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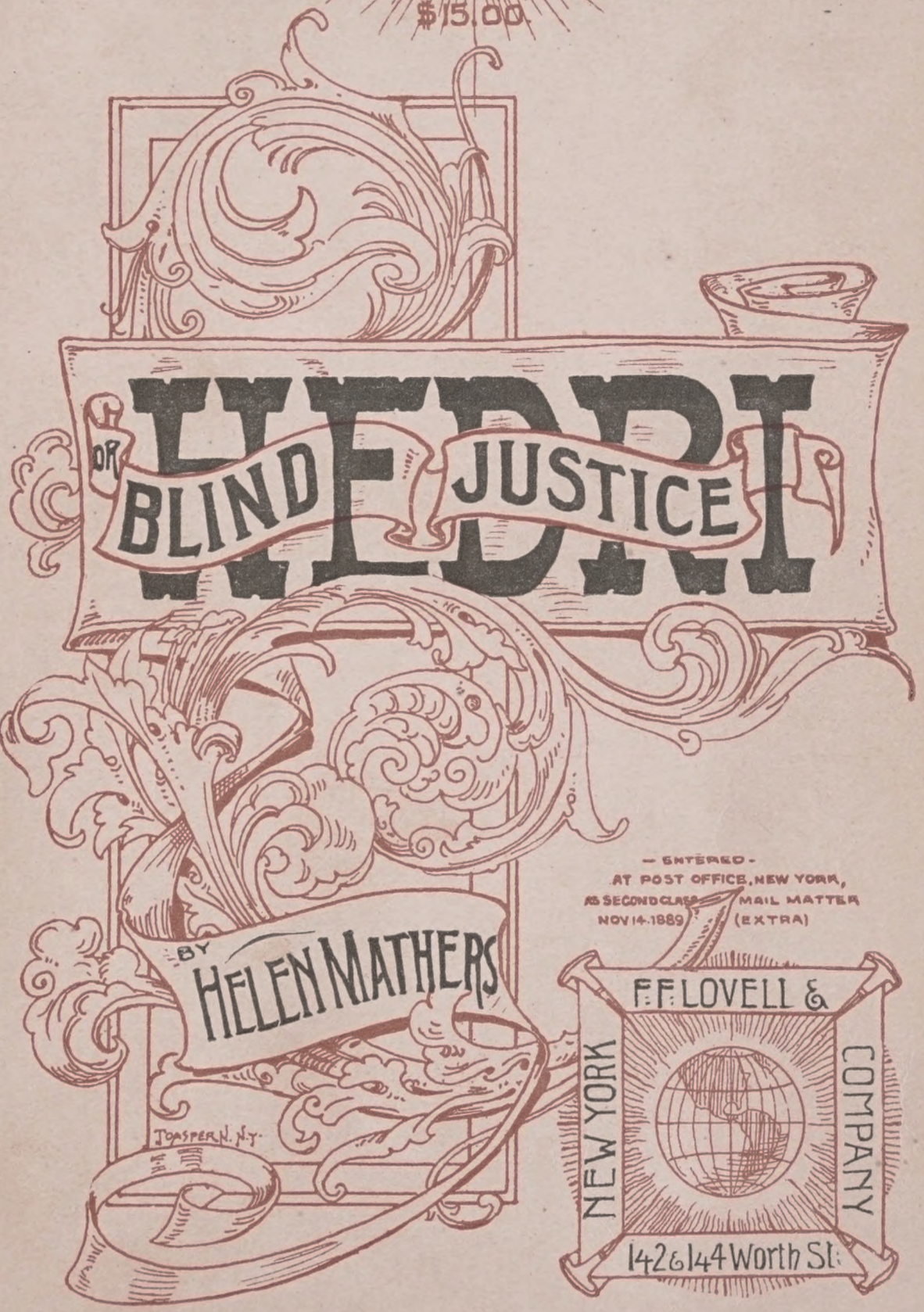
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BY
HELEN MATHERS

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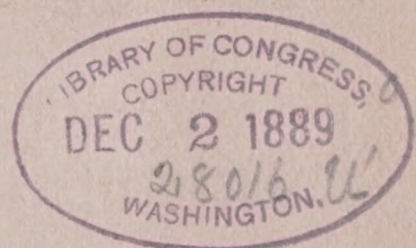
BY

HELEN MATHERS, *Reeves*

Author of "Found Out," "Cherry Ripe," "Story of a Sin," etc., etc.

*4250
Miss Meredith*

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H E D R I.

CHAPTER I.

“For I will prove that feythful love
It is devoyd of shame :
In your distress and heavinesse,
To parte with you, the same ;
And sure all tho’ that do not so,
Trewelovers are they none ;
For in my minde of all mankynde
I love but you alone.”

THE woman flashed across the court at me a look of scorn, ay, and of contempt, but of fear not a trace.

And yet I, who had placed her in the dock where she stood, I, who had made those purely disinterested efforts to hang her, that seemed certain to be crowned with success, felt that however much I might deserve her detestation, I in no sense was or looked the mistaken fool that she supposed me.

Judith they called her, and a Judith she was, with the grand frame and limbs of a daughter and mother

of the gods, and like her great namesake, she too had slain her man, though not to such heroic purpose and results.

This woman had no tribe to glorify her crime, and only one friend on earth with a heart to be wrung by it, and that man now stood as closely as might be, beside her, his comeliness all aged and dimmed by the anguish through which she had brought him.

It was but a tragic variation of the old story of Enoch Arden, only this Enoch did not steal away, leaving her to happiness, but remained, to be speedily removed by her hand, unless all things in heaven and earth lied against her.

And yet I felt, for the first time, sorry for my work, when that look of hers, in which spoke a virile innocence, so sure of itself as easily to afford contempt, flashed upon some inner consciousness of mine, leaving outside it the brain that had already tried and found her guilty.

But, no—I had seen this strong, calm woman in the throes of fear and agony, her not easily moved nature shaken to its very depths, and no criminal yet ever had circumstantial evidence so pitilessly arrayed against her. I forced my eyes from her, and fixed them on the counsel for the prosecution, who had already commenced his indictment against her.

“This woman,” he said, “little more than a child at

her marriage, had lived a notoriously miserable life with Seth Treloar, though, to do her justice, no blame of any kind attached itself to her conduct as a wife; and when within the year he disappeared, leaving no trace, she remained in her native village, supporting herself by any sort of work that came in her way. She does not appear to have encouraged any lovers; but when seven years had passed, she boldly announced that she felt herself legally free of Treloar, and married a man whose character was as good as her former husband's had been the reverse, and whom she loved with a passion more than equal to that detestation she had felt for the other. From being the butt of a drunken and brutal scoundrel, she became the cherished and adored wife of the best looking and best natured man in the village, and for some brief months tasted that supreme happiness which is known only to those persons who in the past have acutely suffered. Perhaps so much content irritated the on-lookers, for only cold looks were cast upon the two, while the malicious prophesied that Treloar's return would cut short the pair's felicity, and affected not to consider them man and wife at all; so that by degrees they became completely isolated from their neighbours, and no living feet save their own ever crossed the threshold of Smugglers' Hole."

This house had formerly been the *rendez-vous* of smugglers who were said to have within it some hiding place in which to dispose of their stolen goods ; but though smugglers went there no more, its bad character remained, and its lonely position at the end of the parish made it feared, so that the rent was a mere trifle, and as Treloar had brought Judith back to it a bride, so now Judith brought Stephen Croft thither as bridegroom, and here they dwelt as much alone as on a desert island.

The woman defied her world, caring nothing, but the man felt her position keenly, and at last persuaded her that it was best to emigrate, and to this she at last very reluctantly consented.

Six months, then, after the ceremony that the villagers declared no ceremony, Judith Croft sat one night by the fire in the almost empty cottage from which she was to depart on the morrow, with the man who represented all the sweetness and happiness she had found in her life.

She heard steps on the path, the latch lifted, and we may surely pity the unhappy woman when, springing through the dusk, she found herself clasped in the arms, not of Stephen Croft, but of Seth Treloar.

Of what passed between them, God alone was witness, and God alone knows the truth ; but when the man she loved came in an hour later, she was sitting

alone by the hearth, with no sign of excitement or anxiety about her.

She prepared the fish he had brought in for supper, ate with him, and from that moment he never left her until they rose early next morning, to be in time for the train that was to take them to Liverpool. So much Stephen Croft said in his evidence, most reluctantly given, but still more reluctantly two damning pieces of evidence against her were drawn from him.

He said they had arranged for their landlord to take over the few poor sticks of furniture they possessed, and had sent on their small personal belongings the day before, but there were some few odds and ends to be carried between them, and he had brought in a coil of stout rope for binding them together. At starting, the rope was missing, but his wife could not account for its disappearance more than himself, and did not "fuss" about it as most women would have done under the circumstances. At breakfast (this was only dragged from him bit by bit) he noticed that she ate very little, but furtively collected food on a plate, and set it aside, as if for an unexpected guest. He asked her why she did this, and she said the neighbours would be all over the house the moment their backs were turned, and she would gratify their curiosity as to what they had for

breakfast. He reminded her that their landlord was trawling that day, and several subsequent days, at a distance, and that no one could know the secret place, previously agreed upon, where they were to hide the key of the house. She laughed strangely, and said that though you might lock people out, you could not lock them in; but this speech, though he did not understand it, was afterwards distinctly quoted in her favour. Then they collected their small effects, and without a God-speed from a friend, or a kindly eye to follow them on their path, passed away from the home in which they had been so happy, to the one that had yet to be earned in the uncertainty of the future. Perhaps the man looked back, but at some distance from the house the prisoner did more, she affected to have forgotten something, and bidding him go forward, retraced her steps quickly. But he reluctantly admitted that she returned empty-handed, that she was pale as a corpse, with wild eyes, that she gasped for breath, stammering and presenting every appearance of a woman who has received some horrible shock, but when he asked her if she had met with some insult from a passing neighbour, she shook her head, but would give no explanation of her state. She showed extraordinary eagerness to reach the train, but did not utter a syllable during the journey, though a sinister incident occurred dur-

ing it. That incident (here the counsel turned and looked steadily at me) was witnessed by a gentleman, to whose keen observation, swift action, and masterly manipulation of fact and surmise was due the brilliantly conclusive chain of evidence that had brought the prisoner to where she stood that day.

This gentleman had in his hurry jumped into a third instead of a first-class carriage, and congratulated himself on his mistake when he saw the two other occupants of the compartment. They were simply the two most magnificent specimens of man and womanhood that he had ever seen in his life, but the man looked troubled and perplexed, and the woman gave one the same impression as of some usually calm majestic aspect of nature, now convulsed and shaken to its very core. He saw the fine hands clenched beneath her woollen shawl, the splendid eyes blind to all save some awful inward sight, and he recognized that a tragedy had been, or was to be enacted, and he watched her, with entire unconsciousness to herself, unremittingly for mile upon mile.

This vigilance was unexpectedly rewarded. She moved abruptly, searched her pocket for a handkerchief with which to wipe her damp brow, and pulled out with it a small, curiously shaped silver box that fell into the man's lap. The blank horror of her eyes slowly quickened with some recollection, she

stretched her hands to take it, but he drew back, and with astonishment in his face lifted the lid, and found the contents to be a white powder. Into this powder he thrust his fore-finger and instantly applied it to his tongue, on the moment crying out that his tongue was burning, then that his throat and stomach were on fire, and violent nausea completed the symptoms of having swallowed a violent irritant poison.

“You have taken arsenic!” cried the stranger present, whereon the prisoner shrieked out, snatched the box from Stephen’s hand, and threw it far out of the window.

The stranger, approaching the window, took the exact bearings of the spot where it must have fallen, they were then close to a station, and there he got out, having watched these two until the last moment.

The man was urging questions on her as to who gave it her, or where she had got it, but beyond that one shriek, the stranger heard no sound issue from her white lips from first to last.

Only as the other closed the door, he saw her lean forward, and press the fisherman’s hand with a passion of tenderness, that startled the gazer; clearly the poison was not intended for the husband, therefore for whom?

The stranger bade the guard watch the pair, and communicate to him, at an address he gave the

station at which they descended, then he retraced the distance he had come from a certain point, and with very little difficulty found what he wanted. The box was of pure silver, of foreign make, which he subsequently discovered to be Austrian, and it was three parts full of arsenic. He locked the box away, said nothing to anybody, but watched the daily papers carefully.

He had not very long to wait ; on the fourth morning he read how in a cellar, formerly used by smugglers beneath a cottage at Trevenick, in Cornwall, had been found the dead body of a man whose appearance gave rise to suspicions of foul play, and who, on examination was found to have in his viscera sufficient arsenic to kill three or four men. The man was well clothed, well nourished, and concealed in a belt upon him was found one hundred gold pieces of money. He was at once identified as the long missing husband of a woman who had within the past few days left the village for Australia with her second husband.

Jake George, a fisherman, swore to seeing a man enter the house at seven o'clock the evening before the pair left, but he saw no one come out, though his work kept him near by till eight, when Stephen Croft himself came home. He was not near enough to hear voices, though he could easily have heard a

cry had there been one. He peeped, as would be shown in the evidence, but he could see nothing. With what superhuman swiftness and strength must this woman have overcome her victim, so that not even a moan or cry reached the spy without! What self-control must have been hers that she could meet her husband with a smile, and sit at board with him that night, however absolutely she might break down on the morrow! In one short hour she had done as much, and more, as a man could do, and she had done it thoroughly. Secure by her hearth, her murdered man hidden at her feet, she sat with undaunted front, no smallest trace around of the man who had visited her. Without that hollow cave below, she might have murdered, but could not have concealed him; but as it was, this hiding-place favoured the swiftness and subtleness of the crime to an extraordinary degree. For who could believe that he, the former master of that house and the woman in it, walked of his own free will to the disused trap-door, and deliberately elected to be lowered by a rope to a cold and noisome dungeon peopled only by rats? No! It was for Stephen Croft to quail, to shrink away out of sight as a defrauded man, or, if Treloar shewed himself moved by his wife's entreaties, and actually consented to leave her to her happiness, would he not have left, as he came, by the house door?

We see no such thing when, in imagination, we project our gaze upon that bare dismantled room ; we see a man who, whatever he may have been to her in the past, had since possibly repented, and prospering in his new life (as his clothes sufficiently proved), had remembered the woman who once loved him, and returned to share his prosperity with her. He found her more beautiful than ever, and probably the very thought of taking her away from another man enhanced her value in his not over-fastidious mind ; he meant to take his rights, and told her so, while the miserable woman only half heard him in straining her ears for her lover's step without. She must have acquiesced to all appearance in his demands, or he could not have taken from her hand the cup of milk with which she had stealthily mixed the poison ; strangely enough, she must have also been possessed at the time of a strong narcotic, since traces of one were found in the stomach, so that the cool firm hand doubly doctored the draft she handed to the unsuspecting man.

Let us picture her then, watching his unavailing struggles and agonies till the opiate deadened the effects of the poison, and he sank down in a stupor that she knew must end in death, nay, that may so have ended abruptly, as she stood by and watched him. Her crime is accomplished, but how to hide it ?

See her eyes wander hither and thither over the walls, the floor, upon the door through which she might drag this heavy weight, but that she may meet her lover on the threshold! Her glance falls on a discoloured ring level with the ground, and scarcely visible save to those who know where to look for it, she creeps nearer and nearer to it. She kneels down, and drags at the rusty ring; a square door, about the width of a strong man's shoulders, rises towards her, beneath is a black void, and that void is to be the hiding-place of her husband's body. Close at hand lies a coil of cord, she deliberately cuts it in half, and kneeling down beside him, makes one portion fast round his body below the armpits, then with the ends drags that huddled, helpless body easily enough along the floor until the open square is reached. And now comes the most difficult part, physically, of her enterprise. To thrust him feet foremost down that pit would be easy enough, but with all a woman's extraordinary insensibility to crime, but sensitiveness to a cruelty, she could not bring herself to do this, but with arms stronger surely than a woman's ever were, lowered him so carefully that not a bruise or a mark was anywhere to be found on his person.

Picture her placing her husband, his feet to the pit, his head to her knees, see her give him a strong push that sends his feet over the edge, and instantly

the body disappears with such a jerk as nearly to throw her forward on the ground ; but with straining muscles she holds grimly on, her thighs bent back, resisting in every fibre the dead weight that seeks to drag her down to the place to which she has condemned him ! Now the head is over, has vanished, bit by bit she lets out the cords that are twisted round her hands ; presently they grow slack, a dull tremble runs through him, the body has reached the ground, she casts the cords in after him, drops the trap-door, and all is over.

So far, she has acted with extraordinary promptitude and skill, ably seconded by great physical strength, she is even able to greet Stephen Croft as if nothing had happened, and to wash the cup out of which her husband drank ; but in the morning she breaks down, and attracts suspicion to herself in a way little short of madness. At breakfast she sets aside food as if for a visitor, she returns to the house after they have both presumably left it for ever, she lifts the trap-door, and leaves it open, and from a hook inside suspends a long piece of cord, by which a person might easily descend to the vault below, or ascend from it to the room above. By the trap-door she places the plate of broken food, and having thus drawn attention to what would have never been suspected but for her indication, she rejoins her hus-

band, very soon after committing another and even worse act of stupidity, since it is witnessed by one who grasps the full significance of the incident, and who in following up the clue then given, brings all the facts home to the woman at last.

This gentleman, on reading of the murder, went straight to the village of Trevenick, found the police supine, and the villagers convinced of Judith's guilt, although they had only their spite to convince them. The rural police thought that the man might have got in after the two left, and had chosen, for his own reasons, to conceal himself below; but the medical evidence proved that he had been dead at least three days, and the key was found by the landlord in the place agreed upon, while every window was securely bolted from within.

But suspicion was not certainty, or Judith would probably have reached Australia unmolested, and remained there to this day, had not the stranger who travelled with them produced the arsenic box and his evidence, at the enquiry then being held. The result you know, the woman was brought back and committed to prison to await her trial.

One cannot sufficiently admire the sagacity and acumen of this amateur detective who put to shame a—but I heard no more. His praise sickened me. I no longer felt proud of my work, but as a mean fel-

low who had deliberately hounded down a possibly innocent woman. But for my evidence about the poison seen in her possession, and that of her husband (the only being in the world who loved her) about the rope, she would be standing a free creature in primeval forests now. Why did I put the slumbering police on her track, why cable to the port where they landed, and secure her arrest? She had done me no harm, nor surely should I have done any in leaving that hunted soul one chance of salvation and a life with the man who honoured her, the mainspring of whose happy existence was now as surely broken as hers.

CHAPTER II.

“For an outlawe, this is the lawe
That men hym take and binde
Without pitee, hanged to bee
And waver with the wynde,
If I ha’l neede (as God forbide !)
What rescue could ye finde ?”

I STOOD still in the Cornish market-place in the midst of the Cornish sing-song voices, trying to think of any loop-hole by which she might escape, but found none; then I bethought me how abler brains than mine would marshall every tittle of evidence in her favour, for, I, who had brought her there, could do no less than engage one of the most brilliant advocates in the world to defend her.

He was probably now speaking, for the burst of applause that just now broke forth announced the end of the opposing counsel’s speech.

I went back, found a man holding the court breathless, and as I listened, felt my doubts waver more and more of her guilt, while a hope began to stir in me that she might escape.

He began by contemptuously dismissing as hyper-

bole, and wild imagination, his learned friend's sketch of what went on in the kitchen of Smugglers' Hole on the night of Seth Treloar's return. In some points that imagination did not carry him far enough, for why was not the court treated to a description of a man in all the agonies of poison, which must have declared itself long before the narcotic had time to take effect? The fisherman within ear-shot of the house heard not a sound—not even raised voices—and was it for a moment credible that a maddened and betrayed man, realising that his wife had murdered him, would not have raised a cry for help, or uttered a single shriek at the agony which devoured his entrails? Such conduct was not only incredible, it was physically impossible, and no woman, however powerful, could have so strangled his furious cries and curses, that not even an echo crossed the threshold. The real truth was, *that she never gave him the arsenic*, for how, pray, did she manage to dissolve it in water before his eyes, then add it to the milk, for if she had merely shaken the powder into the cup, it would have risen to the surface, and attracted his attention immediately. I say that this woman did not touch or see any poison, but that she *did* administer a narcotic she had by her, probably with the intention of gaining time while he was asleep, to think out her terrible

situation. The sight of the trap-door suggested to her mind a hiding-place, and grasping the idea with fatal hurry, she did actually, by the exertion of her unusual strength lower him into the vault while he was unconscious, in the hope that he would not wake before she and Stephen Croft left the house. That she had no wish to harm him, is abundantly proved by the care with which she managed his descent; that she felt sure of his awaking, is proved by the rope she affixed to the hook inside the trap-door, left purposely open by her that he might see the means of ascent, and climb through it. If further proof is wanted that her mind was not murderish, abundant proof was given by the plate of victuals set inside the open trap-door, nay, more, it was the good hearted and gentle action by a woman who, while nerving herself to an act of force made necessary by her desperate situation, could think of the comfort of the man who had been a brute to her, and by such thought prove that she bore no malice against him. True, the man's body contained arsenic, but who was to prove that she gave it him? He had been in the house three days before he was discovered, and what might not have happened in that time? An old enemy might have pursued him there, some old companion have followed and quarrelled with him in the deserted house, or he might

have died by his own hand ; it was utterly impossible to prove that the arsenic found in his body was taken from the box subsequently found in her possession. More than this—(and the learned counsel looked steadily round the court before advancing his daring theory) he would boldly assert that she did not even know there was arsenic in the box, it had been jerked from the man's pocket previous to her lowering him into the vault ; and afterwards in the stress and hurry of the moment, she had thrust it into her pocket, and forgotten all about it, till she drew it out with her handkerchief in the train.

I saw Judith, whose eyes never left her counsel's face, bow her grand head as if she had said " Yes,—that is true," and then she turned and laid her hand on that of Stephen (whom she could just reach), and the utter confidence of the gesture and the look they exchanged of pure love, quite apart from passion, might have moved the hearts of many who sat there.

" If" (continued her counsel) " he carried about arsenic, might he not have had more with him, or at any rate enough to take his own life? True, his arms were bound, but who was to prove that the prisoner bound them? They may have been bound and unbound a dozen times in that deserted place where no villagers ever came, and that stood as much

alone as if it were a hundred miles from a human habitation. Then, if antecedents went for anything, where could a woman be found with more blameless ones than this? Even her drunken scoundrel of a husband was not neglected or deserted by her, and when she was left alone, in the full flower of her magnificent beauty, her name was never lightly coupled with any man's, and she was ashamed of no work, however lowly, by which she might keep herself from beggary, or the pauper's home. It was only when the sum of years that are supposed to constitute legal death had elapsed, that she chose for a husband a man of character as pure as her own, and as you may see, a man physically her match, and though the spite and venom of their neighbours may have affected to consider the bond between them illegal, they were unquestionably in the sight of man and God, husband and wife.

“Could such a woman's nature change all at once, could her veneration for all things holy, all things of good repute, fail her utterly in the one supreme moment of her life, when she found her heaven suddenly transformed into hell? Was yonder the woman to boldly conceive and execute a murder with a skill and rapidity that the most experienced criminal might have envied, and striven to imitate in vain? No! That she had displayed extraordinary

nerve and resource in carrying out a wrong act, he fully admitted ; but when one comes to think of the immensity of the stakes involved, of what life in bondage meant with this man, of what love in freedom awaited her in the new world, you may condemn her, but you cannot wonder that she snatched at any means, however unlawful, by which to save herself.

“ I contend then, that there is no case against this woman, and that each and all of you, gentlemen of the jury, will be guilty of murder if you send this innocent and sorely tried creature to the gallows ! ”

He sat down amidst applause from the legal fraternity, and strangers present, but low murmurs and growls of dissent rose from the fishermen and their wives in the body of the court.

“ Who else had a motive in getting rid of Seth Treloar ? And motive was everything in murder ! Why was the door found locked, and every window fastened from inside (for hadn't some of them prowled round to see after the pair left), and the key found hanging in the place the landlord and Croft had agreed on ? Didn't the doctors say he had been dead a good three days, and how could he have poisoned himself when his arms were fastened to his sides with cords ? Wouldn't an artful jade like her have tied a rope to the hook, and put the food

there, just to make people think she expected him to get up again? Wasn't his face fixed in the most awful look of hungry agony, more like a famine-struck wolf than a human being? Only to dream of it was to lie awake all night afterwards."

And then the Cornish sing-song of bitter tongues ceased as the first witness was called for the prosecution—Stephen Croft.

I have said that he and Judith made the handsomest pair I ever saw in my life, but the man's beauty was the more pre-eminent of the two.

Save in sculptured images of Antinous, whom he most curiously resembled, alike in feature and the sweetness tinged with melancholy of his expression, I never saw anything in the least like him, and from the crown of close sunny curls on his splendid head to the sole of the finely shaped foot, he looked a man who would wear a fisherman's dress or a king's robe with equal grace and dignity. No wonder, thought I, that the women of the village hated Judith—I saw evil looks pass among them as Stephen's blue eyes sought hers as he left her to take his place.

And now she stood alone, and the man who loved her was on oath to give evidence against her.

And surely this was a cruel thing to see, for had he been the woman's husband, the law would have closed his lips, so that he might neither help to save nor to hang her; but Seth Treloar's return had

broken the tie between them, and she was no more than any other stranger to him in the eyes of the law.

He made no ado about kissing the book, but when the first damning question was heard, I saw him set his teeth hard, and his mouth and jaw hardened. Stock still he stood, looking at the man who addressed him, but not one syllable passed his lips.

The question was repeated, this time angrily, but not even a shade of expression crossed Stephen Croft's features in reply, neither sullen nor obstinate did he look, but simply a man who had made his mind up, and who would not unmake it for all the applied force in the world.

He did not look at Judith, even when "Do 'ee spake now!" broke from her lips, and silent as a stone he stood through the war of words that raged around him, silent when the Judge addressed him with no unkindly words, before committing him to prison for contempt of court, urging him to answer, as the admissions he had previously made about the prisoner had been duly taken down, and his silence now could not affect her one way or the other. But the fair Greek lines of his face never yielded in a single line, until just before his removal, then a pang crossed it, as he realised that he would no longer be able to stand beside Judith, and with an earnest "Keep a good heart, my lass!" and a look of love transfiguring his face, he caught her "God bless thee, Steve!" as he was led out.

CHAPTER III.

“For had ye, lo ! an hundred mo’,
Yet wolde I be that one ;
For in my mynde, of all mankynde
I love but you alone.”

HER face changed as he disappeared, for a moment an almost childish look of loneliness pervaded her figure, then she drew herself together, and looked as strong and serene as before.

More triumph shone in her eyes, and she glanced at the spiteful women in the body of the court with almost a smile on her lips. Was he not faithful, her man who would not break his oath, but who was content to suffer imprisonment rather than give witness against her ?

Then the notes taken down of her husband’s admissions, clearly wrung from him in his agony, were read aloud, but still the brightness of her face did not change.

Jake George was the next witness called, a striking contrast to the silent, splendid man who had faced the court a few minutes ago, and whose volubility was far more irritating than Stephen’s dumbness had been.

Jake was the husband and tool of the most bitter-tongued shrew in the village, and as her mouth-piece could have poured out his venom upon Judith by the hour, had he not been smartly checked, and brought to book by his questioner. Shorn of irrevelancies and spite, his story was this :

“ His business took him close to Smugglers’ Hole on a certain night, or perhaps he was only passing it, any way when he saw a man dressed in a pilot coat, outside clothes he should describe as ‘fancy,’ dodging about outside the house, making as if he were in doubt whether to go in or not; he stopped to see what it all meant, and presently the man lifted the latch and went in, shutting the door behind him. Asked if he peeped, Jake boldly admitted that he did, but couldn’t see so much as her shoe-string, the blinds were down, but he could make out the glint of a fire through it, and catch the sound of voices. His wife had always said that Judith would be caught one of these days, and only behaved herself because folks were looking, and at the time he didn’t think the man was up to any good there, after dark, and with such queer rags. He hadn’t seen his face, and didn’t think of Seth Treloar. Didn’t stay at the window long for fear Steve Croft should come back and catch him there, but thought he’d stop and see the game out. Sat down by the cliff, a bit of a

way off—may be a hundred yards, and stayed there till Steve came home. Nobody came out during that time, and he went down to the village, riled at wasting so much time for nothing. Told his wife and she was angry. She liked a story with a tail to it—and this hadn't got one, and he thought no more of it till the landlord found a man's body in the house."

The owner of Smuggler's Folly next entered the box. He was a stout and prosperous man, who also owned the "Chough and Crow," and was not dependent on his nets for a living.

He said that he was from home when his tenants left, and on his return he went to the house, and found the key in a hiding-place upon which he and Stephen Croft had previously agreed. On entering the house, though the blind was down, he noticed at once the open trap-door, and the plate of broken victuals beside it. He let the daylight in, and looking down through the open square in the floor, saw a heap of something lying about twenty feet below, but not until he had obtained a candle, discovered that it was the body, lying face downwards, of a man. He procured help and a ladder, by the aid of which he descended, but had some difficulty in lifting the corpse, as its hands, dug deeply into the mould, had stiffened there, while his teeth literally bit the dust.

The expression of his features was less one of pain than of intense hunger, though his body was well nourished, and his clothes, made in the fashion of some foreign country, spoke of his prosperity. Below the chest, and across the arms was secured the rope by which he had evidently been lowered from above (but cross-questioned on this point, witness admitted that the rope was not tightly drawn, so that a powerful man might easily struggle or jerk himself out of it), a portion of similar rope being secured to a strong hook just beside the trap-door. His own impression at the time was, that somebody had dragged and hidden him there, arranging for his escape when he came to himself, and even providing him with food to eat when he came to. Thought the man died of heart seizure, or visitation of God, or of fright, till the coroner's inquest proved that he died of poison. Was astonished to find that food was found in his stomach, from his look he would have thought he had been slowly perishing of famine for days. Saw a bottle of stuff in the cupboard that smelt of narcotic; was aware that the secret of making it was known to a few women in the village, that it was decocted out of herbs, and that its strength rather increased than waned with years. Had heard it said (though he didn't listen to gossip) that Judith had more than once given a dose of it to Seth Tre-

loar, when he was in one of his mad-drunk furies, but that he never guessed it, only fell asleep and woke in a better temper. That was the only bit of scandal he had ever heard about her. Even now he didn't believe her guilty, though facts might be against her."

When the burly fisherman left the box, he left a distinct impression of good sense and good feeling, and some of those present muttered that he should have been called as a witness for the defence, and not for the prosecution.

The doctor's evidence was short, and to the point. In Seth Treloar's body he had found enough arsenic to kill three or four people, and traces of a powerful narcotic that would have the effect of cutting short his agony after swallowing the poison, so that he would actually die without pain, and unconscious.

Cross-examined as to whether a man who had swallowed a deadly irritant would be likely to refrain from crying out, Dr. Trevelyan said it would be most unlikely, even with a man of severe self-discipline and iron will, and in the last degree improbable with an ignorant and notoriously passionate man. Short of a blow that would have instantly stunned him (of which there was no trace) he could not have escaped the severest agonies immediately after swallowing the doubly hocused drink, which, by the way, he must have tossed off at a draught. The man had been

dead over three days when I saw him, and he could not account for the wolfish look of hunger in his face, for in his stomach was a large quantity of undigested food, indicating that he had eaten heavily shortly before he drank the fatal cup. The body was extremely well nourished, the skin and hair remarkably sleek and glossy, the complexion clear, while the solidity of the flesh spoke to excellent powers of digestion. He looked a man in the very prime of life who might have lived to be old but for the accident that cut short his existence."

When Dr. Trevelyan left the box, I knew that here again was a witness whose evidence was distinctly in favour of Judith, and how, but for me, the case against her must inevitably have broken down.

And then my name was called, and when I left the witness-box, I knew by the faces of the jurymen that Judith was virtually a condemned woman.

CHAPTER IV.

“ Balow, my child, I’ll weep for thee
Too soon, a lake, thou’lt weep for me !
Born to sustain thy mother’s shame,
A hapless fate, a bastard’s name.”

THAT night I made no pretence of going to bed. I could not sleep with that death-cry of “ Guilty ! ” ringing in my ears, and the twelve stolid, stupid faces of the men who had returned the verdict would have stared me into madness had I closed my eyes.

They had not hesitated at all, and only one gave her the benefit of a doubt ; they looked solely to motive and to the enormous stakes involved to the woman, and they quietly rode rough-shod over Jake’s evidence, and that of the Doctor, and having pronounced her guilty went home comfortably to the dowdy wives, who one and all believed a superlatively handsome young woman to be the off-spring of the devil. The men might have felt lenient to a woman who killed her lover rather than offend a husband ; but to kill a man she had sworn to honour and obey, touched them very nearly, and each slept

that night feeling that his day's work was a shining encouragement to virtue.

Perhaps Judith, too, slept well, all her hopes and fears over; but Stephen, once more at liberty, rested as little as I did, or I was much mistaken. Was he cursing me for the cruel part I had played, and himself for that fatal admission about the cord, and the even more damning one of her return to the house. It is an awful thought, that one has helped to adjust the noose about the neck that is the dearest in the world to you. One falls to asking God why he did not strike us with palsy e'er we pronounced the words, why he did not strike us dead before we rose a witness against that we would have been martyred to save.

The bold theory of Judith's counsel had greatly impressed me, though to the jury it had sounded as the merest romance. I had watched her while he spoke, and every feature of her face bore witness to the truth of his guess, nay, there had been a look almost of fear in her eyes, as if she suspected him of some devilry in describing correctly what he could not possibly have seen.

But more than all, I believed in the lightning conviction that had come home to me, born of something indescribable in herself, that of folly and to spare, she had been guilty, but of deliberate murder,

not even in thought. Long before morning dawned, after I had minutely gone over the heavy indictment against her, I knew surely that these twelve men had blundered, and that I had blundered worse than any one of them, though there might be no vestige of evidence to prove to us our mistake.

But proved it must be, and that verdict reversed, or I should be a haunted and miserable man to the day of my death.

And how? If Judith had refused to speak one word for herself up to the present time, would she be willing to speak now, when nothing that she could say or do would avail her? Knowing the uselessness of speech, she had proudly refrained from it, and I greatly admired her silence, even though, if persevered in, it would effectually baulk my efforts to save her.

Seth Treloar died of poison, it is true, but not administered by her hand, nor did she know by whose, and probably no one ever would know. If the dead could speak, it would clear her, but for the living to try and prove the truth was about as hopeless and impossible a task as was ever set to a purblind, miserable man.

Yet I resolved (unchecked by my recent disastrous failure that the world crowned with success) to devote myself during the next two months to search-

ing for the real factor concerned in Seth Treloar's death. Two months—for within a month Judith would be mother to Stephen Croft's child, and the law allowed her a further period of life before her execution.

I remembered how the expression of her face in the train, at the sight of the arsenic-box, was less horror than blank astonishment, and how her impulse to snatch, and throw away what caused her husband intense pain, was a perfectly natural one, and no proof of guilt as I and others had supposed. One thought alone still disturbed me. Why had she returned pale and terror-struck after visiting the house on the morning of her departure? Was it not the same expression on her face, the expression of guilt, that had struck me so vividly the moment I saw her?

But I thrust the doubt away, and resolved that on the morrow I would go to her, and implore her to tell me what had passed between the hours of seven and eight on that evening at Smugglers' Hole, and soothed by the determination, my head fell forward on my arms, and in the morning light I slept.

CHAPTER V.

“ Yet I am sure, of one pleasure
And, shortly, it is this :
That where ye be, me seemth perdi
I could not fare amysse.”

AS I turned in at the gaol-gates, I knocked against Stephen Croft coming out, his face dulled and wrung with disappointment. I guessed that he had been refused admittance to Judith, and this I thought inhuman, even if she had been the guiltiest wretch alive, and had lived with him of choice as his mistress, when in truth she had believed herself to be his wife.

“ Come with me,” I said, “and I will try to persuade the governor to let you in with me.”

He could not change the look of hate that came always into his eyes when he saw me, but he followed me like a patient dog, and after some difficulty I got the required permission, and these two, to whom each made the whole world of the other, were face to face.

For a while I was deaf and blind to them, but presently I said :

“Judith, I believe you are an innocent woman—tell me if what I believe is the truth.”

The scorn in Judith’s eyes was boundless as the sea, but she remained silent; it was the man who spoke.

“Nobbut a fool ’ud iver ha’ doubted her,” he said.

This was a strong speech from a man of Stephen’s gentle character, and I found the two pairs of brown and blue eyes hard to meet.

“And I was that fool,” I said; “but before God I will undo my folly if I can.”

“Naw,” he said sadly, “’ee canst ne’er do that. ’Tis thou has wove the strands aboot her bonnie neck, an’ all ’cos ’ee must blab to what warn’t no business o’ thine. An’ I wish my tongue was rotted i’ my head afore I’d spoke them words as war brought up agen her arterwards—but ’twas thy wark, man, a’ thy wark.”

Judith turned and kissed passionately the mouth that had ignorantly borne testimony against her.

“I’d rayther ha’ a curse from this wan—the on’y wan—than th’ luv o’ all the world,” she cried; and he kissed her back with all his heart.

As on the first occasion of my hearing her speak, the woman’s voice jarred upon me; she looked a Semiramis, and she spoke like a daughter of the people.

“Judith,” I said, “your counsel imagined certain things to have occurred on the night Seth Treloar came home. Did he guess truly?”

She looked at me indifferently.

“Iss,” she said, “but what do’t siggerfy naw? ’Tis all adone wi’, an’ yo’d take me fo’ a fool if I up an’ told ’ee th’ truth.”

“No, I should not,” I said; “and what is more, I should believe you. I want to help you, but you must help yourself by telling me exactly what happened that night.”

Judith looked at Stephen.

“Shall I tell ’un?” she said. “M’appen him ’ull know then what a fule ’un has been. Iss, I’ll tell ’ee, tho’ ’tis waste o’ time, an’ I’d rayther be talkin’ to him, yon.

“Wa-al, I war sittin’ by th’ fire th’ nicht afore we was t’ sail fo’ Australy, thinkin’ o’ my baw, an’ a bit fainty hearted at leavin’ th’ old place (us had been main happy, hadn’t us, lad)? when steps comed along th’ path an’ somebody gie’d a bang at th’ door. I s’posed ’twas some giglet or rapskallion comed fro’ th’ village t’ jeer at me, so I jist bided quiet, then a body swored out, an’ in come a man—’twar Seth Treloar.

“I gied a yellock ’ee moight ha’ heard a moile, an’ him jest larfs an’ ses, ‘Your’m purtier nor iver!’ an’ ups t’ kiss me. ‘If ’ee touches me,’ ses I, ‘I’ll murder

'ee,' an' he larfs agen, an' ses, 'I see yer temper's so sweet as ever 'twas,' an' him thrawed hissself into a chair, an' keeps on larfin'."

"'I 'spected to find 'ee married agen,' him said, 'th' seven year is up, an' you'm free, 'sposin' we'm ony brother an' sister t' wan anither now?'

"'Wi' a' my heart,' say I, strainin' my ears fo' th' sound o' Steve's han upo' th' latch. I knowed I war thrust out o' my bit hebben into hell——

"'If 'ee means that,' ses he, lookin' hard towards me, 'us'll be the boonist frens as ever war. Thar's a baw out yon in Styria as clapped his eyes on yer picter, an' he be jest mad about 'ee, an' when I tells 'um you'm my sister, he ups and swares to marryin' 'ee, and gi'es me no pace till I sets out to fetch 'ee. Will 'ee come? 'Ee 'll have gold an' fine clo' an' sich lashins as 'ee never see the like o' here, an' e's a fine baw, as 'ull be good to 'ee, a sight better'n I iver war.'

"I said niver a word, I war just listenin', listenin' for Stephen's steps.

"'Wa-al,' he ses 'we'll talk more o' that bim'by. I doant look much loike th' ragged ne'er-do-weel as runned away fro 'ee, do I? Awh, t'is a foin life out yon in Styria, all the baws is lusty an' strong over there. Jes look to this!' An' he rolled ups his furrin' sleeve, an' showed a arm as 'ud flummax an ox.

“‘Us don’t drink much over thar,’ sez he, w’ a curious sort o’ larf, ‘us knows o’ somethin’ better stuff as you poor fules ’ud reckon as a bit different to what us dus, stuff as makes ’ee strong, an’ yer skin sleek, an’ yer hair t’ shine, but I ain’t a goin’ t’ tell ’ee wot t’ is. Has ’ee got a drink o’ milk anywheres?’

“Iss,’ ses I, listenin’ for th’ sound o’ Steve’s foot, an’ I wraps my cloak closer about me, an’ I goes t’ th’ cupboard, an’ thar th’ devil war waitin’ fo’ me, as ’t is aisy now t’ see.

“Fo’ thar, roight a facin’ me war th’ bottle o’ sleepin’ stuff as ’ud stood all them seven year; I’d kep it t’ mind me o’ th’ hell I’d lived in w’ Seth, an’ side o’ the stuff war the milk, an’ the cup out o’ which Steve had drunk that day.

“Th’ devil ses ‘Pit some o’ th’ stuff i’ his drink, an’ he’ll niver knaw, an’ git him out o’ th’ way afore Steve be comed in.’ Thar war na taste to ’t, nor more nor watter, nor na color, th’ gipsies knawed thar work too well fo’ that, an’ wi’ my back t’ Seth, I jest poured th’ stuff into th’ cup, an’ th’ milk to top o’ un, an’ I ups an’ gies ’t to ’un, d’reckly.”

“There was no water in the cupboard?” I said.

“Watter?” said Judith, staring at me, “what for should I keep watter there? Wa-al, him. tossed ’t off to wance, an’ afore ’ee could count ten, him war asleep an’ snorin’, and out he slips

fro' th' chair to th' groun', an' a box falls out o' his bosom, an' I picks 't up (listenin' the whiles fo' Steve's step) an' puts it i' my pocket, an' thin, knowin' he war safe naw for twenty-vour hour, I looks at un and ses, Whereiver num I hide un?'

"Ther warth' secret bit room, on'y Steve allus went thar when he comed in, an' I daurna pit him on th' cliff. Jes thin my eye catched th' ring o' th' trap-door, an' th' devil flashed it up t' me, 'Put un down i' th' cellar! 'Ee'll be gone in twelve hour, an' nuthin' 'ull waken he fur twenty-vour, put un down i' th' cellar!'

"If th' devil war quick, I war quicker, I catched up a coil o' rope near by, an' I had Seth Treloar roun' the shoulders i' a second, an' tied a knot ahind him, an' then I dragged un along th' floor till I'd got un to th' trap-door, an' opened un, but t'warnt so easy to let down; an' when I'd pushed his feet over, I knewed I'd got so difficult a job as air a woman had.

"I was boun' to take time, if I'd pushed un too quick, him ud ha' bin killed to wance (an' a' th' time I war listenin' for Steve's step) so I giv' un a bit push, then rinnedback an' jest dug my feet i' th' floor an' thraved mysell till I war slantin' like a tree i' a storm, but th' dead weight o' un's body as him slipped thro' th' trap-door nigh pulled me arter un, but I jest held on, an' lettin un down a inch at a

time, bimby I felt un touch th' groun', thin I dashes th' rope in arter un an bangs down th' door jest at th' very moment as Steve lifts th' latch, an' comed in.

"I thrawed my apron over my head so as un could-na see my face, an' thinkin' I war frettin' anent leavin', he lets me alone, an' bimeby us has supper thegither an' so th' evenin' passed."

"And you could eat, drink and sleep, with that drugged man lying near in the vault at your feet?" I cried.

"Iss," said Judith, whose homely words and accent afforded the strongest contrast to the grandeur of her looks and gestures, "what harm had I done 'un? Him 'ud ha' woke up none th' wurse for what I'd gived 'un, as him had niver been th' wurse afore (often as he'd tooked 't unbeknown t' hisself), an' thar war no rats below, an' th' place war dry an' sandy, an' I knawed he'd come to na harm. Yet I seemed feared like to rejoice too much, to git safe away wi' Steve 'ud be too much joy, an' as things comed out," she added bitterly, "'t war well I didna count my chickens too soon; I warnt to knaw as there war a fule wanderin' about th' warld meddlin' wi' things as God A'mighty didna mean to meddle in. He'd jest hev let 'em ravel themselves out, but you be wiser nor he, tho' naw you'd like t' undo th' piece o' wark you'm made."

She paused a moment, and a rush of pain swept over her face as if some physical agony pressed her hard.

“Has ’ee thort ’o ’t?” she cried, “o’ th’ little un—Steve’s an’ mine—how ’t ’ull grow up wi’ out a mother, an’ be ’shamed t’ speak her name when it be old ’nuff t’ knaw? Eh, my lad (she put her hand on Steve’s), an’ us waited so lang, and o’ our bit o’ happiness wi’ wan anither, we luv’d fu’ money a year afore us iver spoke but wi’ our eyes, ay, ’ee luv’d me when I war th’ sport o’ that ne’er-do-weel, Seth Treloar, an’ I war iver comparin’ the twa o’ ’ee i’ my mind. An’ t’ see ’ee war like a blink o’ heaven, us niver got no nearer, but us war heartened up t’ walk th’ stony road apart, an’ ’ee passed a’ th’ lasses by, but when th’ seven year war up, ’ee jest sed t’ me, ‘You’m mine naw, Judith,’ an’ I went to ’ee like a bird.”

The helpless love, the profound dependence on him that spoke in her voice, moved me deeply.

If ever a woman by her misfortunes had merited some taste of happiness, that woman, who looked made for love, was Judith, and yet she had but sipped the draught before it was dashed from her lips for ever.

She left her arm on Stephen’s neck, then pulled herself together, and went on with her story.

“When mornin’ comed, Steve an’ me war stirrin’ early, an’ whiles I got th’ breakfast, him put up our bits o’ things, an’ then ’un couldna’ guess wheriver th’ coil o’ rope war gotten to.

“Whiles I war eatin’, I ses to mysel’, ‘Seth Treloar ’ull be hungry when ’un comes t’ hisself,’ an’ I set a bit o’ bread an’ fish t’ one side, an’ soon arter us locked th’ door ahind us, an’ war gone for iver, so Steve ’sposed, fro’ th’ place whar I’d bin th’ miserablest an’ th’ happiest woman upo’ airth.

“But so soon as we’m got a bit forrards, ses I to Steve, ‘I’ve forgotten somethin’, an’ must rin back,’ an’ for sure I did rin, an’ catched up th’ key ra’ th’ bush, oped th’ house place, an’ puts th’ plate o’ victuals side o’ th’ trap-door, an’ opens ’t ’an sees th’ rope hangin’ to a staple as th’ men used t’ climb up by. An’ thin I looks at Seth, lyin’ still as th’ dead, an’ all to wance it comed upo’ me the sinfu’ thing I’d adone, an’ I ses to mysel’ ‘’Sposin’ him war niver to wake up? Or if ’un do, ’t ’ull be dead dark, an’ him war allus a coward, like t’ most bulllies, an’ ’sposin’ ’un dies o’ fright?’

“Someways I felt as if I war leavin’ ’un to his death, an’ yet I hadna got th’ sperrit t’ go to Steve an’ say, ‘Go yer ways, an’ leave me an’ th’ child as is comin’, t’ th’ marcy o’ Seth Treloar!’ So I jes stole away, but I left my innicence ahind me, an’ I

niver knawed a moment more o' peace fro' that day t' this.

“Wa-al, you was i' th' train, 'ee knaws how I looked, an' 'ee saw th' box o' poison skip out o' my pocket, I'd niver gi'en 't a thought since I picked 'un up when 't falled out o' Seth's bosom. An' naw I've told 'ee th' truth, an' nuthin' but th' wan truth, but 'ee 'll niver make anythin' o' 't. Nicht an' day I've toiled t' puzzle 't out, but no wan 'ull iver knaw th' truth 'bout Seth Treloar's death, 'ceptin' Seth Treloar hisself.”

“He died of a dose of arsenic, sufficient to kill three men,” I said, “as the post-mortem proved, also that there was no bruise upon him, or any disease whatever to cause death.”

“Iss,” said Judith, looking at me from beneath those grand bent brows of hers, and with the divine stamp of truth on her lips and in her eyes, “'tis that beats me. Him war alive an' well when I put 'un in th' cellar, him war found jest as I'd left 'un, bound safe 'nuff, an' dead, three days arter. But what for did 'un carry a box o' poison? Furrin' folks has outlandish ways, 'sposin' him used th' stuff as a medicine like, summut as I've heerd tell doctors gives poison t' sick folk t' make 'un well?”

“Doctors only give very small doses,” said I, “besides, if Seth Treloar had been in the *habit* of taking

it, why should he die of a dose of it then? He had no desire whatever to die, he was prosperous, healthy, he possessed money, was engaged in schemes to make himself richer, and you may take it for granted that he did not die of his own free will. Witness his attitude when found, the agony of his face, the evidence of his struggles, ignorant in the dark of the means of life and escape close to his hand."

"I canna argify't," said Judith wearily, "'tis all dark t' me, o'ny I knaws I'se as innocent o' his death as you be, but I'll die fo't all th' same."

"Men have died before now by the Visitation of God," I said slowly, "that mysterious death which comes swift as lightning, but, unlike the lightning, the Divine hand striking out of the darkness leaves no trace."

"Iss," said Judith, "I see'd sich a wan once. Her lookt as if her'd falled asleep, poor sawl, an' purtier nor ever her did in life. Seth Treloar niver died that death, but how 'un died for sure none but him an' God A'mighty 'ull iver knaw."

"Could he have had an enemy?" I said as one thinking aloud, "some one who followed him here, and gave him the poison?"

Judith shook her head.

"It arn't possible," she said; "by th' doctor's 'count he died somewheres i' th' night arter I comed away,

an' th' locks an' window war safe, an' nobody knawed whar we'd put th' key. M'appen you'm none so much t' blame fo' yer thoughts o' me, thar's but wan i' th' wide warld (she kissed Stephen's brown hand) as knaws I speak the truth."

"No, I believe you too," I said, but without hope, for there was no hope in me.

And then I turned my back on the pair, bidding them make their farewells, and presently I called the turnkey, and soon found myself in the fresh air with leisure in which to ponder over those things that I had heard.

CHAPTER VI.

“ Who saws thro’ the trunk, tho’ he leave the tree up in the forest,
When the next wind cuts it down—is his not the hand that smote it ? ”

In town I consulted the man who had the most experience of criminals, and criminal trials of any man living, and I told him the story of Judith from first to last, and asked his opinion.

“ I believe she is innocent,” I said, “ do you ? ”

Mr. Gillett answered my question with another, and several to follow ; when I had replied, he took a pinch of snuff in his usual and well-known manner, then said,

“ The woman has lied from beginning to end. She is a handsome woman ? ”

“ The handsomest I ever saw in my life.”

“ H’m--that explains your qualms at having brought your Jezebel to justice. Not but what it must have been a great temptation, enormous, to have an empty cellar at her feet in which to hide her degenerated Enoch. The sole point in her favor is the evidence of the man outside the cottage that night, who did not hear such cries as you might expect a man to give forth when he found that he had been experimented on with arsenic. Does he happen to be *deaf* ? ”

Mr. Gillett was leaning forward, a pinch of snuff between finger and thumb that would not be carried to his impatient nose till he got my answer.

“In the witness-box he did not appear to be so,” I said, “but the court was exceedingly small, and he was very near the Judge.”

“Find out, and let me know,” said Mr. Gillett, snuffing with energy, “and also the exact distance he can hear from, and how far he was from the cottage door; if he didn’t hear the cries of Treloar because he *couldn’t*, then the last hope of the woman’s innocence is gone. Every other point against her is conclusive—the administered drug—”

“Stop,” I cried, “there is a total absence of proof that she did administer it. Remember that arsenic must first be dissolved for some minutes before it could pass unobserved in a drink of any sort; it would have floated to the surface if she had thrown it hastily in, and she gave him the drink he asked for so quickly that she did not even raise his suspicions.”

“So she says,” remarked Mr. Gillett, “but then the only man that would contradict her is dead.”

“I wish you had heard her,” I cried; “the unvarnished simplicity of her story, no flights of tall talk, no heroics, or seeking after effect, but just as a child entirely without imagination would repeat what he had actually seen.”

“Very clever,” said Mr. Gillett, nodding; “those stolid, uneducated people are wonderfully cunning. I was saying, but you cut me short, there is the fact of the administered poison, certainly not by himself, for the man was full of life, health and hope, with a large sum of money, too, ready to his hand; then there is the woman’s own confession of having drugged and bound him—a pretty high-handed proceeding for an innocent woman; there is the evidence furnished by his body, and above and beyond everything is the *motive*, the over-mastering motive she had for making away with the man.

“She must be a fine woman, a very fine woman; her muscular development must be of the highest order, while her powers of lying are also extremely brilliant. But if my old friend, Dolliman, one of the ablest men alive, couldn’t alter facts so as to win her case, I’m afraid her unsupported testimony won’t go for much. She is evidently a consummate liar who will probably go on lying to the end of her life.”

“But the food she placed beside the trap-door,” I urged, “why should she do that if she did not expect him to waken?”

“To disarm suspicion, or to gratify one of those insane impulses that often undo a clever criminal’s most skilful work. Had she not left the food there, or had she even replaced the trap-door, probably the

murder would not have been discovered to this day. You would have forgotten the incident of the arsenic-box in the train, had not the papers pointed her out to you as the probable person who was 'wanted' for the murder."

"No," I said, "I should never have forgotten the incident, or the woman."

Mr. Gillett looked shrewdly at me as he manipulated his last pinch before dismissing me, then he smiled.

"Mr. Varennes," he said, "what possessed you to go in for the post of amateur detective?"

I shook my head.

"I can't tell," I said, "I felt impelled to act as I did in this affair, and now I would give half of all I possess in the world to undo my work."

"I have heard," said Mr. Gillett, "that, about women, there is nothing to beat an old fool, unless it be a young one. Now, my own opinion is, that the middle-aged fool beats the other two hollow. No offence—we're old friends, you know—and let me know if that man is deaf, or not. I only wish to know as a matter of curiosity, for you can do nothing. No one could save the woman now."

Could they not? As I went back to Trevenick that night I swore that I would try.

And yet, if, instead of going to an expert of the

law, I had gone to an expert in medicine, who had read an account of some amazing revelations made by two men (introduced by Dr. Knapps, practising in Styria) at Gratz in 1875, I should have made a discovery, that I afterwards went through a veritable martyrdom of body and spirit to obtain.

CHAPTER VII.

“O, man! thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,
Yet drone—hive strange of phantom purposes!”

SMUGGLER'S HOLE was empty, as it had been ever since its landlord discovered an unlooked-for tenant, and when I told the worthy man I would take it for three months at a liberal rent, he scratched his head, and clearly thought me mad.

He showed me over the two rooms of which the place consisted, sordid and mean beyond belief, but containing sufficient furniture for common use.

The place seemed to have been built out of uneven lengths of timber, crosswise, any-wise, so that the existence of a secret door in the sitting-room wall would never have been discovered by any stranger save by accident. When my new landlord touched a spring, and shewed a small shed or lean-to, containing a second door, and a grating about the height of my head, I was astonished, but easily understood that it had been devised as a means of escape for the smugglers when surprised by the excise officers.

Then he lifted the trap-door, and, striking a match, we both peered down as if half expecting to see Seth

Treloar staring up at us, and gave it as his opinion that, but for this one little mistake of Judith's, she would have been an-out-and-out good woman. I got but little comfort from him, and yet my spirits rose as I turned my back to the hovel, and standing on the towering cliff, along the precipitous edge of which a narrow path wound sinuously to the little cove below, gazed out at sea to where the orange line of sky just touched it, while betwixt them shone a single silvery sail.

From that wonderful orange the sky melted by imperceptible tints to the translucent green that is never matched by any earthly tint of grass or flower, and the quick dancing lights and shadows on the waters seemed to laugh in the sunshine, and to touch here and there the sea-gulls resting upon the bold, dark headlands farther away.

“ I will go back to the great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea ! ”

I exclaimed aloud, and the loneliness and majesty of the scene did not appal me, or, at least, not yet.

The landlord evidently did not share in my admiration for what was common to him as daily bread, and having recommended Jake as a general factotum, who would bring me supplies from the village, and volunteered to send him over to the hotel, half a dozen miles away, for my belongings, he, with the usual

Cornish courtesy, took himself and his pleasant sing-song voice away, evidently relieved to turn his back on the ill-omened abode.

Unutterably dreary in the chilliness of the spring evening looked the squalid room, and I shivered as I sate by the fireless hearth, in the chair that Seth Treloar had occupied not so very long ago.

Involuntarily I contrasted the silence and disuse with the rollicking scenes that had taken place here when the smugglers were stronger than the excisemen, and the bold Cornishmen lived their lives (ay, and sometimes lost them too) in the fullest sense of the word.

Are not all these things set forth gloriously in "Adam and Eve?" And I could not but think of the book as I sate there in the cold alone.

But as my bodily discomfort grew, my mind concentrated itself the more intensely on Judith's story, till I seemed to see her coming and going about her night's work, exactly as she had told me, and if she were making the one great and fatal blunder of her life, methought she committed it magnificently well:

And yet, what could my presence here avail her, her whom I had caught in the toils, with no power to undo the thing that I had done, out of idleness, vanity and curiosity?

There was only one chance, one hope, that, if justified, could furnish me with even the faintest ground for applying to the Home Secretary.

I should know what that chance and hope were worth soon, and by a simple experiment that I meant to try the moment Jake appeared. Meanwhile, I lit my pipe, and smoked it for an hour or so, and finally fell asleep.

I was awakened by a loud knocking at the door, and for a moment, and in the half darkness, could not remember where I was.

"Come in," I shouted, but the door did not unclose, and, though I called out again, nobody replied. At last I lifted the latch myself, and there stood Jake verily laden like any beast of burden.

"I have been shouting to you, to come in," I said, "didn't you hear?"

"I'se bin a bit hard o' hearin' lately, Mister," he said.

"How long?" I said, sharply.

"I doant know, it's jest growed upo' me, so my missus says."

"Come out on the cliff," I said, "and stand just where you stood on the night you saw Seth Treloar come home."

He went obediently enough, wondering. It was a wild evening, and the magnificent Lizard coast was

fast being shrouded in the sea-mist that crept insidiously inward. Jake's figure looked dim, and tall, and lonely outlined against the sad grey sky, and far below him the monotonous rushing of the sea was broken by the booming of the waves, as they rushed into the little cove with a sullen roar.

"Kindly stay where you are," I said, "for five minutes, until I come to you."

He promised, and when I returned to the cottage, any one who had seen my conduct there would never question my right to Bedlam.

Standing by the fireplace I gave utterance to sharp, spasmodic cries, gradually ascending till they reached the point of shrieks, into which I put my whole vigour, and my lungs were those of a normally vigorous man.

Having pretty well exhausted myself, I went out to the cliff, and found Jake precisely where I had left him, and with all a fisherman's contentedness at doing nothing.

"Well, Jake," I cried, "I have been hearing some queer noises—what did *you* hear?"

The man looked at me with ignorant, candid eyes.

"Nothing, sir," he said, "but the water pouring down the cliff yonder—it makes a power of noise—you can hear it right out at sea."

I gave him his reward with a heavy heart, and

when he had lit my fire, arranged my luggage, and taken my orders for what I required from the village, he retired.

With him went Judith's last chance, and day after day, night after night, I brooded in that solitary hut, trying to build possibilities out of impossibilities, theories out of nullities, until at last my brain worked no longer, and whether sitting by the hearth, or wandering about those glorious cliffs, to whose beauty I had become blind, I possessed less intelligence and reasoning power than a dog.

Jake brought me daily the food, fuel, and drink I needed, but we exchanged bare syllables, and I saw that he feared me, believing, with the rest of the village, that I was mad.

Shadows would steal about my door after dark, half-seen faces peered curiously in on me as the fire-light illumined the corners of the ill-omened room, but Steve was not one of those furtive visitors, he had not attempted to see me since I parted with him at the prison gates.

I guessed that he spent every allowable moment with her, and at others pursued his old calling as fisherman, and I knew that hope must be as dead in his heart as it was in mine.

And now the time that is the most ineffably blessed and happy in an innocent woman's life drew

nigh, and I trembled as I thought of all that thrilling joy in her first-born which would make Judith cling all the more passionately to that life from which she was so soon to be thrust out with ignominy and shame.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ I have both waged life and land,
Your love and good-will for to have.”

I WAS sitting one evening before the fire, neither sleeping nor waking, a vegetable more than a thinking human being, when I heard Jake's voice without, and his knock at the door.

I said “ Come in,” listlessly, without opening my eyes, but the tread of two men instead of one sounded on the threshold, and I looked up to see a man of great stature following Jake, clad in a picturesque costume of whose nationality I was not at first sure.

“ Awh,” said Jake, “ here be a fren' o' Seth Treloar's. Him be comed a long journey over t' see 'un, so I broffed 'un here. Him's in his tantrums cos him can't say how-dee-doo, but on'y Seth Treloar, Seth Treloar, loike any Jimmy-ninny.”

My heart leaped, my pulse bounded, as I looked at the stranger, for here was confirmation strong that Judith had told me the truth about the man in Styria to whom Seth would have sold her, and if she had told the truth in this one particular, why not in all ?

He stood looking at me in an attitude of unconcerned grace, hearing, but not understanding Jake's words, and having now decided what his nationality was, I counted it a piece of the rarest good fortune that I was able to address him in his own tongue. I had lived a good part of my life in Vienna, and had almost as thorough a knowledge of Austrian as of English. In fact my one gift was the gift of tongues, and I could talk *argot* in half a dozen. I dismissed Jake and bade the new comer be seated.

He brightened visibly as I spoke, and the smile brightened what was otherwise a strong if not forbidding face of pronounced Austrian type; and as he took the seat opposite mine, I was able easily to define his class as that of a rich herdsman, probably from Upper or Middle Styria, where the men are famous for their vigour and physical strength, and indeed his provincialisms of speech (which I do not find it necessary to repeat here) soon convinced me that I was right.

"You came to see Seth Treloar?" I said, as he sat impassive, waiting for me to speak.

"Yes," he said, "I've waited for him four, five, many weeks, and still he came not—so I am here."

"Seth Treloar is dead," I said very distinctly.

The man's face changed, but he did not move a hair's-breadth from his attitude, and I thought I had

never seen so impassible a mortal, or one less likely to be overthrown by fate than he.

“Seth Treloar is dead,” he repeated slowly, “and where is Seth Treloar’s sister?”

Though he knew not a word of English save Seth Treloar’s name, and the name of the place he had come to, he asked the question calmly, as if it were a perfectly natural thing to journey a thousand miles to fetch a woman whom he had never seen.

“She is alive,” I said slowly.

“And well, and beautiful?” he said.

“She is well,” I said, “and she must always be beautiful.”

His face flushed, but he said calmly, “She is at Trevenick? I may see her?”

“She is not here. When Seth Treloar died, I took his hut and am living here alone.”

The Styrian looked round with something like disgust in his face.

“A poor place for her,” he muttered, then aloud he said, “how did he die?” He was in splendid health when he left me to fetch his sister. Not one beast of all my herd was smoother or sleeker than he, and he hated the life here in this little Cornish hole, and he knew he would go back to prosperity, ay, and become rich if he brought me”—his voice died in a low mutter, he gazed down at

the ground frowning, but more with vexation, I thought, than regret.

“Where is she?” he said, looking me full in the face.

“How can I tell?” I answered haughtily, for the coolness of this rich peasant angered me, “I never spoke to Seth Treloar in my life.”

“Yet you have seen *her*,” he said, with a piercing look, “and I too will see her before another sun has risen.”

“Perhaps you cannot,” I said laconically, “did she know that you were coming?”

“I sent her word by her brother,” said the Styrian with an unconscious loftiness that well became his grand stature and characteristic face.

“How came he to your country?” I asked curiously.

“He was wrecked with some others on our shore,” said the Styrian, “starving and in rags. and I took pity on him and employed him as a shepherd. He was quick at picking up our tongue, the life suited him, he became industrious and avaricious and one day I saw by accident in his hut a picture of a woman so beautiful that it set my heart on fire, and he told me that she was his sister, and as good as she was beautiful.”

He drew from his breast a silver locket and shewed

me the face within. It had been taken at Plymouth and was very beautiful.

“I struggled and fought against such folly, but my peace was gone, and I took no pleasure in my flocks and herds, and at last I said to him, ‘Go home to your sister, tell her that if she will be my wife, I will make her a good husband, and to you—to you I will give the post of chief shepherd.’”

“You took her consent for granted,” I said, “but a woman usually has some voice in the matter.”

“Seth said she would be quite willing,” said the Styrian calmly, “and I sent her a noble marriage gift by him of a hundred golden pieces; he said that, like all women, she loved money, and even if she had another lover that would decide her.”

So here was the secret of the money found on Seth’s belt, truly the rascal had been clever, for, failing Judith’s highly improbable return with him to Styria, he possessed the means of keeping himself in comfort for years.

“Where is that money now?” said the Styrian sharply.

I shook my head.

“I don’t know,” I said.

The Styrian looked at me searchingly as if to read my very thoughts, and I gave him back gaze for gaze.

You are not deceiving me?" he said; "she is not *married?*"

"No," I said truly enough, "she is not married." For her prayer and Seth's, that they might be married before her child was born, had been refused on the ground that the church could not sanctify a union that she had committed a crime to bring about.

A look of intense relief, exultation even, crossed his features.

"I was beginning to fear," he said, "that the man had fooled me,—but he is dead and I have wronged him. And when shall I see her?"

"You *shall* see her," I said, "but not yet. She is away at a considerable distance from this place, and she must be prepared for your visit."

The Styrian chafed visibly, but soon displayed the self-control upon which I could see he prided himself.

"Meanwhile," I said, "remain here as my guest, the place, such as it is, and all in it is at your service."

He thanked me civilly enough, and I then proceeded to get out food and wine, which I set before him. He did not touch the latter, but asked for milk, and I observed that he ate much butter and cheese, but scarcely any meat.

Apparently half asleep in my chair, I watched him closely, but found nothing to gratify my curiosity,

until the meal was done, when he drew from his pocket a small horn box, shook some of its contents (which I could not see) into the palm of his hand and rapidly swallowed it.

Whatever it may have been, it brought to his face much the same satisfied expression as that worn by the dram-drinker whose craving is for the moment appeased, and when he sate down opposite me, I felt half inclined to ask him what his secret refresher was.

But as self-constituted host I had some duties to perform, and when I had improvised a rude bed for him, and had removed the plates and dishes, I found the Styrian, accustomed to his early hours and, early rising, half asleep by the fire, and considerably to my disappointment, he shortly after disrobed and turned in.

Sitting over my solitary pipe and the coffee I presently prepared, I had ample leisure to consider the strangeness of this man's unexpected arrival, but in no way could I perceive that he would influence Judith's fate one jot.

Why, then, had I pressed hospitality upon him, and, after committing myself to a lie that he would in all probability speedily discover, saddled myself day and night with a man who could at best be but an irksome companion to me?

I cannot tell, save that I clung to straws and if

Judith's wild assertion, that Seth Treloar killed himself, were true, then this man, who had lived in his company for years, and must intimately know his habits, might be able to throw some light upon what seemed a wholly incredible thing. "This Styrian," thought I, "must be a man of no common tenacity and strength of will, to start off, knowing no word of English except Seth Treloar, Trevenick, Cornwall, England, in search of a woman whom he has never seen, and I see well enough that he is not a man to be trifled with, now he is here. I may keep him quiet for a day or two, no longer; but during that time he can learn nothing from the villagers as they cannot speak his tongue, and he cannot speak theirs. meanwhile I shall have leisure to study him, and extract from him all that he knows about Seth Treloar.

After—but the morrow should take care of itself.

It was with a distinct feeling of happiness and almost of hope that at last I knocked the ashes out of my pipe, paused awhile to look down on the calm, healthy face of the Styrian, strong even in the abandonment of sleep, and mounted the narrow stairs that led to the only chamber the hut afforded.

CHAPTER IX.

“As on the driving cloud the shining bow
That gracious thing made up of tears and light,
'Mid the wild rack and rain that stands below,
Stands smiling forth, unmoved and freshly bright.”

THE room was empty when I descended early next morning, and the house door stood open shewing the moving sparkle of the sea, fretting itself against the translucent green and yellow of the sky.

Early as it was, Jake had already been here, for a pitcher of milk (only partly full, as if some one had drunk from it), some bread, and other articles of food were placed, as usual, outside the door, and when I had taken these in, I proceeded to make my preparations for breakfast, and then strolled out in search of my visitor.

I knew pretty well who would be his companion, for Jake was as inquisitive as a squirrel or a monkey, and as they had but one word upon which to ring the changes of conversation, instinct guided me to the churchyard, where, sure enough, I found both men standing before a plain tombstone, upon which was inscribed,

SETH TRELOAR.

DIED APRIL, 188-.

I approached them unobserved, and saw that the Styrian eagerly desired to ask some question of Jake, and that his powerlessness to do so moved him to a deep inward rage.

He clenched his sinewy hand with a gesture that spoke volumes, and turned a look upon Jake before which the man drew back, but the Styrian's passion was quickly controlled, and he moved slowly away in the direction of the hut.

He gave no heed to the beauty of the surroundings through which he passed, he never once lifted his head to draw in a breath of the pure, sweet air, nor cliff, nor sky, nor sea had power to win a glance from him, as he moved forward sunk in profound thought, his uncommon dress marking him out as a beacon upon which all the villagers crowded to their doors to gaze.

Jake, unconscious of being himself followed, kept a few paces behind the Styrian, and when the latter entered the hut, hovered about outside, desirous to enter, but fearful of being caught by me on my return. The preparations for breakfast shewed him that I was abroad, and presently he too stepped over the threshold, and disappeared.

Now I am not usually either a spy or an eaves-dropper, but on this occasion I decided to be both, and, turning in my tracks, I made a circuit, and so got

to the back of the hut, and quietly into the small place dignified by the name of the secret room, where was the small grating that gave directly on the kitchen. I looked in. Jake was in the act of lifting the iron ring of the trap-door, and the Styrian, with indifference in his expression, was looking on.

My first impulse was to smile, for Jake had literally one eye on the door, fearing my return, and the other on his companion, who only frowned and looked puzzled 'as Jake pointed to the black void below, repeating, "*Seth Treloar, Seth Treloar,*" over and over again.

Then ensued a display of histrionic power, for which I was not in the least prepared, for snatching up a piece of cord lying near, he rapidly wound it round his arms, simulating a man who is securely bound, then threw himself on the ground, stretched himself stiffly out, and simulated death.

The Styrian watched him closely, but without visible comprehension, till Jake by a series of jerks that shewed considerable muscular energy, but still preserving in his features a corpse-like rigidity, brought himself to the open mouth of the cellar and made a feint of going through it head foremost.

This, I need scarcely say, he was most careful not to do, and having opened his eyes and sat up, he pointed downwards with much vigour, repeating

“Seth Treloar down there!” till the sudden flash of comprehension on the Styrian’s face convinced him that he was understood.

Then he replaced the trap-door, tossed the cord back to where he found it, brushed some of the dust from his jersey, and with a confirmatory nod meant to convey, “it’s all true,” made tracks for the door.

But the Styrian’s strong hand caught him back.

“Murdered?” burst from his lips in Austrian, and in defiance of common sense, but strange to say, whether it be that the thought of murder, or rather its image, is able to convey itself in one flash from eye to eye, being by its human horror as well understood of the deaf as the dumb, Jake distinctly understood the Styrian’s question and nodded vehemently. For a few moments the stranger stood motionless, all his energies concentrated in thought, then he made a gesture of enquiry, that said as plain as possible,

“How?”

Jake was equal to the occasion, and performed his part so well that I was not surprised to hear later that he had often rehearsed the whole drama in the tap-room of the “Chough and Crow.”

He crossed the room, threw himself into a chair, the chair in which Seth Treloar had sate on the night of his return. In this he leaned back, affecting to sit up shortly, and look smilingly at some one who

approached him. He then pretended to take some vessel from the invisible person, to swallow its contents, to be seized at once with violent pain and sickness (it was droll to see him, in the paroxysms of agony, still keeping a weather eye on the door, in case of my return), to roll on the ground in convulsions, biting and kicking like a rabid dog, and finally to stretch himself out stiff and stark, as if the last office he required would be at the hands of the undertaker.

The Styrian had watched with bent brows the first part of the pantomime, fully perceiving its significance, however grotesquely expressed, yet I saw in a moment that it neither surprised nor convinced him, and I said to myself, "This man listens to a circumstantial tale that is entirely vitiated by some secret knowledge that he possesses."

Jake, out of breath, and disappointed with the effect of his simulated death, came nearer the impassive man, who looked up suddenly, and began a pantomime of his own.

I caught his meaning before Jake did. "Did Seth Treloar die of poison *before* he was pushed into the cellar, or after?"

But when Jake had made him understand, an expression of incredulity, quickly followed by astonishment, crossed his face, he turned aside, threw out his

hands vehemently, and his thundered out Austrian, "*No! No! Impossible!*" reached me clearly where I stood.

Jake shrugged his shoulders and slipped away, he knew he had stayed too long already.

For some moments after he had gone the Styrian stood motionless, revolving many things clearly not pleasant in his mind. Then he smiled evilly, and half drew from a fold in his sash a pistol of curious workmanship, and it needed not his significant look at the staircase leading to my sleeping quarters to convince me that here was a man only to be fooled at serious personal risk to the fooler.

He put back the pistol, produced the little horn box, shook out some of its contents into the palm of his hand, and swallowed it.

I saw the color distinctly—white. Involuntarily I thought of another man whom I had seen taking a pinch of white powder out of a box, but with very different results.

Over the Styrian's face stole the same expression of voluptuous satisfaction that I had noticed on the previous night, then he turned to the table as though his appetite were freshly whetted, and, without waiting for me, sate down and fell to.

The act convinced me of his utter contempt and indifference to me. I counted for nothing; he had

come to fulfil a purpose, and meant to do it; my presence here could neither hinder nor advance him one jot. So he thought—but through my brain had just darted an idea so wild, so inspired, that I felt absolutely giddy as I left my loop-hole and regained the fresh morning air.

CHAPTER X.

“What have I done but that which nature destined,
Or the blind elements stirred up within me?
If good were meant, why were we made these beings?”

THE Styrian had the grace to rise as I entered the room, but in the very tone of his greeting I observed a change, and knew that he already distrusted me.

His appetite, however, was in no way affected, for he put away vast quantities of butter, cheese and milk, looking at me with a kind of pity as I made my moderate meal of coffee and bread. When he had finished, he leaned across the table and looked me full in the face, a tough, resolute-eyed fellow, who might have passed for a brigand whose only law was his own will.

“Seth Treloar was murdered,” he said. “Who murdered him?”

I neither turned my eyes away from him, nor answered save by shrugging my shoulders, and shaking my head.

“He was killed first, then thrown down that trap-door,” (he pointed to it). “Why was he killed? I repeat, who killed him?”

"That is what I am trying to find out," I said.

The Styrian looked at me with eyes that searched my very soul.

"You do not know?" he said.

"I do not know."

"Does any one know?" said the Styrian.

"Seth Treloar."

The Styrian laughed harshly, "Of course,—but the man who killed Seth Treloar?"

"I believe Seth Treloar killed himself."

"And who threw him down the trap-door?"

"Another person—for reasons wholly unconnected with his death."

The Styrian sate rigid, and concentrated in thought.

"It is a strange story," he said. "A man dies, is thrust into a cellar. If he had died by his own hand, why not bury him? To whose advantage was it to hide him? Whoever did so must surely have come under suspicion?"

I said nothing, the filling of my pipe occupied me.

"You are playing the fool with me," said the Styrian in a hoarse guttural voice, "but the truth I will have, even if it cost your life."

I laughed contemptuously at his melodramatic tone.

"It is not my life that is in question," I said, "but that of, as I believe, an entirely innocent person."

The manner of Seth Treloar's death *did* arouse suspicion, and the person accused is now in prison." I paused.

"Found guilty?" said the Styrian.

"Under sentence of death," I continued, "but that person no more murdered him than you or I did."

"Who was the person?" said the Styrian.

"The woman," I said, "with whose portrait you fell in love, and whom you have come all the way to seek; the woman," I added slowly, "who was his wife."

The Styrian thrust back his chair, leaped to his feet, and turned on me with the ferocity of a mad bull.

"His wife—*his wife!* You are mad, and a liar! She was his sister, he would not have *dared* to fool me so!"

He literally towered over me, his great stature seeming to rise higher with the wrath and fury that swelled him; his clenched fist involuntarily moved to fall with crushing force on my head, but I did not stir, and with an oath he dropped it by his side, though his features remained dark and convulsed with passion.

"He lied to you," I said quietly; "he was always a liar and a rogue. And he wanted to make her something worse than himself. So far he meant honestly

by you, that he would have taken her to you, and sold her as his sister—if she would have let him.”

“And she killed him when he told her of his intention,” said the Styrian more calmly, “and hid him yonder? She must be a strong woman, and her will must be as strong as her heart.” He snatched at a slender gold chain hanging round his throat, and drew out a locket, which he opened, and looked at with a frown that gradually softened into extraordinary tenderness and love.

“She did right,” he said suddenly and passionately. “The man was a hound and liar, it was not her fault that he deceived me, and he deserved all he got; she must have been a good woman to be so angry; and *he* is dead, she is free now—free—” He stopped suddenly as one palsied by a sudden thought; for some moments he did not speak, then striding over to me he seized my arm and, shaking me violently, said,

“Where is she? Speak! O! God! She is in prison. She is to die—*to die* for killing that scoundrel?”

“She did not kill him,” I said. “I told you that before. But she will be hanged all the same.”

As I spoke I released myself with a sudden exercise of strength that sent him reeling backwards, and seemed to astonish him.

“Tell me the truth,” he said, with more respect in his tone than he had hitherto shown me. “You do not believe her guilty, and I forgive her if she is.”

I could have smiled at his sultan-like assumption that Judith was absolutely at his disposal, but the grandeur of his simplicity impressed me, and I began my story without loss of time.

He heard the account of Treloar’s married life without much emotion, though he occasionally gave vent to an expression of disgust ; but when I brought Stephen upon the scene, he became transformed into an enraged man who sees snatched from his starving lips the morsel he hungrily covets.

“And she loves him, she adores him, this miserable fisherman ?” he cried.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Who can answer for a woman ?” I said. “All women love comfort, and, as you say, he is poor. And she is not his wife,” I added, narrowly watching his working face ; “if by any miracle you could save her, who knows but that——” I did not complete the sentence, but I saw he understood me.

“Wife to one man, mistress to another,” he said, the words dropping harshly and slowly from his lips, “so *that* is the woman I’ve come all this way to find—but go on with the story, there will be more surprise yet.”

I described Seth Treloar's return to Smuggler's Hole, his disappearance, the departure of Stephen and Judith next morning, her return to the hut for a few moments, and her strange conduct in the train, where I was eye-witness to the incident of the box of arsenic and the effect produced on Stephen when he tasted it.

(At this point the Styrian laughed contemptuously, as a fire-eater might at one who dreaded fire.) I went on to relate how I recovered the box that Judith had thrown out of the window, how I traced her as the woman who had left a man hidden away at Smuggler's Hole, how I had caused her to be brought back to England and put on her trial, how she had been condemned, on circumstantial evidence, to death, and how only a short time now would elapse before the carrying out of the sentence. I then gave him a succinct account of the events of that night, as related by Judith herself.

The Styrian had not asked a single question during the recital, but I had read first scorn and then flat denial in his face when I described the dose of arsenic found in the dead man's stomach; he even waved his hand impatiently as if to motion away an absurdity, but when I had ceased to speak, he began a very vivid cross-examination of me.

"You are sure that the potion she gave him was

harmless, beyond keeping him asleep for twenty-four hours ?”

“Quite sure.”

“There was no trace of poison found in the stomach besides arsenic ?”

“None.”

“She did not bruise or injure him when she hid him in the cellar ?”

“There was not a mark or bruise of any kind on him.”

“It would be dark when he came to his senses, there would be no light by which he could see the trap-door above, and his arms were bound ; did the rope hang in such a manner that in the dark he would strike against it or touch it ?”

“No. By lifting his hands he could touch it—not unless.”

“How could a bound man do that ?”

“He could have shifted the cord easily—as any other man of half his muscular strength could have done.”

“Always supposing that he had not swallowed enough arsenic to kill a dozen men,” said the Styrian, whose excitement increased each moment, though he made visible efforts to subdue it.

“Arsenic that was never administered by his wife,” I said boldly, “but by—himself. God knows by

what devilish agency a man is able to take a life-destroying drug and thrive on it, but *you* at least should know, since you carry a box with similar contents to the one *he* carried, and without which, and possibly for lack of it, he died."

I was not prepared for the effect of my wild shot, which had yet hit truth in the bull's-eye, or the Styrian's face belied him. His eyes quailed before mine as I pushed my advantage remorselessly.

"You can see her," I said, "and you *will*. You know that he died of either too much or too little of a powder both you and he seem to be able to take with impunity, and you will go with me at once before a magistrate and swear the evidence which will clear her."

"You talk like one mad," said the Styrian sullenly. "In one breath you say men thrive on a poison, in the next you confess that Seth Treloar died of it. How do you reconcile the two statements?"

"I hope to do so before I am much older," I said coolly, for by now I saw what his line would be, and decided on my own.

For a moment he looked disconcerted, then rose and went to the window, where he stood gazing out and thinking deeply.

"I must see her," he said at last; "take me to her." I shook my head, and went on smoking.

“But I say you shall,” he said, striding close up to me and with a look of absolute murder in his face.

“Not I; unless you are going to give evidence that will clear her.”

“How can I do that?” he cried angrily.

“You can do it,” I said, “and you will. What! You will stand by and see a woman hanged for a murder that you *know* she did not commit, for want of a few words that cannot possibly hurt you? Shame on you! And who knows but that in her gratitude to you——”

“You said she was fond of the other fellow,” said the Styrian sullenly.

“*Was, man, was*—but who will answer for what a beautiful woman *is*?”

“I will see her,” said the Styrian with stubborn lips, “and then I will tell you. She cannot be far away, and if you refuse to take me, that fool who brings you food will guide me to her.”

“Find him,” I said curtly, “and go.”

But the Styrian lingered.

“Will they admit me?” he said.

“Not without me,” I said indifferently.

“Then you will come too,” he said. “See here, I am rich, I am not ill-looking, I love her, I would take her away from a shameful death to give her such a home as she never dreamt of. Is it likely that she will refuse?”

I looked at the man, then thought of Stephen. Many a woman not cast in Judith's mould would not have hesitated between the rich man of many flocks and herds and the poor fisherman whose daily bread and life were at the mercy of the waves.

'I will take you to her,' I said. "And supposing that she should refuse?"

"Come," he said, and that was all the answer I got as he stalked along the cliff before me.

CHAPTER XI.

“The new-fa'en snow to be your smock,
It becomes your body best ;
Your head all wrapt wi' the eastern wind,
And the cauld rain on your breast.

ARRIVED at the gaol, I left the angry, impatient man without, while I sought the governor to explain to him the state of affairs. I also begged that a messenger might be sent for Stephen, though I could hardly have explained why I wished him to be present at the Styrian's interview with Judith.

The governor, who had hitherto held the worst possible opinion of the woman, was inclined to admit that the Styrian's appearance corroborated her story, though he did not for a moment believe that his coming could in any way influence her fate.

But I thought differently, and my heart beat high with hope as I left him.

Judith, whose figure was almost entirely concealed by a long cloak, rose as we entered the cell, but kept her foot on the fishing-net that she was making, looking past me with eyes of grave wonder at the man following behind me.

He on his part stood abashed and confused before the glorious woman who so far outstripped his expectations, and so for awhile the two stood looking on one another, then the colour suddenly flashed into her face and she sate down and resumed her work.

“Judith,” I said, “I have brought to you a man who knew your husband in Styria, and who arrived last night in Trevenick in search of him.”

Judith looked up, in a moment she knew that this was the man to whom Seth Treloar had promised her as a wife, and there was no anger, only pity in her voice, as she said,

“Seth Treloar desaved 'ee, an' made a fule o' 'ee, but he be dead naw.”

“He does not understand English,” I said; then I repeated to him what she said.

The Styrian answered nothing, his burning eyes were rooted to the woman whose fairness was to her picture as the full flood of sunlight is to the pale glimmer of the moon.

“Judith,” I went on, “this man can save you if he will. He knows that Seth Treloar died of arsenic administered by himself, but under what conditions I know not, nor can I persuade him to tell me. If you can so work upon his pity that he will speak, then you will untie the knot from about your neck,

but he will be hard to deal with, for he has come over here to fetch you for his wife."

Judith turned and looked at him.

Some things are learned in a second of time from a woman's eyes that a whole volume of written words might fail to teach, and I knew that he perfectly understood all the dumb entreaty, the deep beseeching of that prayer put forth from her helplessness to his strength, that might surely have kindled chivalry even in the breast of a boor.

"Put by your desire, and save a human soul alive," said her eyes, but her very loveliness undid her petition, and if her mere picture had held such power over him, where should he find strength to thrust from him the breathing woman whose looks and voice were sweet as love?

"Tell her," he said to me, "that I will save her on one condition only, that she becomes my wife."

I repeated his words, and Judith stepped back, throwing out her hands with a grand gesture that expressed repudiation, disappointment and scorn more eloquently than any words.

"Th' coward!" she said, between her teeth; "him's worse than a brute beast, an' me belongin' to Steve, an' th' little 'un an' a'. Tell 'un," she added proudly, "as I'd rather die Steve's light-o'-love than be wife to he or any ither man, an' what him knaws, that 'un

can keep, us did wi'out 'un afore, an' us can do wi'out 'un agen!"

She resumed her seat, and went calmly on with her netting, then suddenly the fire in her eyes flamed out, and she bowed her head upon her arms.

"Steve! Steve!" she said.

It was like a mother's cry of love and yearning forced from a soul that had schooled itself to look calmly upon death, but to whom a momentary prospect of life had renewed all the bitterness of an undeserved doom, but it woke no echo of pity in the Styrian's breast, for well enough he knew that it was not for him, and his face hardened as he looked down upon her.

If she would not live to please him, then she should not live to please another man, so much I read in his eyes and the cruel curl of his lips, and from this determination I afterwards knew he never wavered.

"Let her be," he said to me calmly, "she will come to her senses in time. Where is this Steve on whom she calls like a bird for her mate? Bah! she will forget him and call on me just as lovingly before she is many months older. She was born to wear rich clothes—not such woollen as now disfigures her. Tell her that I will enrich him also if she will leave him, and they will both live to bless me, for there is no such thing as love when the body starves."

I gave no heed to him, but turned to Judith.

“Do not send this man away in anger,” I said; “the key to the mystery of Seth Treloar’s death is locked in his breast, and the only fingers that can steal or wile it away from him are yours.”

Judith thrust back the loosened masses of bronze hair from her face, and looked up.

“What ’ud ’ee have me do?” she said. “I’m jest mazed, an’ how do ’ee know but he be a liard? Him warnt here when Seth Treloar died, an’ how can ’un know aught about it?” she added, exercising the common sense that excitement had for a time driven from its stronghold.

“That I cannot tell you,” I said, “though *he* can. You ask me what you are to do—something harder, probably, than you have either skill or strength for.”

“What be it,” asked Judith, looking at me with sombre, distrustful eyes.

“Fool him,” I said with energy. “Does a captive thrust from him the hand that contains his ransom? Hide your detestation of his offer, let me tell him that you must have time to think over his proposals, and meanwhile I will watch him, and try to surprise his secret.”

“I canna do ’t,” cried Judith with heaving breast, and as I looked at her, I realised that she was morally and physically incapable of acting a part that

the majority of women would have filled with consummate ease.

“How could I sarve ’un so?” said Judith reproachfully, “an’ after Seth Treloar hev chated ’un ivery way, an’ broffed ’un here on a fule’s errand? M’appen, too, ’twar this man’s gold as war found i’ th’ belt.”

“Yes,” I said, “he sent it as a marriage gift to you, but Seth never meant it to reach your hand.”

“Awh!” said Judith, “’tis safe eno’, an’ ’ee ’ll see it be paid back to ’un, wont ’ee? Poor sawl,” she added with all a Cornishwoman’s sense of justice, “him ha’ got summat t’ complain o’ anyways.”

She looked at the Styrian not unkindly as she spoke, and his face softened so instantly that I saw how he would be as wax in her hands, had she but the skill and the courage to handle him.

At that moment the door opened and Stephen Croft came in.

Pale, haggard, the ghost of his former self, he yet looked beautiful as a god compared with the repellent but picturesque figure of the Styrian, at the sight of whom he stood still, arrested by surprise, while Judith with a cry of joy ran forward and,

“Like a loose blossom on a gusty night,”

fell into the arms that involuntarily closed around her.

The church had banned and the law had cursed the pair, yet methought I never saw more purely loving man and wife than these twain, upon whom the Styrian gazed with sullen eyes, and face disfigured with passion and jealous rage.

“This man,” I said, in answer to Steve’s enquiring glance, “is the Styrian of whom Seth Treloar told Judith. When Seth did not return he came over here in search of him, and also on another and more mysterious errand.”

“An’ what may that be?” said Stephen, his face suddenly growing stern and an angry light coming into his blue eyes, while Judith pressed closely to him, closely as a loving woman might cling.

“He came to fetch Judith,” I said, “Judith whom he believed to be Seth’s sister, and who had been promised to him as his wife.”

“Awh!” said Steve with a fierce laugh, “’ee can tell ’un t’ get along home to wance, him have comed a bit late i’ th’ day, for more reasons nor one.”

Fondly he smoothed Judith’s hair as he spoke, and over her head the two men exchanged looks of hatred and defiance, that in Stephen were strongly mingled with triumph.

“He is not to be despised,” I said; “this man knows the true secret of Seth Treloar’s death, and a word from him would open those prison gates and make Judith a free woman.”

Stephen's arms slipped from Judith, and he stood looking at me with dazed eyes, too deeply stunned for joy or more than partial comprehension.

"Be 'ee tryin' t' make a fule o' me?" he said at last; "'ee had always a bee i' yer bonnet, an' how can him knaw aught o' what 'un warnt here t' see?"

"Awh!" said Judith taking his hand, "true enuff is't. I allus sed they was up t' tricks wi' th' pison, an' furrin' folks has queer ways, but whatever him knaws, my dear, us wont hear a word on't."

"Eh!" said Stephen, "him can spake for 'ee an' wunnot? But I'll jest make 'un!"

"Naw," said Judith, pulling him back, "he sets too big a price 'pon it for we. What do 'ee think it be?"

Stephen's breast heaved as Judith's face of mingled love and scorn told him the truth, and the hot blood rushed into his own.

"How dare 'un," he cried, "t' make bargains wi' a poor sawl, an' play pitch an' toss with her life, all for his own bit o' pleasure," and with clenched fist and fury in his eyes he advanced on the Styrian.

"Peace," I cried, arresting his arm while the two men, of about equal stature but utterly dissimilar looks, glared at each other like wild beasts, about to spring, "when he came to the hut he did not even know of your existence. Blame Seth Treloar, not him."

Stephen's arm fell to his side, but his eyes still shone hatred. As to Judith, I caught a look on her face then that at the moment shocked me in so good a woman, for so might look a lioness who saw her mate punish a bold usurper of his rights.

With difficulty I drew Stephen aside, where his angry eyes could not rest on his rival, and Judith followed us and stood beside him.

"You are both acting like fools," I said impatiently; "instead of conciliating this man, you are defying him to do his worst. If he goes away in his present mood, Judith's last hope of being saved goes with him."

"Has 'ee a mind t' wheedle 'un?" said Stephen, instinctively drawing Judith closer, and with all his jealous heart in his eyes.

She only laughed for answer, and out of pure devilry, as I suppose, clasped both her arms round Stephen's neck and kissed him.

It was the last straw. With a furious oath the Styrian stamped his foot and battered with his clenched fists on the door till a gaoler came.

Cursing, he strode over the threshold, and groping his way as one blind got free out of the gaol, but quickly as I followed, I could not come up with him, nor did I see him again that day.

CHAPTER XII.

“ And you killed her ?
May eternal wrath flame round you ! ”

WANDERING from cliff to cliff aimlessly as my thoughts went beating hither and thither, my most abiding sensation was one of anger against Judith for her impolitic conduct. She might surely have temporized with the Styrian, have led him on, at no hurt to herself, till she had willed from him some hint or clue to his secret, but instead of this she had deliberately maddened him by her passionately displayed love for Stephen, and so flung away her last chance.

And yet, when at nightfall I returned to find the hut still empty, I decided that he had gone back to his own country as suddenly as he had left it, and bitterly out of heart I sate down by the cold hearth, thinking of the hopes that had sprung in me so lately as that morning.

Something, too, of Judith's doubts in this man's power to save her assailed me now; after all, might he not have been affecting a knowledge that he had

not, solely to obtain a sight of the woman he so passionately coveted?

He might have been, but I felt convinced that he was not. And a sense of baffled fury filled me at the thought of him, on his way back to Styria, carrying the undivulged secret that would have made the two most miserable people alive the happiest, while from me would have been lifted an intolerable burden that would haunt me to my life's end.

Judge, then, of my joy when at dusk I heard the latch lifted, and saw standing in the aperture of the door a tall shape, whose dishevelled hair and muddy clothes bore witness to the violence of the physical and mental exercise that had racked it, and when the haggard wretch sank into the corner before me, I could almost (in the sudden relief his return afforded me) have found it in my heart to pity him.

But I gave no sign of such weakness, and went on smoking my pipe as though he were not present, and, while I did so, resolved upon my plan of action.

His sullen looks were bent downwards, but expressed no shame, only the silent rage of a man unaccustomed to be beaten, and loathing the pain that his baulked desire inflicted upon him.

Presently I rose, knocked the ashes out of my pipe, and going upstairs collected a few necessaries I had there, put them in a portmanteau, and bringing it

down proceeded to add certain other trifles that were lying about, then fastened it, and placed it ready by the door with my overcoat and rug, then resumed my seat opposite the Styrian and spoke.

“I am going away,” I said, “but you are at liberty to use this place as long as you please. Jake will bring you all you require.”

Worn out as he was, the Styrian’s eyes pierced me as he said,

“Why are you going?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Why should I stay?” I said, “I have neither the wish nor the heart to see a woman hanged for a crime that she did not commit, a woman whom a word too from you would save.”

The Styrian laughed harshly:

“Is your blood so cold in your country?” he said, “do you always throw the women you love into the arms of other men? Living, she would be his; dead she is as much mine as his.”

“Not so,” I cried, “since you have possessed neither her heart nor her. Go home, go home to your own country and hold up your head there if you can with the memory for ever with you of the coward’s deed you have done over here.”

“It is I who have been deceived,” cried the Styrian with heaving breast, “I came honourably to make her

my wife, only to find that I was be-fooled by a scoundrel whom I had housed and fed when he was destitute, whom I taught and enriched till he had almost forgotten his former miserable estate, and who rewarded me as you know."

"What he did is no business of hers," I said, looking him full in the face with bitter contempt, "and all the sins of his mis-spent life would weigh as nothing in the balance of your blood-guiltiness, for if she dies, you are her murderer."

"You are mad," said the Styrian sullenly, "the law of your country found her guilty, and your laws are just. I have lied to you, and I could not save her if I would. You think that Seth Treloar and I knew some secret about arsenic that enabled us to take it with impunity—why then did he die from an overdose of it?"

"God knows," I said bitterly, "your confounded juggling with the cursed stuff is beyond me—but probably by some oversight he had not his antidote with him."

A flitting smile of contempt told me that I had missed the mark, then the Styrian said calmly,

"He never carried, for he never needed, an antidote."

I shrugged my shoulders and yawned, as one utterly weary of the subject.

“I give it up,” I said, indifferently, “I have wasted far too much time over the matter already. May I expect to see you on my return?”

“That depends upon when you come,” said the Styrian. “Look you—she is a fool. On the one hand life and riches with me, on the other a horrible death and nothing—not even her proud fisherman for company. All to-night she will think and think ..tomorrow I will go to her, and she will answer me differently. Eh?” he added in a harsh note of interrogation.

But I made him no answer, only nodding my head in a curt farewell to him as I went out.

It was pitch night by now, and the breakers below the cliff seemed rolling to my very feet, but above their sound I heard the clashing of rough bolts and bars with which the Styrian hastened to barricade the hut.

Then I saw the blind pulled down, and heard the shutters close, and I had a curious feeling of being turned out like a dog from my own hearth as I stood in the darkness without. But I was hungry, and had beside some arrangements to make, so, after concealing my bag and rug in a cleft of the rock hard by, I persued the winding path that led down to Trevenick, and was soon inside the cheerful hostel that I had more than once before visited.

Smiles awaited me, and a good homely dinner followed in due course, during which I saw many a shy glance stolen at me by the buxom landlady, as in the village I was looked upon as almost a wizard for the part I had played in bringing Judith to justice.

“So you’m got a visitor up to th’ hut, sir,” she said, as she set my modest dessert before me.

“A friend of Seth Treloar’s,” I said.

“Awh,” she said looking grave, “better fo’ ’un poor sawl if ’un had bided ’mongst them as wished ’un no harm. Who’d iver ha’ thought Judith ’ud turn out sich a devil? For sure but Seth war a ne’er-do-weel, an’ niver happy but when he was torsticated, but nuthin’ him iver took did ’un th’ harm’ that wan cup that Judith gi’ed ’un when he comed home, not knawin’ she war wi’ child by anither man.”

“You have always believed her guilty,” I said.

“Iss, she luv’d Steve powerfu’ eno’ to do anythin’ so ’s them two shouldn’t be divided, but part they’ll have to now, befo’ long.”

But I did not feel quite so sure of that parting as an hour later I climbed the steep path that led to Smuggler’s Hole.

CHAPTER XIII.

“ He turned her owre and owre again
O’ gin her skin was white !
I might have spared that bonny face
To have been some man’s delight.”

I STOOD still to listen outside the hut, but all was silent, no glimmer of light shewed through the cracks of the crazy old shutters.

Evidently the Styrian had a little anticipated his usual time for retiring, and presently he gave an oral proof of it, for a distinct sound of snoring reached me, and I smiled at discovering the quarter whence it issued, being no less a place than the bed-room upstairs, which he evidently preferred to the shake-down I had made up for him below.

No sound could have pleased me better. He slept with barricaded doors, secure as he supposed in a fortress, and with not the smallest fear of surprise to keep him awake. Exhausted as he was his slumbers were likely to be profound, and my spirits rose as I went round to the back of the hut, and lit the lanthorn with which I had taken care to provide myself at the inn.

The door of the small outhouse or lean-to yielded readily to my touch; I closed it behind me, and looked through the narrow grating I have before mentioned, into the room beyond. The embers on the hearth still glowed, but the place was in total darkness, and at once I opened the secret door, and stepped in.

Overhead came the long regular breathing of the Styrian, for awhile I stood listening, then I removed my boots, darkened the lanthorn, and with the utmost caution proceeded to creep up the stairs that ended in an open space, in one corner of which stood the bed upon which my unbidden guest had disposed himself.

He was fully dressed, so much I saw in the narrow blink of the lanthorn I permitted myself to uncover, and bitter disappointment seized me, for I knew that the thing I sought was actually on his body, and that my chances of taking it from him were small indeed.

He lay on his back, one arm, with the hand open and empty, thrown behind his head, the other hidden beneath the coverlid with which he had half wrapped himself.

At a little distance from the bed was a chair, and upon this I sate down to think, but thought availed me little. Nothing short of overcoming him by sheer physical strength that out-matched his (which

I did not possess), could wrest from him that little box in which he found nourishment and strength, and in the fellow to which Seth Treloar had found death.

Alone I could do nothing, but with the help of Jake—Jake whose clumsy movements would certainly have awakened the sleeper, I might by good luck have bound and robbed him, but I was alone, unarmed, and my wit failed me.

I may have sate there a minute or an hour when with a half groan he turned on his side, and suddenly threw out an arm that fell sheer across my chest, and rested there.

It had all the weight of a blow, and I trembled under the shock, it was so horribly unexpected; but as the moments passed, and his regular breathing convinced me that he slept, I gradually shifted the lanthorn and cautiously stole a ray of light that shewed me his strong fingers closed tightly on the horn box that I was perilling my life to steal.

Even had I the strength to unlock that iron grasp, he carried arms, and would shoot me like a dog before I could escape. Involuntarily I thought of those snake charmers and Hindoo jugglers who, by the skilful use of a feather, are able to make a sleeping man change his attitude or release his grip upon whatsoever he holds, but I had no such power to

make flaccid this man's muscles, and in sheer helplessness and desperation I sate for what seemed to me a lifetime with that heavy arm weighing on my breast.

What real length of time elapsed, I cannot say, but suddenly he turned with a heavy groan, as if some spectre troubled his sleep, and his arm fell to the ground with a dull thud, then he fell to snoring loudly and regularly as before.

Kneeling down, I ventured on a tiny shaft of light that showed me his relaxed hand lying on the ground, palm uppermost, with—and the sight of it nearly took my breath away for joy—the horn box loosely held in the relaxed fingers.

For once in my life I rose to the emergency of the moment, and without hesitation slipped the box from beneath that nerveless touch, and stole away.

But I had reckoned without that instinct, belonging of right only to animals, but found in savages and men who live almost entirely in the open air; an instinct that becomes developed almost into a sixth sense, that keeps sentinel over the others while they sleep, and gives instant warning of danger.

On the instant the Styrian awoke, found his hand empty, and held his breath to listen for the slightest sound that might give evidence of a stranger's presence. Then he swept his hand along the floor as

thinking he might have dropped what he missed, and, not finding it, hurled his huge weight out of bed, and I said to myself, "Now, if he possesses a light I am a dead man," and listened for the striking of a match, that, thank God! did not come.

I heard instead a click, ominous enough, and doubting if in the darkness he so accurately knew the position of the staircase as to cover it successfully, I stooped down, and, getting on my hands and knees, crawled to the stair-head with all the speed I could command.

Instantaneously, with the first sound I made, came a shot that passed directly over my head, and then the boards groaned under the Styrian's weight as he dashed across the narrow room towards me, just missing my heels as I slid down the stairs, checking my too rapid descent by grasping the low hand-rail that on one side guarded them.

He fired again with the same result as before, then came thundering after me, but I had the start, and knew that if I could reach the secret door (which I had left open) I was safe.

But even as I slipped through it, a sharp report and a stinging sensation in my right shoulder told me that I was hit, and I had barely drawn the door close behind me, when he fell against it with a crash that shook the whole place.

I heard him cursing and raging on the other side, completely baffled by my disappearance, and probably not aware that he had winged me.

Softly I slipped out at the other door, and sped down the winding path at the top of my speed, never drawing breath till I reached the nearest cottage, where lived a fisherman with his three stalwart sons, all soundly asleep, and with difficulty awakened.

"I have been shot at, and wounded by the man at Smuggler's Hole," I said, "you must come with me at once and secure him."

The blood that dripped from my coat sleeve corroborated my story plainly enough when the three joined me, but the emergency left no time for those explanations that I should have been puzzled to give, and no more was said till we arrived at the hut.

Outside it we held a parley.

"Him carries fire-arms," said the old fisherman, "an' if aich wan o' his bullets be so spry as this 'un," and he touched my arm significantly.

"We must take him by surprise," I said. "While two of you beat at the front door and ask for me, the others must steal on him from behind, through the masked door. He will be parleying with you, and so we can easily overcome him without so much as a shot being fired."

So in the darkness, and without a murmuring word

from any of them, our party divided, and my pulses beat fast, as, followed by two strong fellows, I entered the hidden room, and, advancing to the grating, looked in.

The Styrian had kindled a light, and the sound of his curses came plainly to my ears as he stalked to and fro, raging at his inability to discover how the midnight thief had escaped.

Even as I watched him his fury received a check, for loud and urgent came the summons from without, and the sound of rough voices calling on my name.

For awhile he stood like an arrested statue of doubt and anger, then he strode to the door with a gesture as if he would drive away these unwelcome intruders, and on the instant I leaped silently out of my ambush, followed by the two men, and before he had time to turn in the narrow room we were upon him, and had pinioned both hands behind his back.

He struggled and roared out as the pistol fell clattering from his hand, and tore and kicked and bit at all three of us ; if his strength had not been so enormous, I think I should have felt ashamed of the uneven odds of three men against one, but as it was we found all our work cut out to secure him to the table, which was solid enough to fit a prison.

Bound and humiliated, the Styrian shewed his teeth in a snarl of malignant hate as he looked up at me.

“ You use your guests strangely in this country,” he said ; “ first you rob and then you deprive them of their liberty, and what do you expect to gain by it ? ”

“ A woman’s life,” I said, then all things grew dim before me, and with them faded the face that seemed to hide an urgent dread and fear beneath its mask of defiance and shame.

CHAPTER XIV.

“Fight on, my men, Sir Andrew says,
A little I’m hurt, but not yet slain;
I’ll but lie down and bleed awhile,
And then I’ll rise and fight again.”

THE chill air was blowing in on me, and some rough surgery, pending the arrival of the doctor, was being applied to my arm, when I came to myself, and looked around.

My eyes fell first upon Stephen, who returned my questioning gaze with another.

“Awh, whatever have ’un bin up to?” he said. “Sheddin’ o’ blid woant help he wi’ Judith, an’ he be but a raskill, too, t’ set upo’ ’ee like this.”

“Stay here with me, and help watch him,” I said, then thanked the three fishermen (the fourth had gone for the doctor) for what they had done, rewarded them handsomely, and sent them away.

They cast many a puzzled glance behind, undoubtedly much exercised in their minds as to the meaning of the night’s work, and they had barely gone when the doctor’s cheery voice sounded without, and he came briskly in. He cast a comprehensive glance around, lifted his eyebrows slightly, then, with-

out asking a question, proceeded to examine my arm.

“H’m, a pretty severe flesh wound,” he said, “and the bullet must be probed for; you’ll have to come back with me to my place. Steve here will keep an eye on your prisoner. What brought you to such a hole as this?” he went on, looking at me keenly, then turning to bend a long gaze on the Styrian, “and in such company?”

He did not wait for an answer but hurried out. He had lived all his life in Trevenick, and had no doubt been called to more than one scene of bloodshed and violence under this roof.

I followed him at once, leaving alone together the man who loved and was beloved of Judith, and the man who loved and was scorned by her.

“Doctor,” I said, when a sufficiently painful quarter of an hour had been got through, and the Styrian’s bullet lay in my hand, “is it possible for a man to take a quantity of arsenic daily with impunity, then die suddenly from the effects of it?”

The doctor, who had been cleaning and replacing his instruments, turned to me quickly with a wicked-looking knife poised in his hand, and said,

“So you have not yet got rid of your insane idea that Seth Treloar poisoned himself?”

“No, I said firmly, and what’s more I am going to

prove it. This box (I produced it) taken from that man while he slept to-night, is positive proof that he takes arsenic habitually ; and as he was a close companion of Seth Treloar's for years, it is pretty certain that their habits as well as occupations were identical."

Dr. Cripps took the box from my hand, tasted a grain of its contents with a very wry face, then said, "There's enough here to kill a hundred men."

"You have not answered my question," I said, and I repeated it.

"It is one I could not possibly answer," he said, off-hand. "It is unusual, extraordinary even for the body to assimilate large doses of an irritant poison, but I should say that once having violated Nature's rules successfully, a man would not be likely to succumb to its effects."

My face fell, and the smart of my shoulder angered me as a useless and intolerable pain.

"So he shot you because you stole this," said Dr. Cripps, the pallid morning light falling on his round weather-beaten face, at once homely and shrewd ; "then clearly he sets a high value on it, and I shall be curious to know how he gets on without it."

He spoke slowly as one who thought aloud, his hand arrested on its way to the table, and in his eyes I caught the slow glimmering of an idea.

"Seth Treloar was under the influence of the drug

which Judith gave him for twenty-four hours," he said, "it would be dark when he came to himself, and he may have wandered round and round like a beast in a cage for hours, ignorant of the open trap-door over his head, and the rope by which he might gain it. Did he—did he—"

"Die for want of the poison that he was in the habit of taking at regular intervals?" I burst out, putting at last into words and shape the idea that had so constantly eluded me, and to which an indefinable something in the doctor's face assisted me.

"Exactly," said Dr. Cripps, "and it strikes me we have now an excellent opportunity of finding out—that opportunity being furnished by the gentleman who is now safely tied to the leg of your kitchen table. But what brought him here?" he added suddenly.

I told him the Styrian's story from the beginning; of his interview with Judith, and everything down to the present time.

"The game is in your own hands," he said, when I stopped, "you have only to sit down and watch the man. If he shows symptoms of collapse, send for me, but it's the most extraordinary—" he paused abruptly.

"Poor girl," he said in a moved voice, "and I was ready, like all the rest of the world, to believe that

the sudden temptation overcame her, and turned a good woman into a bad one—but we don't know yet. I must get to bed now for a couple of hours, for I've a harder day's work before me, young man, than yours as amateur detective, And now you'll go back and get some sleep yourself—I'll look in after breakfast, And before I go out I'll write to B—— the first toxicologist of the day, and ask him a few questions. I wish I had done so sooner."

And he disappeared upstairs, as I went out into the grey morning, more than satisfied with the night's work, and full of hopes of what the next twenty-four hours should bring forth.

CHAPTER XV.

“O, the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound like power in light
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere.”

IT was midday when I woke from the heavy slumber into which I fell from pure exhaustion on my return from Dr. Cripps, my limbs aching from the hard chair in which I had slept, and with what felt like the brand of a red hot iron deep in my shoulder.

I looked across to the bound figure by whose side was set cup and platter, both untouched, though the wolfish look of hunger and craving that met mine put me in mind of nothing so much as a starving, hunted dog. Had his torment commenced already? It would have to be sharpened yet before I wasted a word upon him. Stephen sate in the open doorway, a patient, pathetic figure, whose attitude spoke to his hopeless despair, and whose eyes were blind to the glory of the scene upon which he gazed.

He looked up apathetically as I joined him, too engrossed in his own sorrow to heed me much.

“Th’ sun woant rise many mo’ times upo’ her,

poor sawl," he said, looking out at the living joy of the sea, "it 'ull a' be dark whar she lies, tho' th' flowers 'll bloom as swate, an' th' birds sing as loud as iver over her head, ay, an' th' little 'un 'll laff the whiles my heart is breakin'."

"You'll see many a sunrise together yet," I said cheerfully, "ay, and many a sunset too. Keep a close watch on that fellow. I shall get something to eat in the village, it would choke me to eat in his presence," and I stepped over the threshold as a captive escaping from his dungeon.

Hatless, I roamed forth with the sea, air, and sky for company, feeling brain and body rested with every step I took, and drinking in all the sweet influences of the morning with a joy to which I had long been a stranger.

"Soon," thought I, "Judith's elastic step will tread this cliff, and she will look up free as air to heaven, innocent before God and man, and already forgetting those gates of death that so lately yawned to receive her.

"In the grave lo! all things are forgotten, and in life, man, if he be happy, does not remember, he just breathes and rejoices in the mere sense of being; and the fretted arch of the blue above, the balmy air that blows from inland to the shore, and the thousand scents of the blossoming spring will speak to her in

soft whispers of the happy years to come with the lover who clung to her when all the world passed her by.

“Instead of everlasting silence, the laughter of happy voices; in place of the worm’s cold touch, the sweet clinging of her infant’s fingers, and instead of the accursed memory of the slayer of innocent blood, the honest savour and sweetness of an honorable and blameless life.”

In fancy I roamed beside the pair, and tasted all the keenness of their delight. I seemed to see the bruised spirit of the man revive, and lift itself as a flower stretches upward to the sunlight, the bowed form once more erect, and the light in his clouded eyes shining gladly forth upon his fellows.

On and on I wandered from cliff to cliff, feeling only the springing turf, the wooing, whispering air, seeing but the mingled glory of sea and sky, and those tender hues of spring that spread over the land, like the sudden laughter upon the face of a very young child.

No occasion had I for haste, rather a secret necessity behind all this tumult of joy bade me linger and spend lavishly the hours of this glorious day, so that many might elapse before I returned to the hut, and gauged the effect that the progress of time had made on the Styrian.

Ought not the thought of that caged wretch to have taken all the spring out of my limbs, the elixir out of my morning cup? Did not those wolfish eyes haunt me with their dumb cry for what I had stolen from him like any common thief?

No! they disturbed me as little as did the smarting pain in my shoulder, felt, indeed, but disregarded in the triumphant exultation of my mood. For I was buoyed up by more than hope; a sense of victory, even, possessed me, and the mere touch of the horn box in my breast pocket gave me a physical feeling of success impossible to describe.

In less than twenty-four hours—that was the limit I had set to the Styrian's powers of endurance without his drug—I should know its secret, whether life or death, and it would go hard with me if Dr. Cripps and I did not between us wring a confession from him that would clear the woman to whom he was acting so basely.

Presently the delightful pang, delightful when one sees a prospect of allaying it, whose name is hunger, assailed me.

The man who sleeps, dines, says the proverb, but I was well satisfied with my appetite now I had found it.

I had passed, far below me, more than one fisherman's cottage nestled like a white sea-gull upon a spur

of the cliff but when I came in sight of the next, I descended with some difficulty, and explained my wants to the good woman within.

"Awh," she said, scanning me closely with the clear, reasonable eye, that seems peculiar to the fisherfolk, "'ee can bide a bit. I seed 'ee war a stranger when 'ee comed over top o' th' cliff, m'appen 'ee be th' chap fro' Trevenick as is livin' to Smuggler's Hole?" she added with a sudden change of tone as she set bread and fish on the table.

"Yes, I'm the chap from Trevenick," I said, "and to all appearance you haven't heard much in my favour."

"Naw," she said coldly, "I ha'nt heard much to you'm credit. Why couldn't 'ee let a poor sawl be, 'stead o' doin' constable's work, when, as I hear tell, 'ee be rich eno' to do nothin' fo' a livin'? But laws, little perky folks is allus up to mischief!"

She stood with her magnificent arms akimbo, looking as if for two pins she would have taken and shaken me like a rat.

But I was hungry and I was happy, so I ate and drank diligently, answering her not a word.

"'Iss," she went on with a grand disregard for the laws of hospitality, "'iss, you'm rich, an' Judith's poor, 'ee 've got th' best o' 'un, but if iver a sawl went inn'cent to her crool death, that sawl be Judith Croft."

She spoke the last word defiantly as if inviting contradiction, and I said to myself, "Judith is richer than she thinks, for she possesses one friend in the world besides Stephen."

Aloud I said,

"You are the first woman I have heard express any doubt of Judith's guilt."

The fisherman's wife laughed angrily.

"Does 'em knaw her so well as I knaw her?" she said; "her niver made but wan fren' 'mongst th' women, and I war that wan, an' I knawed her inside an' out as well as a page o' thicky Bible upo' that shelf."

"And yet you have never been near her," I said, "I have heard her say that she had not one friend in the world save Stephen Croft."

"Awh," said the woman sadly, "'tis true 'nuff, if frens is reckoned by frenly actions, but my baw, he be terrible masterful, an' when Judith war took, him ses to me, 'I forbids 'ee t' go anighst her; how-somedever frens 'ee was, her baint fit for an honest woman stand by naw.' An' I could niver make 'un bliev' her warn't t' blame. 'Pison be pison,' ses he, 'an' who wanted 'un out o' th' way so bad as her did?' An' ivery baw i' th' village blinkit at his wife, as if so be her moight ha' got th' same notion in her head toward 'un."

“If she did not kill him,” I said, “how then did he die?”

“How can I tell ’ee?” she said scornfully. “God a’mighty’s got His own way o’ takin’ off folks, an’ praps God a’mighty war angry wi’ Seth for comin’ home an’ meddlin’ in what he’d spoilt enuff aready. I niver could abide meddlers mysel’.”

“Why were all the women so hard on her?” I said, pushing back my chair from the table; “judging by what I have heard, she never tried to take away a lover from any one of them.”

“Do ’ee think her’d any need t’ try?” said the woman contemptuously; “wheriver she war, thar war the one woman, th’ rest o’ em was pale shadders, an’ th’ men could as liev’ deny th’ sun war shinin’ as keep their eyes fro’ strayin’ to she. Laws, I always makes ’lowance fo’ handsome folks—seems as if ’em warnt meant fo’ jest wan sawl’s happiness, but Judith niver wanted no ’lowance made for she. Her war made fo’ luv’, but somethin’ in her kep’ her straight, an’ luv’ she niver took, an’ niver knawed, till Steve comed t’ Trevenick, an’ years upo’ years they passed wan anither by wi’ on’y their eyes to speak th’ world o’ luv’ ’atween ’em. An’ th’ gigles was all as mad as mad, ’cos he wouldna look at ’em, an’ th’ baws was bitter an’ wild ’cos Judith preferred he, an’ so it was that she’d narry a fren’ ’mong ’em all but me, an’ ’tis

little 'nuff good I'se been to she. If yo' see her" (the woman's voice softened, and tears stood in her eyes) "will 'ee tell her that 'Lizabeth' have carried a sair heart 'pon her account, but her daurna disobey her man, an' her hant 'nuff book larnin' to write her a letter."

"Yes," I said, "I'll tell her, but you will be able to do it yourself before long."

"Naw," she said, "that can niver be. An' do her find it in her heart to frogive 'ee?" she added bitterly; "but the lamb allus looks up piteouslike to the butcher, an' praps her spirits that broke, her blood be turned to watter."

"Her spirit is not broken yet," I said. "Stephen Croft is the more downcast of the two."

"An' ther'll be th' little 'un," went on the woman sadly, and now the tears fell heavily on her breast, "what'll 'un do wi'out 'un's mother? Pr'aps my man 'ud let me take 'un—fo' a' he'm so set agen her. Awh, but 'tis a crooked warld. Years an' years my arms has ached fo' want o' a child t' fill 'em, an' here's Judith 'ull ha' that gied t' her that her cant keep."

"Please God, she shall," I said gravely, "and your man shall give her a warm welcome, and ask her forgiveness for his ill thoughts of her. And perhaps," I added (for she had really touched me), "you'll forgive me, too, some day."

“Naw,” she said with spirit, “that I niver will. I baint no scholard, but I spelled out ivery word ’ee telled up agen her, an’ from fust to last I thought ’ee a fule, an’ a meddlin’ fule, as is wuss nor all. But ’ee niver knawed her, an’ how she niver did. Seth an ill turn, fo’ a’ th’ crool things ’un did to she; th’ ony desate her iver shawed ’un war when she gied ’un th’ stuff to make ’un slape, when he war like a figger on wires wi’ th’ tremblins. I knawed it, an’ I niver blamed ’un; her’d a bin murdered times an’ times but fo’ quietin’ o’ ’un.”

“And yet,” I said, “it played her false in the end. If she had not given Seth Treloar a dose of it the night he came home, she might have been made a miserable woman, but she would never have been accused of his murder. It was the one mistake she made in her otherwise blameless life.”

“’Iss,” she said, “the only wan—an’ ’ee ’m found out that, have ’ee? After ’ee’d got ’un into gaol, an’ wove the rope to hang ’un—awh!” she added in a low tone of disgust, “let yer pity bide t’ home, man, ’tis like nothin’ so much as a bitter swate apple to my thinkin’.”

I shrugged my shoulders, laid some silver on the table, and was turning away when my money came flying past me, hurled by a vigourous hand, and followed by as vigourous a tongue till I got well out of hearing.

But as I climbed the cliff I felt only gladness that Judith had one such faithful friend, and she a woman.

That evening there was one of the grandest sunsets that I ever witnessed on the Cornish coast.

Glorious as the day had been, it clouded somewhat about five, and gradually an indigo-blue cloud spread itself along the horizon, here and there parting like a curtain to disclose a wall of flame that shewed vividly against the deep purple-black of the sea line. As the sun sank lower, by almost imperceptible degrees the dark cloud moved upwards, and between the sea and sky a pale rose colour breathed softly outwards, ever growing and widening until (and I knew not where the darkness went) it had spread itself over all. To me as I watched, it shewed as a Titanic struggle between the powers of good and evil, in which the good was triumphantly victorious.

Away to the right pure amber clouds, touched with fire, rose like altars lit by God, and higher yet, a pale primrose sky merged into a wind-freshened blue vault, up to which I looked, and reverently asked myself if indeed it were not an omen of hope?

Long would I have gazed, but Nature's grandest effects are made with as much swiftness as ease, and our perception must travel at lightning speed to keep up with her. When she had flung her last

changing colour on that canvas which knows no limit, when sea and sky had become fused into one calm translucent flood of liquid light, that more purely suggests peace than any other heavenly or earthly thing within our ken, I unwillingly turned away from its loveliness and set my face towards the hut, where a very different sight awaited me.

CHAPTER XVI.

“O, they hae fought for twa lang hours ;
When twa lang hours were come and gone,
The sweat drapped fast frae aff them baith,
But a drap of blude could not be seen.”

TWILIGHT was lengthening into dusk when I came in sight of Smuggler's Hole, and the motionless figure of Stephen sitting across the threshold.

Silent he sate, but the cliff was alive with moving figures, and half a dozen old gaffers and gamblers had crowded their heads against the narrow casement, and were peeping in.

At my approach they slunk away, but not far, and I heard broken ejaculations of pity and horror escape them, as if moved by some deplorable spectacle upon which they had just gazed. I did not stop to question Stephen, but passed in, and saw that a frightful change had come over the Styrian during my absence. His face was absolutely livid, and out of that ghastly pallor burned two eyes that expressed a craving and agony such as I pray God I may never see in a human face again.

He had torn open his embroidered vest as if to

gain air, and every few minutes he was shaken by a convulsive shudder that he strove to check with the locked arms that he pressed downwards across his body. Beside him stood the cup and platter, absolutely untouched.

“You are ill?” I said, approaching him.

He looked at me as a dying man might at another who withheld from him the cup of cold water for which his soul fainted, or as a mother at the executioner of her first-born, then he ground his teeth, and turned those dreadful eyes away, the spirit not being broken in him yet.

“If you are hungry, eat,” I said, hardening my heart against him as I thought of Judith, watching day by day the slow progress of a death from which, but for his vile selfishness, he might save her.

He looked at me, and had I ventured within his reach then, he would have throttled the life out of me with those muscular fingers that writhed in and out of each other, never for one moment still. Indeed he seemed rapidly passing from under his own control, and reminded me of a dram-drinker who is suddenly and totally deprived of the stimulant upon which he has mainly supported his existence.

I turned away and drew down the blind, shutting out the furtive faces, white against the dusk, who were peering in, and then I bade Stephen close the door

also and come in, which he did, and having kindled a fire and lights, I questioned him as to what had gone forward in my absence.

"I doant knaw what 'un wants," said Stephen, in the faint weary voice of one who had not touched food that day, "not meat an' drink fo' sure, him's got plenty, an' I broffed 'un whiskey but 'un woudn't ha't, but 'tis summut 'un wants ter'ble bad, an' 'un keeps on clamourin' i' that furrin' lingo t' get 'un."

"Has Dr. Cripps been here?" I said.

"'Iss, an' 'un on'y grinned, and sed yon chap 'ud be wuss afore 'un war better, an' 'un war comin' back t' bide th' night wi' ee, an' 'spected Judith an' me 'ud hear summut t' s'prise us afore we was much older."

"Good," I said, intensely relieved to hear of Dr. Cripps's intention, and then I drew my chair to the fire, and bade Steve take the other, keeping my eyes turned away from that horrible figure in the background.

Gradually the warmth and rest overpowered my tired limbs and I slept.

In my dreams I found myself in an Indian jungle, with the savage roar of some wild beast at a distance drawing each moment nearer to me, and I woke at last to find that the sound was real, and on glancing at the clock saw that I had slept three hours.

I sate up, and looked at the Styrian from whom

the last vestige of self-restraint had fallen, and could no longer control the cries that he had hitherto by sheer physical force succeeded in strangling.

“Him ha’ bin clamourin’ t’ me to wake ’ee,” said Stephen, whose features bore more than their usual impress of pain, “leastways, so I guessed ’un to mane. Look ’ee, I’m thinkin’ him ’ll be dead by mornin’!”

“My box, give me my box!” shrieked the Styrian, straining at his cords as if he would burst them. Give it to me, give! You can sleep, devil, while I die here, and you are committing a murder as *she* did when she kept Seth Treloar for twenty-four hours without—” he stopped abruptly, and a crafty look overspread his livid face.

But he had said enough. I saw that he could have bitten his teeth out for the slip.

“I talk madly,” he exclaimed, making a supreme effort that I could not but admire; “keep what you stole, I can do without it. But set me free, put me on the road to the nearest town, and you shall be troubled with me no more.”

“I will set you free,” I said deliberately, “and I will give you back your box of poison, if you will give me in writing a full confession of how you taught Seth Treloar to use it, of the effect produced by a sudden cessation of the doses, and other particulars that you will know how to furnish.”

The Styrian's eyes searched my face for any sign of relenting, then turned them upon Stephen Croft, who had dropped into a weary sleep, his golden head leaning against the wall, but more really beautiful in the unconsciousness of sleep than even in his waking moments.

The man's eyes darkened as they gazed upon him.

What! He should leave those two glorious, passionately loving creatures to be happy in each other's arms, while he, *he* went back like a fool to his own country without the bride he had travelled so far and hazardously to fetch?

Thus I read the expression of his working features and yet he took me by surprise when he said,

"I can die, but I will not give her up to him. After all, the worst suffering is now over, and a few hours more will see it out. Let the poor fool be happy with her in his dreams, for in life he never shall be. My dying will soon be over—*theirs* is to come.

The malignity of his look and voice froze me, then his head sank on his breast, and his hair, matted with sweat, hid his face from me.

And my heart went cold, for I had never counted on such resolution, and I was loath to have his blood upon my soul.

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Looking back after long years on that night, I seem to feel and hear the intense stillness in which I waited for the sound of Dr. Cripps' approaching feet, a sound that never came. Later, I knew that a railway accident a few miles away had kept him hard at work of the most painful description until past dawn, but then I blamed him bitterly for failing me when I most wanted his counsel. For as the hours went by, each moment a hell to the man I watched, as it was an hour of torture to me who beheld him, I expected each moment that death would come to the rescue, and so he and his secret would escape me for ever.

How was I to tell where real suffering ended, and simulation began when I had not even his face to guide me?

Surely no man had ever a nicer calculation to make, or one requiring more judgment and medical knowledge, than I had then, for though I felt myself morally justified in pushing my experiment and his endurance to the utmost limit, I knew that I was actually guilty of murder if he died under the test. And the skilled intelligence that could have lifted that heavy burden from my shoulders tarried yet, so that twice I sent Stephen in search of Dr. Cripps, and was now awaiting his second return. With a bitter sense of powerlessness I felt myself reduced to one of two courses: to restore the man's poison to him, and

with it his life, or to withhold it, and so inflict on him death, and, as a natural consequence, on Judith also.

How long, I asked myself impotently, might a man writhe in unrelieved tortures not to be surpassed by any in Dante's *Inferno*, and yet retain life in his racked body? Would not his resolution by infinitesimal degrees give way, and that confession spring to his lips which would lift him from the pains of purgatory into the peace of heaven?

I have since thought that it might have done, had not Stephen been present to keep alive in him the jealous hatred that devoured him. And to this day I believe that if Judith's love had been an ordinary fisherman, instead of in the likeness of a young Greek god, the Styrian would have gone his way with that raging devil unaroused in him, which even prompted self-slaughter, rather than the surrender of her to one so infinitely his superior.

But my blunder in bringing the two men together was on a par with my other mistakes, and, like them, irreclaimable. And I began to think that my latest achievement in engaging the Styrian in a duel of wills, out of which, dead or alive, he must emerge victorious, was but the biggest mistake of all.

And truly I could not but feel admiration for this wretch (who put me forcibly in mind of that fabled boy who suffered the fox to gnaw out his heart rather

than cry out) whose heroic absence of sound or word (since once he had taken his resolve) only impressed the more vividly his agony upon me, and yet I sat there watching like a stone, or a devil, with the means of relieving it lying idle to my hand.

If he died, would his death be proof presumptive that Seth Treloar died in the same way, not from the effects of the poison, but from the cessation of it?

Suddenly it struck on me like a chill blow that this man had been my guest, that I had no one to bring forward as witness that he administered the arsenic to himself, that the box was even then in my possession, and, if he were found dead, I should be in precisely the same position as Judith had filled, and possibly found guilty, as she had been, of a crime I had never committed. True, Dr. Cripps knew the circumstance, but he could only quote my unsupported testimony, which would go for nothing. And as all these things dawned upon me I said to myself that verily the Styrian's revenge upon me, as upon Judith, would be complete indeed.

A man's guilt—and very often his success—is decided by the way he rises to an emergency or quails before it, and I must confess that I failed before this one, and did not think or do any one of the hundred things that an heroic man would have done easily in my place. I just waited in a sort of

sullen stupor for events to take their course, for Dr. Cripps to turn up, or for the man to think better of his suicidal obstinacy, or for some command from my innermost self that I dared not disobey, but neither Cripps, nor the Styrian's repentance, nor my spiritual orders arrived, though something else did, with all the swiftness of a genuine catastrophe.

A long convulsive shiver suddenly passed through the Styrian's body, then his head fell forward above the arms clenched across his heart, and he was still.

Cold as the dead, I gazed, and all the irrevocableness of my deed rushed upon me. I knew then the sensations of the murderer, whose hand has in one moment substituted death for life, and who stands appalled at the awful image he has created.

Like him, I would have flown from the sight that will never leave him more by night nor by day, but an inward power compelled me, and making my way to the Styrian, I threw myself down beside the huddled up, stirless figure.

I touched his hands, they were ice—his heart, and could find no beat; then an awful sense of his presence, of being *alone with* this murdered spirit, we two apart, and for ever face to face, while heaven and earth fell away, seized me, and with a cry in my ears of *Where is now thy brother Abel?*" I fell downwards across the Styrian's feet.

CHAPTER XVII.

“But see, the traitor’s yet alive,
Now bitterly he shall aby
And vengeance fall upon his head.”

WHAT happened after was such a confused medley of fact and imagination, that I find it difficult to describe what really happened.

I thought I fell headlong down a pit of darkness to have my throat seized by strong hands, that choked my gasping breath as it rose, while my temples seemed bursting with the wave of blood that surged upwards, until a dull stupour crept over me, in which I felt no pain. Suddenly, I was dragged out of it by a vigorous wrench that set me free of those iron fingers, and I was flung aside, scarce knowing if I were the victim of a realistic dream, or awake, and roughly treated in very prosaic fashion indeed.

But even as I lay there, stunned and stupid, the lightning consciousness of what I had done flashed through my mind, and I covered my face with my arms and groaned aloud.

Immediately I felt a touch on my shoulder, and Steve’s voice sounded in my ear.

“Be ’ee much hurt?” he inquired anxiously; “yon devil war close ’pon finishin’ ’ee off when I comed in. What iver made ’ee go’a’nigst ’un?”

I dragged myself up and saw—O God! a sight that made me the happiest man alive. For there, the lividness gone from his face, and the raging agony of his eyes changed to an expression of mocking triumph, sate the man of whom I had believed myself to be the murderer for the few most awful moments of my life.

“Thank God!” I cried, forgetful of Judith, forgetful of everything, save that I was not to be followed by the accursed shadow of blood-guiltiness for the rest of my days.

“’Iss,” said Stephen, “’ee may well say that. Him have robbed ’ee too—he’m got the box ’ee set so much store ’pon, an’ swallowed some o’ what be inside.”

I uttered an exclamation, and looked at the Styrian.

Ay, by artifice he had overcome me, and obtained the medicine that was his life, and healthy vigour once more flowed through his blood, and shewed in his natural fresh colour, and for a considerable time, at least, he could defy me.

He laughed as our eyes met, and a glow of intense triumph overspread his features.

“You are beaten,” he said, “confess it, and let me go in peace. You will hardly care to go through the experience of last night again, and I see you have scruples about taking a man’s life. I had none whatever about relieving you of yours, and if yonder fellow had not returned——” he paused significantly, and I perfectly understood him.

“I should have cut my cords with your pocket-knife,” he continued coolly, “and walked out. Curse that interfering fool,” and he darted a savage look at Stephen.

“And now you will do nothing of the sort,” I said; “it will be easy enough to take that box from you, and I have plenty time, I can afford to wait until you tire of this game.”

His face fell, and I saw that he had not expected my stubbornness to hold out any longer.

“So be it,” he said with affected indifference, “but living you will no more be able to drag a word from me than dead. *She* alone can make me speak, but if she will not——” he shrugged his shoulders in completion of the sentence.

I left him, and went to the open door, for my head was still giddy, and my throat sore from the Styrian’s grasp.

Dawn was breaking in sober guise, a chilly wind blew up from the sea, as I gazed abroad methought

the spirit of spring had folded her wings and stolen away in the night, taking with her the warm hopes that ran riot but yesterday in my breast.

I felt helpless as a derelict that drifts hither and thither at the mercy of the waves, for I had no power within to guide myself or others.

Yesterday I had regarded myself as master of the situation, to-day I knew that the Styrian held the key of it, and would indifferently live or die with it in his possession.

Involuntarily I took the way that led to Dr. Cripps' house, and arrived at his gate just in time to see him driving up in his shabby cart, looking thoroughly jaded and fagged out.

"Well, man," he said, irascibly, as I opened my lips to speak, "what do you want with me at this hour?"

"Want with you?" I said indignantly in my turn, "why, you forget that man, you promised to watch him with me last night, and—"

"Promised a fiddlestick," he said, throwing the reins to a Cornish lad who hurried up, "I've had other fish to fry. A dozen killed, five and thirty mangled in the worst railway accident we ever had hereabouts, what time do you think I have had to bother about your Styrian?"

And he walked stiffly into the house, pausing inside to call back,

“I must get some sleep and then I’ll come down. Is the man dead?”

“No, but I’ll bet my night has been a worse one than yours.”

I thought I heard a fierce grumble in the distance as I moved away, bitterly disappointed, but yet with a wholesome sense of correction that helped to brace up my unstrung nerves.

I set myself resolutely to walk, and so transfer my trouble of mind to fatigue of muscles, and soon felt the desired effect; my mind grew calm, the strain upon me relaxed, I regarded the night and its events dispassionately, asking myself in what better way I could have acted, and whether indeed I had not been imposed upon and hoaxed by a consummate actor. But no, the Styrian’s sufferings had been very real, and I could not but believe that, though he so cleverly simulated death as to out-match me, yet that death itself trod hard on the heels of his counterfeit, and only by a hair’s breadth had I escaped a crime.

It was, I thought, natural enough that he should try to take the life of a man who had in cold blood almost taken his, and I bore him no malice, and possibly thought it would have been nobody’s loss, nor mine either, if he had.

And then my thoughts turned to Judith, and of

how, through the long night, life must have beckoned her with alluring finger, bidding her turn away from death and Stephen to fulfil her allotted span, and to find peace, ay, and even happiness, as time slowly blotted out the past. But alas! for Judith, she was no time server, no trader in love, but one who threw down her one queenly gift in all its integrity and had no power to take from or add to it more.

Except his altogether remarkable beauty, and his faithfulness to her, I could not see anything in Stephen Croft to awaken such a passion, but the woman evidently thought differently, and after all a man more usually accepts the dictum of the other sex upon him than that of his own.

I had walked many miles, and the sun was well up, when I suddenly thought of going to see her; true, it was early, but prison life was earlier, and I had no fear of being refused admittance.

The clock was striking six as I turned in at the gaol gates, and already a busy activity reigned within and without the building.

But though admitted to the governor's room without comment, I was not destined to see Judith on that or many subsequent days.

The matron came to me, and with some excitement, and a pretty color on her wholesome cheek, informed me that Judith had been taken ill imme-

diately after we had departed yesterday, and that half an hour ago her babe had seen the light.

“She is doing well?” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” was the reply, but when I inquired for the child, she shook her head.

“Still-born, a boy,” she said, “and please, would I tell Stephen Croft?”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Married wi’ me ye sall ne’er be nane
(Blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw);
I’ll mak’ me a sark without a seam
(And the wind has blawn my plaid awa’).”

I TOOK Stephen out on the cliff and told him. He turned so white, I thought he would have fallen, then his head sank, and he muttered, “Poor sawl, *that* partin’ be over,” and then strode off as if he wore seven league boots to inquire for her.

I wondered if they would let him in, if these two poor helpless souls might be permitted to mingle their tears over the little prematurely blighted flower, and I thought that God would have shown more mercy had He garnered mother and child together, since I found no certainty in my hopes now.

I could not face the house and my triumphant prisoner, and remained abroad till I saw Dr. Cripps’ rotund person climbing the path, far more rapidly, too, than usual, I thought.

Even at the distance I was, I perceived a beaming cheerfulness in his broad face that distinctly irritated me.

“It is all very well for you,” I growled to myself, “who have been doing your duty nobly all night, and since slept like a top for some hours, and eaten a good breakfast, but I’ve done none of these things, and been made a fool of into the bargain.”

When a few hundred yards distant, he spied me, and brandished in the air something that looked yellow or pink, shouting out “Hurrah!” at the same time, as loudly as his scarcity of breath would permit.

I wondered what he found to hurrah at, as I advanced to meet him, but my ill-humour gave way to rapture as he shouted out, “Judith is saved, man, saved! Read this, and this,” and he thrust several telegraphic sheets into my hand.

“There’s a good fellow for you,” he said, “only got my letter at eight, answer here by nine, and a boy has walked two miles with it from the telegraphic office. Evidently deeply interested, and thinks me a fool, of course, but how’s a poor devil in the desert to keep up with all the new discoveries in town.”

The message—it was a long one—ran thus:—

“In 1875, at the forty-eighth annual meeting of the German Society of Naturalists and Physicians, which was held at Gratz, Dr. Knapp, practising in Styria, introduced two male arsenic eaters to the assembly. One of these men consumed in their presence above

six grains of white arsenic—that is, enough to poison three men—without suffering the slightest inconvenience; he stated he had been accustomed to this sort of thing for years, and that it was a practice common among ox-herds and shepherds in Styria. One peculiarity of arsenic eating is this, that, when a man has once begun to indulge in it, he must continue to indulge, for, if he ceases, the arsenic in his system poisons him, or, as it is popularly expressed, the last dose kills him. Indeed, the arsenic eater must not only continue in his indulgence, he must also increase the quantity of the drug, so that it is extremely difficult to stop the habit, for, as *sudden cessation causes death*, the gradual cessation produces such a terrible heart-gnawing, that it may probably be said that no genuine arsenic eater ever ceased to eat arsenic while life lasted. The fact is unprecedented in the annals of toxicology; and, though incredible, it is true that our bodies, which may be annihilated with two grains of a white powder, may be so far changed as to require, nay, even to crave for, a daily heavy dose of this same poison. In Styria this arsenic poisoning goes by the name of ‘Hedri.’ Full medical report follows by post.”

When I had read to the last word, and the famous name appended, I threw my hat up in the air, I stamped, I shouted, I could have rolled on the turf

in my extravagant joy and then I seized the little doctor's hands, and nearly wrung them off his arms.

"Stop!" he cried, "stop! who would have thought you were so strong?" then I let him go so suddenly that he nearly fell backwards, and back I tore into Smuggler's Hole.

"Keep your box!" I shouted, "keep it and bad luck to you! Your secret is no secret now, and the woman you could have saved, and would not, is saved without you. Listen—" and standing opposite him, while Dr. Cripps placidly sate down just inside the door, I translated the telegram in Austrian to him.

"So," he said calmly, though his face was that of a defeated devil, "you English are not such fools as I supposed. You do sometimes hear of what goes on in other places; but you have poor stomachs—you are not strong men like we are, and our meat is your poison."

"Thank God, yes!" I cried, "we can support life without being slaves to a degrading habit such as yours."

The Styrian thrust out his lips with a gesture of utter contempt.

"Have you any bad habit that can shew such results as ours?" he said scornfully, "or any drug that will make the skin and hair sleek and glossy,

just as it will make an animal plump, and strengthen its breathing organs? It gives us clearness of skin, and increased powers of digestion; it enables our herdsmen laden with heavy burdens to climb mountains without fatigue, and it gives us courage, the courage that comes of perfect health and strength. Look you, Seth Treloar came to me with bones showing through his skin, and only one thought in his mind, how he could get drink. I soon taught him there was something better than drink, and he began with very small doses; he suffered burning pains in the mouth, throat and stomach, for he was no hardy mountaineer, whose forefathers had eaten arsenic from generation to generation, and who commenced the practice in early youth, but I kept his courage up, and soon he got to love it as he had loved his drink. Cursed be the day," he went on savagely, "in which he crossed my path; he has robbed me, he has fooled me, he brought me hither to be treated like a dog, and here I should have died but that I am stronger than most of my race, and hard to kill. I could not die—ay, I *would* not," he added, striking the ground with his clenched fist. "But that fool," he went on after a pause, "when he woke up to find himself *there*" (he pointed downwards), "in the dark, alone, with no light, and his box gone, no doubt he thought himself buried alive, and out of pure fear and rage,

for want of his arsenic, died. He always was a coward; if he had made up his mind to endure his agony for a few hours, daylight would have shown him the means of escape, and he would be living now."

"I must be off," broke in Dr. Cripps, "I don't know how those poor creatures are getting on. And I hope I leave you quite happy, sir. Poor Judith, poor girl—but the future will make handsome amends."

"One moment," I said, "I must get an order from a magistrate to detain this man as he has important evidence to give in Judith's favour. I won't watch him another night, but he must be put in safe custody somewhere."

"O! Tregonnell will see about that," said Dr. Cripps, "he is our nearest magistrate, and I shall be passing his very door. Come back with me, and I will drop you there. Have you breakfasted?" he added, looking keenly at me.

"No, I was too anxious to see you."

"My housekeeper will give you a mouthful, come along. So that fellow has found his appetite?" he added, looking at the Styrian and the empty cup and platter beside him, as he went out.

"Yes, I never thought to see him eat again," and I told the doctor the night's events.

He listened with the deepest interest, and was now sufficiently comfortable in his own person to pity me.

“You’ve had a rough time of it,” he said kindly, “but you’ve reason to be proud of the way you’ve undone your mistake. To be sure it all sounds wildly improbable, and if Judith is tried again, the jury may refuse to believe a word of it—but I take it that she is now practically a free woman. To be sure she has lost her child, but time will mend that.”

.
That night the Styrian slept under another roof than mine, and until very late Dr. Cripps and I studied together the pamphlet that arrived by the evening post.

The main facts about the practice of “Hedri” we already knew through A—’s telegram, but many interesting details were now added, a few of which I here give.

It appears that the ox-herds in Styria are in the habit of administering to the cattle under their charge a daily dose of arsenic, for the purpose of rendering their hair glossy, and otherwise improving their appearance.

Long ago, one of the ox-herds, wiser than the rest, argued that what was good for the oxen was good for himself, and having tried it with perfect success,

and being in possession of robust health, did not suffer. He communicated the practice to others, and so became the founder of the habit. It is acknowledged that the slaves to it live to a green old age, and it is supposed by them that they owe their longevity to the practice, though this is open to serious doubts.

When *Hedri* was first brought before the notice of the medical profession, it was treated as a gross imposition and classed with fasting-girls and other frauds, and the doctors boldly declared that the Styrian peasants ate chalk, not arsenic, for it was not deemed credible that a man could unscathed consume enough poison to affect a dozen people, and sufficient to kill three.

As early as 1822 Dr. Heisch brought forward the subject of arsenic eating, and in 1851 Tschudi brought the matter prominently forward, and since that time, scientific research has proved *Hedri* to be no fiction, but a very vivid reality.

No one, however, takes to the habit quite openly. It is usually begun in secret and at the increase of the moon, with strange and superstitious observances.

A minute dose is at first taken once a week, usually in bread and butter; then twice a week, and so on, until, when the individual arrives at a dose daily, the dose itself is increased till as much is taken as ordinarily would kill two or three people.

But their apprenticeship is sharp, and courage is needed to go through the initial stages of the habit. Nausea, burning pains in the mouth, throat and stomach, last for a considerable time, but no man has ever been known to turn back on account of them, for the peculiarity of *Hedri* is this: that when a man has once begun to indulge in it, he must continue to indulge, for, if he stops, the arsenic in his system poisons him, or, as they express it, the last dose kills him. He must not only continue his indulgence, he must also increase the quantity of the drug, for, as sudden cessation causes death, the gradual cessation produces such terrible heart-gnawing that it may be said that no genuine arsenic eater ever ceased to eat arsenic while life lasted.

It is much in their favour that they are all robust mountaineers, whose forefathers have eaten arsenic from generation to generation, so that each successive one has become more arsenic proof than the one before him. Then they consume large quantities of milk and butter, as well as other food prodigal in fats, when the oily matters to a certain extent unite with the arsenic, forming an arsenical soap which does not so readily enter into the blood, so that the total amount of arsenic assimilated is proportionately small. Heredity to a certain extent makes him proof against it,

and his food undoubtedly supplies him with some sort of an antidote.

“And to think,” said Dr. Cripps, pushing back his chair when he had come to the last page, “that I should never have heard a word of it! That comes, sir, of living forty years in a Cornish village, and being often too dog-tired to read *Bell’s Life*, much less the *British Medical Journal* and *Lancet*. Well it’s clear enough now. That poor devil Seth came to himself in the dark, there would be no glimmer of light from the aperture above, and he would probably prowl round and round like a wild beast, never dreaming of the rope hanging just above him, for he wouldn’t know where he was, and so died, of pure cessation of poison, and fury at being trapped. That Styrian fellow was of another sort, he wouldn’t die! To be sure Seth would not have died if Judith had not drugged and put him there—I’m not sure, mind you, it won’t be brought in homicide (don’t turn pale, man), but she has suffered so much, that perhaps mercy will be shown her.

“And now, Mr. Varennes, I think we’ve earned a bowl of rack-punch, and I only wish my friend A—were here to join us.”

CHAPTER XIX.

“O happy living things ! no tongue
Their beauty might declare :
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware.”

JUDITH'S case was not re-tried, but the new evidence was duly laid before the Home Secretary, and shortly afterwards supplemented by the written statement of the Styrian, who, wearying at last of his confinement, and having told all he knew, was suffered to depart.

So that in due leisurely course, Her Majesty's most gracious pardon was extended to Judith for a crime she had never committed, and on the morning she was set free a curious and pretty scene was enacted outside the gaol gates, at which I gladly assisted. For thither came flocking matrons and maids, men and youths, little children with chubby hands quite full of flowers, and even old gaffers and gammers leaning on their sticks, eager to swell the note of welcome that was ready to burst forth at sight of the woman whom one and all had so cruelly misjudged. Not a matron there but had put on her smartest

finery, not a man but was redded up as if he were bent on courting, half a dozen young girls had been decked out in all the available white clothes of the community, and carried in their aprons the flowers of which they had despoiled their cottage gardens to throw at Judith's feet.

For the morning of her release was also her wedding-day, though she little guessed with what hearty good-will, and in what numbers, it was to be attended.

Mingling with the crowd, whose eyes never left the yet unopened door through which Judith must pass, I heard many things said in the soft Cornish sing-song voice that now moved my heart, and now provoked me to a smile, but through all I traced the honest, sincere nature of a people anxious to make amends for the wrong they had done, and full of pity for her upon whom they had heaped such heavy stones.

Among them, blazing with triumph, and with a sheep-faced man beside her, who was probably the only unwilling spectator present, stood the woman who had been Judith's friend, and who had championed her so warmly while she fed and abused me.

She spied me out, and pushed her way to me, giving my hand a shake that made it tingle warmly.

"Awh," she said, "'ee be'ant such a bad sawl arter all, an' I'll forgi'e 'ee now, tho' I took 'ee fo' a liard when 'ee said I should spake wi' Judith as a free

woman agen. 'Iss, an' my man yon do look a fule, a reckon a 'll wear th' breeks now an' agen fro' now."

And she nodded her head with a world of meaning as she fought her way to the first rank before the gates.

Spring—no wayward sprite to tantalise you with sips of sweetness, but warm, odourous, all-giving—was among those who had come forth to do Judith honour, and with her balmy breath she warmed the old folks' blood, and touched the fancies of the youths and maidens, so that love and life seemed to pulse and throb in that glowing, vigourous crowd standing bare-headed beneath the vivid blue and white beauty of a mackerel sky, its eyes turned to the prison walls before it, its back set to the diamond-strewn breast of

"The great earth mother,
 Lover and mother of men, the sea!"

I wish that I could describe the lightning thrill and stir, as suddenly hushed in one catching breath, as the door-way beyond was filled by two tall figures bathed in sunshine, but I seem to hear even now the roar of welcome that burst from every throat, as the lovers advanced trembling, amazed, at the salvoes of applause that greeted them.

The woman wore a white woollen gown, her head was uncovered, but Stephen was in his fisherman's

garb, and looked more like Antinous than ever, if one can ever picture the young Greek as perfectly happy.

I thought the vehemence of their welcome at first hurt her, for she pressed close to Stephen, but once the gates were thrown back, and they were surrounded by that impetuous crowd, she smiled and put her arms round Nance, who was the very first to reach her.

“Awh, Judith, woman!” said Nance, kissing her hungrily, “I niver doubted ’ee, ’dearie, an’ it baint my fault I’ve not bin anighst ’ee.”

“Eh, but I missed ’ee, Nance,” said Judith, and first one, then another, must shake her hand, and the little ones must give her their flowers, but I saw her take up the smallest of them all, and bow her head upon its dimpled neck, and I knew that in all the glory and sunshine of her day was one sombre cloud.

When each and all had said their word, and very sweet and wholesome many of them were, the maidens took matters into their own hands, and placing Judith and Stephen in their midst, with many droppings of flowers, and liftings of pleasant voices in Cornish song, they took their way through the gaping town and along the sunny path that wound down the cliff to Trevenick.

Strangers to the place stared at the gay proces-

sion that had so long and happy a following, closed in by young and old toddlers of both sexes. The sea-wind blew back the girls' white dresses, and sweeter grew their voices till in the distance they died away, and many a kindly wish and hopeful word followed the pair to the little church, where once more they kneeled together with good hope of stored-up happiness to come.

And if, when the rejoicings were at their height, they stole away to where

“ Beside a little grave
They kissed again with tears—”

who shall say that the one touch of sorrow in their crowned love did not make it divine?

To me their faces seemed as the faces of angels, when, stepping down to where I stood, they thanked and blessed me, bidding me God-speed whithersoever I should go.

THE END.

MISS MEREDITH.

MISS MEREDITH.

CHAPTER I.

IT was about a week after Christmas, and we—my mother, my two sisters and myself—were sitting, as usual, in the parlour of the little house at Islington. Tea was over, and Jenny had possession of the table, where she was engaged in making a water-colour sketch of still life by the light of the lamp, whose rays fell effectively on her bent head with its oreole of Titian-coloured hair—the delight of the Slade school—and on her round, earnest young face as she lifted it from time to time in contemplation of her subject.

My mother had drawn her chair close to the fire, for the night was very cold, and the fitful beams played about her worn, serene and gentle face, under its widow's cap, as she bent over the sewing in her hands.

A hard fight with fortune had been my mother's from the day when, a girl of eighteen, she had left a comfortable home to marry my father for love. Poverty and sickness—those two redoubtable dragons—had stood ever in the path. Now, even the love

which had been by her side for so many years, and helped to comfort her, had vanished into the unknown. But I do not think she was unhappy. The crown of a woman's life was hers; her children rose up and called her blest.

At her feet sat my eldest sister, Rosalind, entirely absorbed in correcting a bundle of proof-sheets, which had arrived that morning from *Temple Bar*. Rosalind was the genius of the family, a full-blown London B.A., who occasionally supplemented her earnings as coach and lecturer by writing for the magazines. She had been engaged, moreover, for the last year or two, to a clever young journalist, Hubert Andrews by name, and the lovers were beginning to look forward to a speedy termination to their period of waiting.

I, Elsie Meredith, who was neither literary nor artistic, neither picturesque like Jenny, nor clever like Rosalind, whose middle place in the family had always struck me as a fit symbol of my own mediocrity—I, alone of all these busy people, was sitting idle. Lounging in the arm-chair which faced my mother's, I twisted and retwisted, rolled and unrolled, read and re-read a letter which had arrived for me that morning, and whose contents I had been engaged in revolving in my mind throughout the day.

“Well, Elsie,” said my mother at last, looking up with a smile from her work, “have you come to any decision, after all this hard thinking?”

“I suppose it will be yes,” I answered rather dolefully; “Mrs. Grey seems to think it a quite unusual opportunity.” And I turned again to the letter which contained an offer of an engagement for me as governess in the family of the Marchesa Brogi, at Pisa.

“I should certainly say ‘go,’” put in Rosalind, lifting her dark expressive face from her proofs; “if it were not for Hubert I should almost feel inclined to go myself. You will gain all sorts of experience, receive all sorts of new impressions. You are shockingly ill-paid at Miss Cumberland’s, and these people offer a very fair salary. And if you don’t like it, it is always open to you to come back.”

“We should all miss you very much, Elsie,” added my mother; “but if it is for your good, why, there is no more to be said.”

“Oh, of course we should miss her horribly,” cried Rosalind, in her impetuous fashion, gathering together the scattered proof-sheets as she spoke; “you mustn’t think we want to get rid of you.” And the little thoughtful pucker between her straight brows disappeared as she laid her hand with a smile on my knee. I pressed the inky, characteristic fingers in my own. I am neither literary nor artistic, as I said before, but I have a little talent for being fond of people.

“I’m sure I don’t know what I shall do without

you," put in Jenny, in her deliberate, serious way, making round, grey eyes at me across the lamplight. "It isn't that you are such a good critic, Elsie, but you have a sort of feeling for art which helps one more than you have any idea of."

I received very meekly this qualified compliment without revealing the humiliating fact that my feeling for art had probably less to do with the matter than my sympathy with the artist; then observed, "It seems such waste, for me, of all of us, to be the first to go to Italy."

"I would rather go to Paris," said Jenny, who belonged, at this stage of her career, to a very advanced school of æsthetics, and looked upon Raphael as rather out of date. "If only some one would buy my picture I would have a year at Julien's; it would be the making of me."

"For heaven's sake, Jenny, don't take yourself so seriously," cried Rosalind, rising and laying down her proofs; "one day, perhaps, I shall come across an art-student with a sense of humour—growing side by side with a blue rose. Now, Elsie," she went on, turning to me, as Jenny, with a reproachful air of superior virtue, lifted up her paint-brush, and, shutting one eye, returned in silence to her measurements—"now, Elsie, let us have further details of this proposed expedition of yours. How many little Brogi shall you be required to teach?"

“There is only one pupil, and she is eighteen,” I answered; “just three years younger than I.”

“And you are to instruct her in all the 'ologies?”

Rosalind had taken a chair at the table, and, her head resting on her hand, was interrogating me in her quick, eager, half-ironical fashion.

“No; Mrs. Grey only says English and music. She says, too, that they are one of the principal families of Pisa. And they live in a palace,” I added, with a certain satisfaction.

“It sounds quite too delightful and romantic; if it were not for Hubert, as I said before, I should insist on going myself. Pisa, the Leaning Tower, Shelley—a Marchesa in an old, ancestral palace!” And Rosalind's dark eyes shone as she spoke.

“Ruskin says that the Leaning Tower is the only ugly one in Italy,” said Jenny, not moving her eyes from the Japanese pot, cleft orange and coral necklace which she was painting.

“But the cathedral is one of the most beautiful, and the place is a mine of historical associations,” answered Rosalind, her ardour not in the least damped by this piece of information.

As for me, I sat silent between these two enthusiasts, with an abashed consciousness of the limitations of my own subjective feminine nature. It was neither the beauties or defects of Pisan architecture which at

present occupied my mind, nor even the historical associations of the town. My thoughts dwelt solely, it must be owned, on the probable character of the human beings among whom I was to be thrown. But then it was I who was going to Pisa, and not my sisters.

“Does Mrs. Grey know the Marchesa Brogi personally?” asked my mother, who also was disposed to take the less abstract view of the matter.

“Oh, no, it is all arranged through the friend of a friend.”

“I don’t like the idea of your going so far, alone among strangers,” sighed mother; “but, on the other hand, a change is just what you want.”

“What a pity Hubert is not here to-night—that horrid *première* at the Lyceum! We must lay the plan before him to-morrow,” struck in Rosalind, who, hopeless blue stocking as she was, consulted her oracle with all the faith of a woman who barely knows how to spell.

I went over to my mother and took the stool at her feet which my sister had just vacated.

“It’s going to be ‘Yes,’ mother; I have felt it all along.”

“My dear, I won’t be the one to keep you back. But need you make up your mind so soon?”

“Mrs. Grey says that the sooner I can leave the

better. They would like me to start in a week or ten days," I answered, suppressing as best I could all signs of the feeling of desolation that came over me at the sound of my own words.

"You will have to get clothes," cried Rosalind; "those little mouse-coloured garments of yours will never do for ancestral palaces."

"Oh, with some new boots and an ulster—I'm afraid I must have an ulster—I shall be quite set up."

"You would pay very well for good dressing," observed Jenny, contemplating me with her air of impartial criticism. "You have a nice figure, and a pretty head, and you know how to walk."

"'Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley,'" replied Rosalind with some irony. "My dear Elsie, I have seen it in your eyes—they are highly respectable eyes, by-the-bye—I have seen it in your eyes from the first moment the letter came, that you meant to go. It is you quiet women who have all the courage, if you will excuse a truism."

"Well, yes, perhaps I did feel like going from the first."

"And, now that is decided, let me tell you, Elsie, that I perfectly hate the idea of losing you," cried Rosalind with sudden abruptness; then, changing her tone, she went on—"for who knows how or when we shall have you back again? You will descend

upon that *palazzo* resplendent in the new boots and the new ulster: the combined radiance of those two adornments will be too much for some Italian Mr. Rochester, who, of course, will be lurking about the damask-hung corridors with their painted ceilings. Jane Eyre will be retained as a fixture, and her native land shall know her no more."

"You forget that Jane Eyre would have some voice in the matter. And I have always considered Mr. Rochester the most unpleasant person that ever a woman made herself miserable over," I answered calmly enough, for I was accustomed to these little excursions into the realms of fancy on the part of my sister.

"I think there is a little stone, Elsie, where the heart ought to be," and Rosalind, bending forward, poked her finger, with unscientific vagueness, at the left side of my waist.

"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love," I quoted, while there flashed across my mind a vision of Rosalind sobbing quietly in the night a month before Hubert proposed to her.

"*Men*; it doesn't say anything about women," answered Rosalind, thoughtfully, flying off, as usual, at a tangent.

"Is it woman's mission to die of a broken heart?" I could not resist saying, for there had been some

very confidential passages between us, once upon a time. "The headache is too noble for my sex; you think the heartache would sound pleasanter."

"Elsie talking women's rights!" cried Jenny, looking up astonished from her work.

"Yes; the effects of a daring and adventurous enterprise are beginning to tell upon her in advance."

"We have wandered a long way from Pisa," I said. "But that is the worst of engaged people; whatever the conversation is, they manage to turn it into sentimental channels."

"I sentimental!" cried Rosalind, opening wide her eyes; "I who unite in my own person the charms of Cornelia Blimber and Mrs. Zellaby, to be accused of sentiment!"

I lay awake that night in my little iron bed long after Rosalind was sleeping the sleep of happy labour. I was a coward at heart, though I had contrived to show a brave front to my little world.

At the thought of that coming plunge in the unknown my spirit grew frozen within me, and I began to wish that the fateful letter from Mrs. Grey had never been written.

CHAPTER II.

ABOUT ten days after the conversation recorded in the last chapter, I was driving down to Victoria station in a four-wheel cab, wearing the new ulster, the new boots, and holding on my knee a brand-new travelling bag. It was a colourless London morning, neither hot nor cold, but as I looked out with rather dim eyes through the dirty windows, I experienced no pleasure at the thought of exchanging for Italian skies this dear, familiar greyness. At my side sat my mother, silent and pale. Now that we two were alone together—my busy sisters had been at work some hours ago—we had abandoned the rather strained and feverish gaiety which had prevailed that morning at breakfast.

“Now, Elsie, keep warm at night; don't forget to eat plenty of Brand's essence of beef—it's the brown parcel, not the white one—and write directly you arrive.”

Between us we had succeeded in taking my ticket and registering the luggage, and now my mother stood at the door of the carriage, exchanging with

me those last farewells which always seem so much too long and so much too short.

This journey of mine it must be owned bore to us both the aspect of a great event. We had always been poor, most of our friends were poor, and we were not familiarised with the easy modern notions of travel, which make nothing of a visit to the North Pole, or a little trip to China by way of Peru. And as the train steamed out at last from the station my heart sank suddenly within me, and I could scarcely see the black-clothed familiar figure on the platform, for the tears which sprang to my eyes and blinded me.

My first new experience was not a pleasant one, and as I lay moaning with sickness in a second-class cabin, I wondered how I or anyone else could ever have complained of anything while we stood on *terra firma*. All past worries and sorrows faded momentarily into nothingness before this present all-engulfing evil. It seemed an age before we reached Calais, where, limp, bewildered and miserable, I was jostled into a crowded second-class carriage *en route* for Basle. The train jolted and shook, and I grew more and more unhappy, mentally and physically, with every minute. My fellow passengers, a sorry, battered-looking assortment of women, produced large untempting supplies of food from their travelling

bags, and fell to with good appetite. I myself, after some hesitation, sought consolation in the little tin of Brand's essence; after which, squeezed in between the window and a perfectly unclassifiable specimen of Englishwoman, I fell asleep.

When I awoke it was broad daylight, and the train was gliding slowly into the station at Basle.

I was stiff, cramped and dishevelled, but yesterday's depression had given place to a new, delicious feeling of excitement. The porters hurrying to and fro, and shouting in their guttural Swiss-German, the people standing on the platform, the unfamiliar advertisements and announcements posted and painted about the station, all appeared to me objects of surpassing interest. The glamour of strangeness lay over all. A keen exhilarating morning breeze blew from the mountains, and as I stepped on to the platform it seemed as if I trod on air. With a feeling of adventure, which I firmly believe Columbus himself could never have experienced more keenly, I made my way into the crowded refreshment-room, and ordered breakfast. I was very hungry, and thought that I had never tasted anything better than the coffee and rolls, the shavings of white butter, and the adulterated honey in its little glass pot. As I sat there contentedly I found it difficult to realise that less than twenty-four hours separated me from the

familiar life at Islington. It seemed incredible that so short a space of time had sufficed to launch me on this strange sea of new experiences, into this dream-like, disorganised life, where night was scarcely divided from day, and the common incident of a morning meal could induce, of itself, a dozen new sensations.

The rest of that day was unmixed delight. I scarcely moved my eyes from the window as the train sped on across the St. Gothard into Italy. What a wondrous panorama unrolled itself before me! First, the mysterious, silent world of mountains, all black and white, like a photograph, with here and there the still, green waters of a mighty lake; then gentler scenes—trees, meadows, villages; last of all, the wide, blue waters of the Italian lakes, with their fringe of purple hills, and the little white villas clustered round them, and the red, red sunset reflected on their surfaces.

The train was late, and I missed the express at Genoa, passing several desolate hours in the great deserted station. It was not till eleven o'clock the next morning that a tired, dishevelled and decidedly dirty young woman found herself standing on the platform at Pisa, her travelling rug trailing ignominiously behind her as she held out her luggage check in dumb entreaty to a succession of unresponsive porters.

The pleasant excitement of yesterday had faded, and I was conscious of being exceeding tired and rather forlorn. Here was no exhilarating mountain air, but a damp breeze, at once chilly and enervating, made me shiver where I stood.

I succeeded at last, in spite of a complete absence of Italian, in conveying myself and my luggage in a fly, and in directing the driver to the Palazzo Brogi. As we jolted along slowly enough, I looked out, expecting every minute to see the Leaning Tower; but I saw only tall, grey streets, narrow and often without sidewalks, in which a sparse but picturesque population was moving to and fro. But I was roused, tired as I was, to considerable interest as we crossed the bridge and my eye took in the full sweep of the river, with the noble curve of palaces along its bank, the distant mountains, beautiful in the sunshine, and the clear and delicate light which lay over all.

I had not long, however, to observe these things, for in another minute the drosky had stopped before a great square house in grey stone, with massive iron scrolls guarding the lower windows, and the driver, coming to the door, announced that this was the Palazzo Brogi.

My heart sank as I dismounted, and going up the steps, pulled timidly at the bell. The great door was standing open, and I could see beyond into a gloomy and cavernous vista of corridors.

No one answered the bell, but just as I was about to pull for the second time, a gentleman, dressed in a grey morning suit *à l'anglaise*, strolled out inquiringly into the passage. He was rather stout, of middle height, with black hair parted in the middle, and a pale, good-looking face. The fact that no one had answered the bell seemed neither to disconcert nor surprise him; he called out a few words in Italian, and, advancing towards me, bowed with charming courtesy.

"You are Miss Meredith," he said, speaking in English, slowly, with difficulty, but in the softest voice in the world; "my mother did not expect you by the early train." Here his English seemed to break down suddenly, and he looked at me a moment with his dark and gentle eyes. There was something reassuring in his serious, simple dignity of manner; I forgot my fears, forgot also the fact that I was as black as a coal, and had lost nearly all my hair-pins, and said, composedly, "I missed the express from Genoa. The train across the St. Gothard was late."

At this point there emerged from the shadowy region at the back a servant in livery, who very deliberately, and without explanation of his tardiness, proceeded to help the driver in carrying my box into the hall.

The gentleman bowed himself away, and in another

moment I was following the servant up a vast and interminable flight of stone stairs.

The vaulted roof rose high above us, half lost to sight in shadow; everywhere were glimpses of galleries and corridors, and over everything hung that indescribable atmosphere of chill stuffiness which I have since learned to connect with Italian palaces.

Anything less homelike, less suggestive of a place where ordinary human beings carried on the daily, pleasant avocations of life, it would be impossible to conceive. A stifling sensation rose in my throat as we passed through a folding glass door, across a dim corridor, into a large room, where my guide left me with a remark which of course I did not understand. With a sense of unutterable relief I perceived the room to be empty, and I sat down on a yellow damask sofa, feeling an ignominious desire to cry. The shutters were closed before the great windows, but through the gloom I could see that the place was furnished very stiffly with yellow damask furniture, while enormous and elaborate chests and writing-tables filled up the corners. A big chandelier, shrouded in yellow muslin, hung from the ceiling, which rose to a great height, and was painted in fresco. There was no fire, and I looked at the empty gilt stove, which had neither bars nor fire-irons, with a shiver.

It was not long before an inner door was thrown open to admit two ladies, who came towards me with greetings in French. The Marchesa Brogi was a small, vivacious, dried-up woman of middle age, with an evident sense of her own dignity, looking very cold and carrying a little muff in her hands. She curtseyed slightly as we shook hands, then motioned me to a seat beside her on the sofa. "This is my daughter Bianca," she said, turning to the girl who had followed her into the room.

I looked anxiously at my pupil, whose aspect was not altogether reassuring. She was a tall, pale, high-shouldered young person, elaborately dressed, with a figure so artificially bolstered up that only by a great stretch of imagination could one realise that she was probably built on average anatomical lines. Her hair, dressed on the top of her head and stuck through with tortoiseshell combs, produced by its unnatural neatness the same effect of unreality. She was decidedly plain withal, and her manners struck me as being inferior to those of her mother and brother. She took up her seat at some little distance from the sofa, and whenever I glanced in her direction I saw a pair of sharp eyes fixed on my face, with something of the unsparing criticism of a hostile child in their gaze.

I began to be terribly conscious of my disordered appearance—I am not one of those people who can

afford to affect the tempestuous petticoat—and grew more and more bewildered in my efforts to follow the little Marchesa through the mazes of her fluent but curiously accentuated French.

It was with a feeling of relief that I saw one of the inner doors open, and a stout, good-tempered looking lady, in a loose morning jacket, come smiling into the room. She shook hands with me cordially, and taking a chair opposite the sofa, began to nod and smile in the most reassuring fashion. She spoke no English and very little French, but was determined that so slight an obstacle should not stand in the way of expressing her good-will towards me.

I began to like this fat, silly lady, who showed her gums so unbecomingly when she smiled, and to wonder at her position in the household.

The door opened yet again, and in came my first acquaintance, the gentleman in the grey suit.

I was growing more and more confused with each fresh arrival, and dimly wondered how long it would be before I fell off the hard yellow sofa from sheer weariness. The strange faces surged before me, an indistinguishable mass; the strange voices reached me, meaningless and incoherent, through a thick veil.

“She is very tired,” some one said in French; and not long after this I was led across half-a-dozen rooms to a great bedroom, where, without taking in any details of my surroundings, I undressed, went to bed, and fell asleep till the next morning.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN I awoke the sun was streaming in through the chinks of the shutters, and a servant was standing at my bedside with a cup of coffee and some rolls. But I felt no disposition to attack my breakfast, and lay still, with a dreamy sensation as my eyes wandered round the unfamiliar room.

I saw a great, dim chamber, with a painted ceiling rising sky-high above me; plaster walls, coarsely stencilled in arabesques; a red-tiled floor, strewn here and there with squares of carpet; a few old and massive pieces of furniture, and not the vestige of a stove. The bed on which I lay was a vast, four-post structure, mountains high, with a baldaquin in faded crimson damask; it and its occupant were reflected, both rather libellously, in the glass front of a wardrobe opposite.

“I shall never, never feel that it is a normal human bedroom,” I thought, appalled by the gloomy state of my surroundings. Then I drank my coffee, and, climbing out of bed, went across to the window, and unshuttered it.

An exclamation of pleasure rose to my lips at the sight which greeted me.

Below flowed the full waters of the Arno, spanned by a massive bridge of shining white marble, and reflecting on its waves the bluest of blue heavens. A brilliant and delicate sunshine was shed over all, bringing out the lights and shades, the differences of tint and surface of the tall old houses on the opposite bank, and falling on the minute spires of a white marble church perched at the very edge of the stream.

The sight of this toy-like structure—surely the smallest and daintiest place of worship in the world—served to deepen the sense of unreality which was hourly gaining hold upon me.

“I wonder where the Leaning Tower is,” I thought as I hastily drew on my stockings, for standing about on the red-tiled floor had made me very cold in spite of the sunshine flooding in through the windows; “what would they say at home if they heard I had been twenty-four hours in Pisa without so much as seeing it in the distance.”

But I did not allow myself to think of home, and devoted my energies to bringing myself up to the high standard of neatness which would certainly be expected of me.

I found the ladies sitting together in a large and

cold apartment, which was more home-like than the yellow room of yesterday, inasmuch as its bareness was relieved by a variety of modern ornaments, photograph frames and other trifles, all as hideous as your latter-day Italian loves to make them. They greeted me with ceremony, making many polite inquiries as to my health and comfort, and invited me to sit down. The room was very cold, in spite of the morning sun, whose light, moreover, was intercepted by venetian blinds. The chilly little Marchesa had her hands in her muff, while her daughter warmed hers over a *scaldino*, a small earthen pot filled with hot wood ashes, which she held in her lap.

The amiable lady in the dressing-jacket was evidently a more warm-blooded creature, for she stitched on, undaunted by the cold, at a large and elaborate piece of embroidery, taking her part meanwhile in the ceaseless and rapid flow of chatter.

It was rather a shock to me to gather that she was the wife of the charming son of the house; to whom, moreover, a fresh charm was added when it came out that his name was Romeo. I had put her down for a woman of middle age, but I learned subsequently that she was only twenty-eight years old, and had brought her husband a very handsome dowry. The pair were childless after several years of marriage and they lived permanently at the

Palazzo Brogi, according to the old patriarchal Italian custom, which, like most old customs, is dying out.

I sat there, stupidly wondering if I should ever be able to understand Italian, replying lamely enough to the remarks in French which were thrown out to me at decent intervals, and encountering every now and then with some alarm the suspicious glances of the Signorina Bianca.

Once the kind Marchesina Annunziata—Romeo's wife—drew my attention with simple pride to a leather chair embroidered with gold, her own handiwork, as I managed to make out.

I smiled and nodded the proper amount of admiration, and wished secretly that my feet were not so cold, for the tiled floor struck chill through the carpet. Bianca offered me a scaldino presently, and the Marchesa explained that she wished the English lessons to begin on the following day. After that I sat there in almost unbroken silence till twelve o'clock, when the casual man-servant strolled in and announced that lunch was ready.

The dining-room, a large and stony apartment with a vaulted roof, was situated on the ground floor, and here we found the Marchesino Romeo and the old Marchese, to whom I was introduced. The meal was slight but excellently cooked; and the sweet

Tuscan wine I found delicious. Romeo, who sat next to me, and attended to my wants with his air of gentle and serious courtesy, addressed a few remarks to me in English and then subsided into a graceful silence, leaving the conversation entirely in the hands of his womenkind.

After lunch, a drive and round of calls was proposed by the ladies, who invited me to join them. The thought of being shut up in a carriage with these three strange women, all speaking their unknown tongue, was too much for me, and gathering courage, the courage of desperation, I announced that, unless my services were required, I should prefer to go for a walk. The ladies looked at me, and then at one another, and the good-natured Annunziata burst into a laugh. "It is an English custom," she explained.

"You must not go beyond the city walls, Miss Meredith, not even into the Cascine; it would not be safe," said the Marchesa; while Bianca looked scrutinisingly at my square, low-heeled shoes which contrasted sharply with her own.

It was with a feeling of relief, some twenty minutes later, that, peeping from the window of my room, I saw them all drive off, elaborately appavelled, in a close carriage; Romeo, bareheaded, speeding them from the steps.

Then I sat down and wrote off an unnaturally cheerful letter to the people at home, only pausing now and then when the tears rose to my eyes and blurred my sight.

"I hope I haven't overdone it," I thought, as I addressed the envelope and proceeded to dress. "I'm not sure that there isn't a slightly inebriated tone about the whole thing, and mother is so quick at reading between the lines."

I passed across the corridor and down the stair to the first landing, where I lingered a moment. A covered gallery ran along the back of the house, and through the tall and dingy windows I could see a surging, unequal mass of old red roofs.

"How Jenny would love it all," I thought, as I turned away with a sigh.

As I reached the street door, Romeo emerged from that mysterious retreat of his on the ground floor, where he appeared to pass his time in some solitary pursuit, looked at me, bowed, and withdrew.

"At last!" I cried inwardly as I sped down the steps. At last I could breathe again, at last I was out in the sunlight and the wind, away from the musty chilliness, the lurking shadows of that stifling palace. Oh, the joy of freedom and of solitude! Was it only hours? Surely it must be years that I had been imprisoned behind those thick old walls

and iron guarded windows. On, on I went with rapid foot in the teeth of the biting wind and the glare of the scorching sunlight, scarcely noticing my surroundings in the first rapture of recovered freedom. But by degrees the strangeness, the beauty of what I saw, began to assert themselves.

I had turned off from the Lung' Arno, and was threading my way among the old and half-deserted streets which led to the cathedral.

What a dead, world-forgotten place, and yet how beautiful in its desolation! Everywhere were signs of a present poverty, everywhere of a past magnificence.

The men with their sombreros and cloaks worn toga fashion, their handsome, melancholy faces and stately gait; the women bareheaded, graceful, drawing water from the fountain into copper vessels, moved before me like figures from an old world drama.

Here and there was a little empty piazza, the tall houses abutting on it at different angles, without sidewalks, the grass growing up between the stones. It seemed only waiting for first gentleman and second gentleman to come forward and carry on their dialogue while the great "set" was being prepared at the back of the stage.

The old walls, roughly patched with modern brick

and mortar, had bits of exquisite carving embedded in them like fossils; and at every street corner the house leek sprang from the interstices of a richly wrought moulding. A great palace, with a wonderful façade, had been turned into a wine-shop; and the chestnut-sellers dispensed their wares in little gloomy caverns hollowed out beneath the abodes of princes. Already the nameless charm of Italy was beginning to work on me; that magic spell from which, let us once come under its influence, we can never hope to be released.

A long and straggling street led me at last to the Piazza del Duomo, and here for a moment I paused breathless, regardless of the icy blast which swept across from the sea.

I thought then, and I think still, that nowhere in the world is there anything which, in its own way, can equal the picture that greeted my astonished vision.

The wide and straggling grass-grown piazza, bounded on one side by the city wall, on the other by the low wall of the Campo Santo, with the wind whistling drearily across it, struck me as the very type and symbol of desolation.

At one end rose the Leaning Tower, pallid, melancholy, defying the laws of nature in a disappointingly spiritless fashion. Close against it the magnificent

bulk of the cathedral reared itself, a marvel of mellow tints, of splendid outline, and richly modelled surfaces. And, divided from this by a strip of rank grass, up sprang the little quaint baptistery, with its extraordinary air of freshness and of fantastic gaiety, looking as though it had been turned out of a mould the day before yesterday.

Such richness, such forlornness, struck curiously on the sense. It was as though, wandering along some solitary shore, one had found a heaped treasure glittering undisturbed on the open sand.

I strolled for some time spellbound about the cathedral, not caring to multiply impressions by entering, shivering a little in the wind which held a recollection of the sea, and was at the same time cold and feverish. By-and-bye, however, I made my way into the Campo Santo, lingering fascinated in those strange sculptured arcades, with the visions of life and death, of hell and heaven, painted on the walls.

One or two cypresses rose from the little grass-plot in the middle, and in the rank grass the jonquils were already in flower. I plucked a few of these and fastened them in my dress. They had a sweet, peculiar odour, melancholy, enervating.

The bright light was beginning to fail as I sped back hurriedly through the streets.

It was Epiphany, and the children were blowing on

long glass trumpets. Every now and then the harsh sound echoed through the stony thoroughfare. It fell upon my overwrought senses like a sound of doom. The flowers in my bodice smelt of death; there was death, I thought, crying out in every old stone of the city.

The palazzo looked almost like home, and I fled up the dim stairs with a greater feeling of relief than that with which an hour or two ago I had hastened down them.

After dinner the Marchesa received her friends in the yellow drawing-room.

A wood fire was lighted on the flat, open hearth of the stove, and a side table was spread with a few light refreshments—a bottle of Marsala wine and a round cake covered with bright green sugar being the most important items.

About eight o'clock the visitors began to arrive, and in half an hour nine or ten ladies and three or four gentlemen were clustered on the damask sofas, talking at a great rate, and gesticulating in their graceful, eager fashion. Bianca had withdrawn into a corner with a pair of contemporaries whose long, stiff waists, high-heeled shoes, and elaborately dressed hair, resembled her own. The old Marchese sat apart, silent and contemplative, as was his wont, and Romeo, drawing a chair close to mine, questioned me in his precise, restricted English as to my afternoon walk.

This parliament of gossip, which, as I afterwards discovered, occurred regularly three times a week, was prolonged till midnight, but, kind Annunziata noticing my tired looks, I was able to make my escape by ten o'clock.

As I climbed into my bed, worn out by the crowded experiences of the day, there rose before me suddenly a vision of the parlour at home; of mother sewing by the fireside; of Jenny and Rosalind at work in the lamplight; of Hubert coming in with the evening papers and bits of literary gossip.

“If they could only see me,” I thought, “alone in this unnatural place, with no one to be fond of me, with no one even being aware that I have a Christian name.”

This last touch struck me as so pathetic that the tears began to pour down my face. But the tall bed, with the faded baldaquin, if oppressive to the imagination, was, it must be confessed, exceedingly comfortable, and it was not long before I forgot my troubles in sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE English lesson next morning proved rather an ordeal. It took place in one of the many sitting-rooms, a large room with an open hearth, on which, however, no fire was lighted. But with a shawl round my shoulders, and a *cassetta*, or brass box filled with live charcoal, for my feet, I managed to keep moderately warm.

Bianca rather sullenly drew a small collection of reading-books, grammars and exercise-books, all bearing marks of careless usage, from a cabinet, and placed them on the table. Then drawing a chair opposite mine, she fixed her suspicious, curious eyes on me, and said in French—

“Have you any sisters, Miss Meredith?”

“I have two. But we must speak English, Marchesina.”

“I always spoke French with Miss Clarke,” answered Bianca.

Miss Clarke, as I subsequently gathered, was my predecessor, who had recently left the *palazzo* after a sojourn of eighteen months, and who, to judge by

results, must have performed her duties in a singularly perfunctory fashion.

“Are your sisters married?” Bianca condescended to say in English, looking critically at my grey merino gown, with its banded bodice, and at my hair braided simply round my head.

“No, but one is engaged.”

“And have you any brothers?”

“No; not one.”

“And I have not one sister, and two brothers, Signorina,” cried Bianca, apparently much struck by the contrast. “It is my brother Andrea who is so anxious for me to learn and to read books, although I am past eighteen. He writes about it to my father, and my father always does what Andrea tells him.”

“Then you must work hard to please your brother,” I said, with my most didactic air, examining the well-thumbed English-Italian grammar as I spoke.

“What is the use, when he has been five years in America? Who knows when I may see him? Ah! *molto indipendente* is Andrea—*molto indipendente!*” And Bianca shook her too neat head with a sigh of mingled pride and reprobation.

We made a little attack on the grammars and reading-books in the course of the morning, but it was uphill work, and I sat down to the piano feeling thoroughly disheartened.

But the music lesson was a great improvement on the English. Bianca had some taste and considerable power of execution, and we rose from the piano better friends. A short walk before lunch was prescribed by the Marchesa, and soon I was re-threading the mazes of the Piso streets, Bianca hobbling slowly and discontentedly at my side on her high heels.

My pupil's one idea with regard to a walk was shops, and now she announced her intention of buying some *torino*, the sweet paste of honey and almonds so dear to Italian palates. As we turned into the narrow street, with its old, old houses and stone arcades, where, such as they are, the principal shops of Pisa are to be found, I could not suppress an exclamation of delight at the sight of so much picturesqueness.

"Ah," said Bianca, not in the least understanding my enthusiasm, "you should see the shops at Turin, and the great squares, and the glass arcades, and the wide streets. I have been there twice. Romeo says it is almost as beautiful as Paris."

The ladies drove out again after lunch in the closed carriage, and again I set out alone to explore the town. This time I penetrated into the interior of the cathedral, spending two happy hours in the dusky richness of the vast building; lost in admiration, now of the soft rich colour of marble and jasper and painted glass;

now of the pictures on walls, roof and altar ; now of the grandeur of line, the mysterious effects of light and shadow planned by the cunning brain of a long departed master.

The weather was much milder than on the previous day, and half a dozen tourists, with red guide-books, were making a round of inspection of the buildings on the piazza.

Two of these I recognised with a thrill to be my own compatriots. They were, to the outward eye, at least, quite uninteresting ; a bride and bridegroom, presumably, of the most commonplace type ; but I followed them about the cathedral with a lingering, wistful glance which I am sure, had they been conscious of it, would have melted them to pity. Once, as I was standing before Andrea del Sarto's marvelous St. Catherine, the pair came up behind me.

"It's like your sister Nellie," said the man.

"Nonsense ! Nellie isn't half so fat, and she never did her hair like that in her life. Why, you wouldn't know Nellie without her fringe," answered the woman in a superior way as they moved off to the next object of interest mentioned in Baedeker.

They were Philistines, no doubt ; but I was in no mood to be critical, and must confess that the sound of their English voices was almost too much for my self-control.

The ladies went out after dinner, and I was left to the pains and pleasures of a solitary evening, an almost unprecedented experience in my career.

The next day was Sunday; the family drove to early mass, and an hour or two later I made my way to the English church, the sparseness of whose congregation gave it a rather forlorn aspect. The English colony is small, and consists chiefly of invalids attracted by the mildness of the climate, who are at the same time too poor to seek a more fashionable health resort. They did not, as may be imagined, present a very cheerful aspect, but the sight of them filled me with a passing envy. Mothers and daughters, sisters, friends; every one came in groups or pairs, with the exception of myself; I, the most friendless and forlorn of all these exiles.

The chaplain and his wife called on me after I had sent in my name for a sitting, but there was never much intimacy between us.

In the evening of this, my first Sunday away from home, the Marchesa again "received," and once more I sat bewildered amid the flood of unintelligible chatter, or exchanged occasional remarks with Bianca, who appeared to have abandoned her suspicions of me, and had taken up her place at my side.

CHAPTER V.

I BOUGHT a dictionary and a grammar, and worked hard in my moments of leisure. My daily life, moreover, might be described as an almost unbroken Italian lesson, and it was not long before I began to understand what was said around me, and to express myself more or less haltingly in the language of my land of exile. A means of communication being thus opened up between myself and the Marchesina Annunziata, that open-hearted person began to take me into her confidence, and to pour out for my benefit a dozen little facts and circumstances which I might have lived all my life with the voluble, but reserved, Marchesa without ever having learnt.

Of Andrea, the absent son, she spoke often.

“*Molto indipendente!*” she said, shaking her head, and using the same expression as her young sister-in-law.

This reprobate, it seemed, flying in the face of family tradition, had announced from the first his intention of earning his own living; had studied hard and with distinction for a civil engineer, and five years

ago, refusing all offers of help, had accepted a post in America.

As for Romeo, the elder brother, he, also, said his wife, was very clever; had passed his examinations as a barrister. "But, of course," she added, with naïve pride, "he would never think of practising."

Romeo, indeed, to do him justice, was troubled by no disturbing spirit of radicalism, and carried on the ancestral pursuit of doing nothing with a grace and a persistence which one could not but admire.

His mother possessed a fine natural aptitude for the same branch of industry; but the old Marchese, whom, though he spoke but little and was seldom seen, I soon perceived to have a character of his own, passed his days in reading and writing in some obscure retreat on the ground floor.

Bianca, after suspending her judgment for some days, had apparently given a verdict in my favour, for she now followed me about like a dog, a line of conduct which, though flattering, had certainly its drawbacks. The English lessons were always a trial, but they grew better as time went on, and the music lessons were far more satisfactory.

As for me, I began to grow fond of my pupil; she was such a crude, instinctive creature, so curiously undeveloped for her time of life, that one could not but take her under one's wing and forgive her her failings as one forgives a little child.

I had now been a month in Pisa, and the first sense of desolation and of strangeness had worn off. There were moments, even now, when the longing for home grew so desperate that I was on the point of rushing off to England by the next train. But I was growing accustomed to my surroundings; the sense of being imprisoned in an enchanted palace had vanished, and had been followed by a more prosaic, but more comfortable, adaptation to environment.

My life moved from day to day in a groove, and I ceased to question the order of things. In the morning were the lessons and the walk with Bianca; the afternoons were looked upon as my own, and these I generally passed in reading, writing letters, and in walking about the city, whose every stone I was getting to know by heart.

Often leaning on the bridge and looking across at the palaces curving along the river, I peopled with a visionary company the lofty rooms beyond the lofty windows.

Here Shelley came with his wife and the Williams's, and here it was that they made acquaintance with Emilia Viviani, the heroine of "Epipsychidion." Byron had a palace all to himself, whence he rode out with Trelawney, to the delight of the population. Leigh Hunt lingered here in his many wanderings,

and Landor led a hermit life in some hidden corner of the old town. Claire Clairmont, that unfortunate mortal, who wherever she came brought calamity, vibrated discontentedly between here and Florence, and it seemed that sometimes I saw her, a little, unhappy, self-conscious ghost, looking from the upper windows of Shelley's palace.

And here, too, after the storm and the shipwreck in which their lives' happiness had gone down, came those two forlorn women, Mary Shelley and Jane Williams. Upon the picture of such sorrow I could not trust myself to gaze; only now and then I heard their shadowy weeping in some dim, great chamber of a half-deserted house.

At other times, I returned to my first friend, the great piazza, whose marvels it seemed impossible to exhaust, and for which I grew to entertain a curiously personal affection.

But as the spring came on, and the mild, enervating breezes ousted more and more their colder comrades, I began to long with all my soul and body for the country. The brown hills, so near and yet so far, inspired me with a fervour of longing. I had promised never to go beyond the city walls; even the great park, or Cascine, where already the trees were bourgeoning, was forbidden ground, though sometimes, indeed, I drove out there with the ladies.

The cool and distant peaks of the Apennines drew my heart towards them with an ever-growing magnetism. The cypresses and ilexes springing up beyond the high white walls of a garden, the scent of spring flowers borne across to me in passing, filled me with a longing and a melancholy which were new to me.

As a matter of fact, the enervating climate, the restricted life and the solitude—for solitude, when all were said, it was—were beginning to tell upon my health. I was not unhappy, but I grew thin and pale, and was developing a hitherto unknown mood of dreamy introspection.

In June, I gathered, the whole Brogi household would adjourn to the family villa near the baths of Lucca. It was taken for granted that I was to accompany them, and, indeed, I had determined on making out my full year, should my services be required for so long.

After that, no doubt, a husband would be found for Bianca, and I could return to England with a clear conscience and quite a nice little amount of savings. Mother should have a deep arm chair, and Rosalind a really handsome wedding present; and with my new acquisition of Italian I hoped to be able to command a higher price in the educational market.

The evenings were generally passed in chatter, in which I soon learnt to take my part; and I began to

be included in the invitations to the houses of the various ladies who "received," like the Marchesa, on certain evenings of the week.

No subject of gossip was too trivial for discussion; and I could not but admire the way in which the tiniest incident was taken up, turned inside out, battledored this way and that, and finally worn threadbare before it was allowed to drop, by these highly skilled talkers. Talk indeed was the business of their lives, the staple fare of existence.

Every one treated me with perfect courtesy, but also, it must be owned, with perfect coldness.

Bianca, as I said before, developed a sort of fondness for me; and Annunziata included me in her general benevolence—Annunziata, good soul, who was always laughing, when she was not deluged in tears. I fancy the charming Romeo had his drawbacks as a husband.

The Marchesa, with her glib talk, her stately, courtesy, was in truth the chilliest and the most reserved of mortals. Of Romeo I saw but little. With the old Marchese, alone, I was conscious of a silent sympathy.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE morning after the breakfast I found the whole family assembled in the yellow drawing-room in a state of unusual excitement. Even the bloodless little Marchesa had a red spot on either shrivelled cheek, and her handsome old husband had thrown off for once his mask of impenetrable and impassive dignity in favour of an air of distinct and lively pleasure.

Bianca was chattering, Romeo was smiling, and Annunziata, of course, was smiling too. Beckoning me confidentially towards her, and showing her gums even more freely than usual, she said: "There is great news. The Marchesino Andrea is coming home. We have had a letter this morning, and we are to expect him within a fortnight."

I received with genuine interest this piece of information. From the first I had decided that the rebel was probably the most interesting member of his family, and had even gone so far as to "derive" him from his father, in accordance with the latter-day scientific fashion which has infected the most unscientific among us.

Bianca was quite unmanageable that morning, and I had finally to abandon all attempts at discipline and let her chat away, in English, to her heart's content.

"I cried all day when Andrea went away," she rattled on; "I was quite a little thing, and I did nothing but cry. Even mamma cried too. When he was home she was often very, very angry with Andrea. Every one was always being angry with him," she added presently, "but every one liked him best. There was often loud talking with papa and Romeo. I used to peep from the door of my nursery and see Andrea stride past with a white face and a great frown." She knitted her own pale brows together in illustration of her own words, and looked so ridiculous that I could not help laughing.

I judged it best, moreover, to cut short these confidences, and we adjourned, with some reluctance on her part, to the piano.

Lunch was a very cheerful meal that day, and afterwards Bianca thrust her arm in mine and dragged me gaily upstairs to the sitting-room.

"Only think," she said, "mamma is writing to Costanza Marchetti, at Florence, to ask her to stay with us the week after next."

"Is the Signorina a great friend of yours?"

Bianca looked exceedingly sly. "Oh, yes, she is a

great friend of mine. I stayed with her once at Florence. They have a beautiful, beautiful house on the Lung' Arno, and Costanza has more dresses than she can wear."

She spoke with such an air of naïve and important self-consciousness that I could scarcely refrain from smiling.

It was impossible not to see through her meaning. The beloved truant was to be permanently trapped; the trap to be baited with a rich, perhaps a beautiful, bride. The situation was truly interesting; I foresaw the playing out of a little comedy under my very eyes.

Life quickened perceptibly in the *palazzo* after the receipt of the letter from America. Plans for picnics, balls and other gaieties were freely discussed. There was a constant dragging about of heavy furniture along the corridors, from which I gathered that rooms were being suitably prepared both for Andrea and his possible bride.

At the gossip parliaments, nothing else was talked of but the coming event; the misdemeanours of servants, the rudeness of tradesmen, and the latest Pisan scandal being relegated for the time being to complete obscurity.

In about ten days Costanza Marchetti appeared on the scene.

We were sitting in the yellow drawing-room after lunch when the carriage drove up, followed by a fly heavily laden with luggage. Bianca had rushed to the window at the sound of wheels, and had hastily described the cavalcade.

A few minutes later in came Romeo with a young, or youngish, lady, dressed in the height of fashion, on his arm.

She advanced towards the Marchesa with a sort of sliding curtsey, and shook hands from the elbow in a manner worthy of Bond-street. But the meeting between her and Bianca was even more striking.

Retreating a little, to allow free play for their operations, the young ladies tilted forward on their high heels, precipitating themselves into one another's arms, where they kissed one another violently on either cheek. Retreating again, they returned once more to the charge, and the performance was gone through for a second time.

Then they sat down close together on the sofa, stroking one another's hands.

"Costanza powders so thickly with violet powder, it makes me quite ill," Bianca confided to me later in the day; "and she thinks there is nobody like herself in all the world."

When the Contessina, for that I discovered was her style and title, had detached her fashionable bird-

cage veil from the brim of her large hat, I fell to observing her with some curiosity from my modest corner. She was no longer in her first youth—about twenty-eight—I should say, but she was distinctly handsome, in a rather hard-featured fashion.

When she was introduced to me, she bowed very stiffly, and said, “How do you do, Miss?” in the funniest English I had ever heard.

“It is so good of you to come to us,” said the Marchesa, with her usual stateliness; “to leave your gay Florence before the end of the Carnival for our quiet Pisa. We cannot promise you many parties and balls, Costanza.”

Perhaps Costanza had seen too many balls in her time—had discovered them, perhaps (who knows?), to be merely dust and ashes.

At any rate, she eagerly and gushingly disclaimed her hostess’ insinuation, and there was voluble exchange of compliments between the ladies.

“Will you give Bianca a holiday for this week, Miss Meredith?” said the Marchesa, presently.

“Certainly, if you will allow it,” I answered, saying what I knew I was intended to say.

Costanza looked across at me coldly, taking in the modest details of my costume.

“And when does the Marchesino arrive?” she asked, turning to his mother.

“Not till late on Thursday night.”

Bianca counted upon her fingers.

“Three whole days and a half,” she cried.

“On Friday,” said the Marchesa, “we have arranged a little dance. It is so near the end of Carnival we could not put it off till long after his arrival.”

“Ah, dearest Marchesa,” cried Costanza, clasping her hands in a rather mechanical rapture, “it will be too delightful! Do we dance in the ball-room below, or in here?”

“In the ball-room,” said the Marchesa, while Annunziata nodded across at me, saying:—

“Do you dance, Miss Meredith?”

“Yes; I am very fond of it,” I answered; but it must be owned that I looked forward with but scant interest to the festivity. My insular mind was unable to rise to the idea of Italian partners.

Costanza raised her eyeglass, with its long tortoise-shell handle, to her heavy-lidded eyes, and surveyed me scrutinisingly. It had been evident from the first that she had but a poor opinion of me.

“I hope you will join us on Friday, Miss Meredith,” said the Marchesa, with much ceremony.

I could not help feeling snubbed. I had taken it for granted that I was to appear; this formal invitation was inexpressibly chilling.

I did not enjoy my holiday of the next few days.

I had always been exceedingly grateful for my few hours of daily solitude, and these were mine no more. The fact that the ladies of the household never seemed to need either solitude or silence had impressed me from the first as a curious phenomenon. Now, for the time being, I was dragged into the current of their lives, and throughout the day was forced to share in the ceaseless chatter, without which, it seemed, a guest could not be entertained, a ball given, or even a son received into the bosom of his family.

Here, there, and everywhere was the unfortunate Miss Meredith—at everybody's beck and call, "upstairs, downstairs and in my lady's chamber."

"It is fortunate, that it is only me," I reflected. "I don't know what Jenny or Rosalind would do. They would just pack up and go." For, at home, the liberty of the individual had always been greatly respected, which was, perhaps, the reason why we managed to live together in such complete harmony.

As for Bianca and her friend, they clattered about all day long together on their high heels, their arms intertwined, exchanging confidences, comparing possessions, and eating *torino* till their teeth ached. In the intervals of this absorption in friendship my pupil would come up to me, throw her arms round me, and pour out a flood of the frankest criticisms on the fair Costanza. To these I refused to listen.

“How can I tell, Bianca, that you do not rush off to the Contessina and complain of me to her?”

“Dearest little Signorina, there could be nothing to complain of.”

“Of course,” I said, “we know that. I am perfect. But, seriously, Bianca, I do not understand this kissing and hugging of a person one moment, and saying evil things of her the next.”

Bianca was getting on for nineteen, but it was necessary to treat her like a child. She hung her head, and took the rebuke very meekly.

“But, Signorina, say what you will, Costanza does put wadding in her stays, because she is so thin, and then pretends to have a fine figure. And she has a bad temper, as every one knows.—”

“Bianca, you are incorrigible!” I put my hand across her mouth, and ran down the corridor to my own room.

CHAPTER VII.

THE covered gallery which ran along the back of the house was flooded in the afternoon with sunshine. Here, as the day declined, I loved to pace, basking in the warmth and rejoicing in the brightness, for mild and clear as the day might be out of doors, within the thick-walled palace it was always mirk and chill.

The long, high wall of the gallery was covered with pictures—chiefly paintings of dead and gone Brogi—most of them worthless, taken singly ; taken collectively, interesting as a study of the varieties of family types.

Here was Bianca, to the life, painted two centuries ago ; the old Marchese looked out from a dingy canvas 300 years old at least, and a curious mixture of Romeo and his sister disported itself in powder amid a florid eighteenth century family group. Conspicuous among so much indifferent workmanship hung a genuine Bronzino of considerable beauty, representing a young man whose charming aspect was scarcely marred by his stiff and elaborate fifteenth century costume. The dark eyes of this picture had a way

of following one up and down the gallery in a rather disconcerting manner ; already I had woven a series of little legends about him, and had decided that he left his frame at night, like the creatures in "Ruddy-gore," to roam the house as a ghost where once he had lived as a man.

Opposite the pictures, on which they shed their light, was a row of windows, set close together deep in the thick wall, and rising almost to the ceiling. They were not made to open, but through their numerous and dingy panes I could see across the roofs of the town to the hills, or down below to where a neglected bit of territory, enclosed between high walls, did duty as a garden.

In one corner of this latter stood a great ilex tree, its massive grey trunk old and gnarled, its blue-green foliage casting a wide shadow. Two or three cypresses, with their bare broom-like stems, sprang from the overgrown turf, which at this season of the year was beginning to be yellow with daffodils, and a thick growth of laurel bushes ran along under the walls. An empty marble basin, approached by broken pavement, marked the site of a forgotten fountain, the stone crop running riot about its borders ; the house-leek thrusting itself every now and then through the interstices of shattered stone. Forlorn, uncared for as was this square of ground ;

it had for me a mysterious attraction; it seemed to me that there clung to it through all change of times and weathers, something of the beauty in desolation which makes the charm of Italy.

It was about four o'clock on Thursday afternoon, and I was wandering up and down the gallery in the sunshine. I was alone for the first time during the last three days, and was making the best of this brief respite from the gregarious life to which I saw myself doomed for some time to come. The ladies were out driving, paying calls and making a few last purchases for the coming festivities. In the evening Andrea was expected, and an atmosphere of excitement pervaded the whole household.

"They are really fond of him, it seems," I mused; "these people who, as far as I can make out, are so cold."

Then I leaned my forehead disconsolately against the window, and had a little burst of sadness all by myself.

The constant strain of the last few days had tired me. I longed intensely for peace, for rest, for affection, for the sweet and simple kindness of home. I had even lost my interest in the coming event which seemed to accentuate my own forlornness. What were other people's brothers to me? Let mother or one of the girls come out to me, and I

would not be behind hand in rejoicing. "No one wants me, no one cares for me, and I don't care for any one either," I said to myself gloomily, brushing away a stray tear with the back of my hand. Then I moved from the window and my contemplation of the ilex tree, and began slowly pacing down the gallery, which was getting fuller every minute of the thick golden sunlight.

But suddenly my heart seemed to stop beating, my blood froze, loud pulses fell to throbbing in my ears. I remained rooted to the spot with horror, while my eyes fixed themselves on a figure, which, as yet on the further side of a shaft of moted sunlight, was slowly advancing towards me from the distant end of the gallery.

"It is the Bronzino come to life!" whispered a voice in some back recess of my consciousness. The next moment I was laughing at my own fears, and was contemplating with interest and astonishment the very flesh-and-blood presentment of a modern gentleman which stood bowing before me.

"I fear I have startled you," said a decidedly human voice, speaking in English, with a peculiar accent, while the speaker looked straight at me with a pair of dark eyes that were certainly like those of the Bronzino.

"Oh, no; it was my own fault for being so

stupid," I answered rather breathlessly, shaken out of my self-possession.

"I am Andrea Brogi," he said, with a little bow; "and I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Clarke?"

"I am Miss Meredith, your sister's governess," I answered, feeling perhaps a little hurt that the substitution of one English teacher for another had not been thought a matter of sufficient importance for mention in the frequent letters which the family had been in the habit of sending to America. Andrea, with great simplicity, went on to explain his presence in the gallery.

"I am some hours before my time, you see. I had miscalculated the trains between this and Livorno. Now, don't you think this a nice reception, Miss Meredith?" he went on, with a smile and a sudden change of tone. "No one to meet me at the depot, no one to meet me at home! Father and brother at the club, mother and sister amusing themselves in the town."

His remark scarcely seemed to admit of a reply; it was not my place to assure him of his welcome, and I got out of the situation with a smile.

He looked at me again, this time more attentively. "But I fear you were really frightened just now. You are pale still and trembling. Did you think I was a ghost?"

"I thought—I thought you were the Bronzino come down from its frame," I answered, astonished at my own daring. The complete absence of self-consciousness in my companion, the delight, moreover, of being addressed in fluent English, gave me courage.

As I spoke I moved over half unconsciously to the picture in question. Andrea, smiling gently, followed me, and planting himself before the canvas contemplated it with a genuine and naïve interest that was irresistible.

I stood by, uncertain whether to go or stay, furtively regarding him.

"Was there ever such a creature," I thought; "with your handsome serious face, your gentle dignified air for all the world like Romeo's; with your sweet Italian voice and your ridiculous American accent—and the general suggestion about you of an old bottle with new wine poured in—only in this case by no means to the detriment of the bottle?"

At this point the unconscious object of my meditation broke in upon it.

"Why, yes," said Andrea calmly, "I had never noticed it before, but I really am uncommonly like the fellow."

As he spoke, he fixed his eyes, frank as a child's, upon my face.

As for me, I could not forbear smiling ; whereupon Andrea, struck with the humour of the thing, broke into a radiant and responsive smile. I thought I had never seen any one so funny or so charming.

At this point a bell rang through the house. "That must be my mother," he said, growing suddenly alert. "Miss Meredith, you will excuse me."

I lingered in the gallery after he had left, but my forlorn and pensive mood of ten minutes ago had vanished.

Rather wistfully, but with a certain excitement, I listened to the confused sound of voices which echoed up from below.

Then I heard the whole party pass upstairs behind me, the heels of the ladies clattering in a somewhat frenzied manner on the stones.

Annunziata was laughing and crying, the Marchesa was talking earnestly, the young ladies scattered ejaculations as they went. Every now and then I caught the clear tones of Andrea's voice.

At dinner that night there was high festival. Every one talked incessantly, even Romeo and his father. We had a turkey stuffed with chestnuts, and the Marchese brought forth his choicest wines. At the beginning of the meal I had been introduced to the new arrival, and, for no earthly reason, neither had made mention of the less formal fashion in which we had become acquainted. Some friends dropped in

after dinner, and Andrea was again the hero of the hour—a rather trying position, which he bore with astonishing grace. I sat sewing in a distant corner of the room, content with my spectator's place, growing more and more interested in the spectacle.

“That Costanza!” I thought, rather crossly, as I observed the handsome Contessina smiling archly at Andrea above her fan. “I wonder how long the little comedy will be a-playing? As for the end, that, I suppose, is a foregone conclusion.” Then I bent my head over my crewel-work again. I was beginning to feel annoyed with Andrea for having passed over our first meeting in silence; I was beginning also to wish I had furred slippers like Bianca's, as a protection against the cold floor.

“Miss Meredith,” said a voice at my elbow, “you are cold; your teeth will soon begin to chatter in your head.”

Then, before I knew what was happening, I was led from my corner, and installed close to the kindling logs. And it was Andrea, the hero of the day, who had done this thing; but had done it so quietly, so much as a matter of course, as scarcely to attract attention, though the Marchesa's eye fell on me coldly as I took up my new position.

“It really does make the place more alive,” I reflected, as I laid my head on my pillow that night. “I am quite glad the Marchesino is here. And I wonder what he thinks of Costanza?”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE day after the dance was exquisitely bright and warm—we seemed to have leapt at a bound into the very heart of spring—and when I came out of my room I was greeted with the news that Andrea and the ladies had gone to drive in the Cascine. Annunziata was my informant. She had stayed at home, and, freed from the rigid eye of her mother-in-law, was sitting very much at her ease, ready to gossip with the first comer.

The Marchesina could rise to an occasion as well as any one else; could, when duty called, confine her stout form in the stiffest of stays, and build up her hair into the neatest of bandolined pyramids. But I think she was never so happy as when, the bow unbent, she could expand into a loose morning-jacket and twist up her hair into a vague, unbecoming knot behind.

“Dear little Signorina,” she cried, beckoning me to a seat with her embroidery scissors, “have you heard the good news? Andrea returns no more to America.”

“He has arranged matters with Costanza pretty

quickly," was my reflection; and at the thought of that easy capitulation he fell distinctly in my esteem.

"He has accepted a post in England," went on Annunziata. "We shall see him every year, if not oftener. Every one is overjoyed. It is a step in the right direction. Who knows but one day he may settle in Italy?" And she smiled meaningly, nodding her head as she spoke.

The ladies came back at lunch-time without their cavalier, and assembled in the sitting-room, displaying every one of them unmistakable signs of what is sometimes called "hot coppers."

"Costanza is so cross," said Bianca, drawing me aside, in her childish fashion; "she talks of going back at once to Florence, and I don't know who would be sorry if she did."

"Oh, for shame, Bianca, she is your guest," I said, really shocked.

I had been greeted coldly on my entrance, a fact which had dashed my own cheerful mood, and had set me seriously considering plans of departure. "If they are going to dislike me, there's an end of the matter," I thought; but I hated the idea of retiring beaten from the field.

I did not succeed in making my escape for a single hour throughout the day. Every one wanted Miss Meredith's services; now she must hold a skein of

wool, now accompany Costanza's song on the piano, now shout her uncertain Italian down the trumpet of a deaf old visitor. I was quite worn out by dinner-time, and afterwards the whole party drove off to a reception, leaving me behind.

"Does not the Signorina accompany us?" said Andrea to his mother, as they stood awaiting the carriage.

"Miss Meredith is tired and goes to bed," answered the Marchesa in her dry, impenetrable way. I had not been invited, but I made no remark. Andrea opened his eyes wide, and came over deliberately to the sofa where I sat.

There was such a determined look about the lines of his mouth, about his whole presence, that I found myself unconsciously thinking: "You are a very, very obstinate person, Marchesino, and I for one should be sorry to defy you. You looked just like that five years ago, when they were trying to tie you to the ancestral apron-strings, and I don't know that Costanza is to be envied, when all is said."

"Miss Meredith," said his lowered voice in my ear, "this is the first opportunity you have given me to-day of telling you what I think of your conduct. I do not wonder that you are afraid of me."

"Signor Marchesino?"

"To make engagements and to break them is not

thought good behaviour either in Italy or in America. Perhaps in England it is different."

I looked up, and meeting his eyes forgot everything else in the world. Forgot the Marchesa hovering near, only prevented by a certain awe of her son from swooping down on us ; forgot Costanza champing the bit, as it were, in the doorway ; forgot the cold, unfriendly glances which had made life dark for me throughout the day.

His gravity was too much for my own, and I smiled.

"You suffer from too keen a sense of humour, Miss Meredith," he said, and I scarcely knew whether to take him seriously or not. I only knew that my heart was beating, that my pulses were throbbing as they had never done before.

"The carriage is at the door, Andrea," cried Bianca, bouncing up to us, and looking inquisitive and excited.

He rose at once, holding out his hand.

"Good-night, Miss Meredith," he said aloud, "I am sorry that you do not accompany us."

Costanza flounced across the passage noisily ; the Marchesa looked me full in the face, then turned away in silence ; and even Annunziata was grave. I felt suddenly that I had been brought up before a court of justice, tried, and found guilty of some heinous but unknown offence.

Light still lingered in the gallery, and when the carriage had rolled off I sought shelter there, pacing to and fro with rapid, unequal tread. What had happened to me? What curious change had wrought itself not only in myself, but in my surroundings, during these last two days? Was it only two days since Andrea had come towards me down this very gallery? Unconsciously the thought shaped itself, and then I grew crimson in the solitude. What had Andrea to do with the altered state of things? How could his homecoming affect the little governess, the humblest member of that stately household?

There in the glow of the fading sunlight hung the Bronzino, its eyes—so like some other eyes—gazing steadily at me from the canvas. “Beautiful eyes,” I thought; “honest eyes, good eyes! There was never anything very bad in that person’s life. I think he was good and happy, and that every one was fond of him.”

And then again I blushed, and turned away suddenly. To blush at a picture!

Down in the deserted garden the spring was carrying on her work, in her own rapid, noiseless fashion. No doubt it was the spring also that was stirring in my heart; that was causing all sorts of new, unexpected growths of thought and feeling to sprout into sudden life; that was changing the habitual serenity

of my mood into something of the fitfulness of an April day.

Alternately happy and miserable, I continued to pace the gallery till the last remnant of sunlight had died away, and the brilliant Italian moonlight came streaming in through the windows.

Then my courage faded all at once. The stony place struck chill, my own footsteps echoed unnaturally loud ; the eyes of the Bronzino staring through the silver radiance filled me with unspeakable terror. With a beating heart I gathered up my skirts and fled up the silent stairs, along the corridor, to my room.

CHAPTER IX.

LEANING out from the window of my room the next morning I saw Andrea and his father walking slowly along the Lung' Arno in the sunlight.

In the filial relation, Andrea, I had before observed, particularly shone. His charming manner was never so charming as when he was addressing his father ; and the presence of his younger son appeared to have a vitalising, rejuvenating effect on the old Marchese.

And now, as I watched them pacing amicably in the delightful spring morning, the tears rose for a moment to my eyes ; I remembered that it was Sunday, that a long way off in unromantic Islington my mother was making ready for the walk to church, while I, an exile, looked from my palace window with nothing better in the prospect than a solitary journey to the *chiesa inglese*. Annunziata had not gone to mass, and when I came downstairs ready dressed she explained that she had a headache, and was in need of a little company to cheer her up.

Of course I could not do less than offer to forego my walk and attendance at church, which I did with

a wistful recollection of the beauty and sweetness of the day.

“Have you heard?” she said. “Costanza goes back to Florence to-night. She prefers not to miss the last two days of Carnival, Monday and Tuesday. So she says,” cried the Marchesina, with a frankness that astonished me, even from her; “so she says; but between ourselves, Andrea was very attentive last night to Emilia di Rossa. Costanza ought to understand what he is by now. She has known him all her life; she ought certainly to be aware that his one little weakness—Andrea is as good as gold—is the ladies.”

I bent my head low over my work, with an indignant, shame-stricken consciousness that I was blushing. “He is evidently engaged to Costanza,” I thought, and I wished the earth would open and swallow me.

“And a young girl, like Emilia,” went on Annunziata; “who knows what construction she might put upon his behaviour? It is not that he says so much, but he has a way with him which is open to misinterpretation. Poor little thing, she has no money to speak of, and, even if she had, who are the Di Rossa? Andrea, for all he is so free and easy, is the very last man to make a *mésalliance*. A convent, say I, will be the end of the Di Rossa.” And she sighed contentedly.

Was it possible that she was insulting me? Was this a warning, a warning to me, Elsie Meredith? Did she think me an adventuress, setting traps for a rich and noble husband, or merely an eager fool liable to put a misconstruction on the simplest acts of kindness and courtesy?

My blazing cheeks, no doubt, confirmed whichever suspicion she had been indulging in, but I was determined to show her I was not afraid. Lifting my face—with its hateful crimson—boldly to hers, I said: “We in England regard marriage and—and love in another way. I know it is not so in Italy, but with us the reason for getting married is that you are fond of some one, and that some one is fond of you. Other sorts of marriages are not thought nice,” with which bold and sweeping statement on behalf of my native land I returned with trembling fingers to my needlework.

To do me justice, I fully believed in my own words. That marriage which had not affection for its basis was shameful had been the simple creed of the little world at home.

“Indeed?” said *Annunziata*, with genuine interest; “but, as you say, it is not so with us.”

My lips twitched in an irresistible smile. Her round eyes met mine so frankly, her round face was so unruffled in its amiability, that I could not but feel

I had made a fool of myself. The guileless lady was prattling on, no doubt as usual, as a relief to her own feelings, and not with any underlying intention. I felt more ashamed than before of my own self-consciousness.

“What is the matter with you, Elsie Meredith?” cried a voice within me. “I think your own mother wouldn’t know you; your own sisters would pass you by in the street.”

“Andrea ought to know,” went on Annunziata, “that such freedom of manners is not permissible in Italy between a young man and young women. He seems to have forgotten this in America, where, I am told, the licence is something shocking.”

I wished the good lady would be less confidential—what was all this to me?—and I was almost glad when the ladies came sailing in from mass, all of them evidently in the worst possible tempers.

There was an air of constraint about the whole party at lunch that day. Wedged in between the Marchesa and Romeo I sat silent and glum, having returned Andrea’s cordial bow very coldly across the table. Every one deplored Costanza’s approaching departure, rather mechanically, I thought, and that young lady herself repeatedly expressed her regret at leaving.

“Dear Marchesa,” she cried, “I am at my wits’

end with disappointment; but my mother's letter this morning admits of but one reply. She says she cannot spare me from the gaieties of the next two days."

"You might come back after Ash Wednesday, said Bianca, who sat with her arm round her friend between the courses, and whose friendship seemed to have been kindled into a blaze by the coming separation.

"Dearest Bianca, if I could only persuade you to return with me!"

"Bianca never makes visits," answered her mother, drily.

"Were you at church this morning, Miss Meredith?" asked the old Marchese, kindly, as the figs and chestnuts were put on the table.

It was the first time that any one had addressed me directly throughout the meal, and I blushed hotly as I gave my answer.

The departure of Costanza, her boxes and her maid, was, of course, the great event of the afternoon. The three gentlemen and Annunziata drove with her to the station, and I was left behind with my pupil and her mother.

A stiff bow from Costanza, a glare through her double eye-glass, and a contemptuous "Good-bye, Miss," in English, had not tended to raise my spirits.

To be an object of universal dislike was an experience as new as it was unpleasant, and I was losing confidence in myself with every hour. Even Bianca had deserted me, and, ensconced close to her mother, shot glances at me of her early curiosity and criticism.

As for the Marchesa, that inscrutable person scarcely stopped talking all the afternoon, rattling on in her dry, colourless way about nothing at all. Speech was to her the shield and buckler which silence is to persons less gifted. Behind her own volubility she could withdraw as behind a bulwark, whence she made observations safe from being herself observed.

I was quite worn out by eight o'clock, when the usual Sunday visitors began to arrive.

With my work in my hand, I sat on the outskirts of the throng, not working indeed, but pondering deeply.

"Miss Meredith, you are very industrious."

There before me stood Andrea, a very obstinate look on his face, unmindful of Annunziata's proximity and Romeo's scowls.

"As it happens, I haven't put in a stitch for the last ten minutes," I answered quietly, though my heart beat.

He drew a chair close to mine.

"You are unfair, Andrea, you are unfair," I thought, "to make things worse for Miss Meredith by singling her out in this way, when you know it makes them all so cross. Things are bad enough for her as it is, and you might forego your little bit of amusement."

I began really to stitch with unnatural industry, bending an unresponsive face over the work in my hand.

"That is very pretty," said Andrea.

"No, no, Marchesino," I thought again, "you are as good as gold, any one could see that from your eyes; but you have a little weakness, only one—'the ladies'—and you must not be encouraged."

I turned to Annunziata, who, baffled by the English speech, sat perplexed and helpless.

"Signora," I said aloud in Italian, "the Signor Marchesino admires my work."

"I taught her how to do it," cried Annunziata breaking into a smile. "See, it is not so easy to draw the fine gold thread through the leather, but she is an apt pupil."

"Miss Meredith, I am sorry to see you looking so pale." Andrea dropped his voice very low, adhering obstinately to English and fixing his eyes on mine.

"I haven't been out to-day."

"What! wasting this glorious weather indoors. Is

it possible that you are falling into the worst of our Italian ways."

"I generally go for a walk."

I rose as I spoke, and turned to the Marchesina. "I am so tired ; do you think I may be excused."

"Certainly, dear child."

Bowing to the assembled company I made my way deliberately to the door. Andrea was there before me, holding it open, a look of unusual sternness on his face.

"Good-night, Miss Meredith," and then before them all he held out his hand.

Only for a moment did our fingers join in a firm eager clasp, only for a moment did his eyes meet mine in a strange, mysterious glance. Only for a moment, but as I fled softly, rapidly along the corridor I felt that in that one instant of time all my life's meaning had been changed. "As good as gold ; as good as gold." The words went round and round in my head as I lay sobbing on the pillow.

Somehow that was the only part of Annunziata's warning which remained with me.

CHAPTER X.

I ROSE early next morning, and, without waiting for my breakfast, ran downstairs, made Pasquale, the vague servant, open the door for me, and I escaped into the sunshine.

In the long and troubled night just passed I had come to a resolution—I would go home.

From first to last, I told myself, the experiment had been a failure. From first to last I had been out of touch with the people with whom I had come to dwell ; the almost undisguised hostility of the last few days was merely the culmination of a growing feeling.

In that atmosphere of suspicion, of disapprobation, I could exist no longer.

Defeated, indeed, but in nowise disgraced, I would return whence I came. I would tell them everything at home, and they would understand.

That I had committed some mysterious breach of Italian etiquette, outraged some notion of Italian propriety, I could not doubt ; but at least I had been guilty of nothing of which, judged by my own standard, I could feel ashamed.

But my heart was very heavy as I sped on through the streets, instinctively making my way to the cathedral.

It was the second week in March, and the spring was full upon us. The grass in the piazza smelt of clover, and here and there on the brown hills was the flush of blossoming peach or the snow of flowering almonds.

In the soft light of the morning, cathedral, tower, and baptistery seemed steeped in a divine calm. Their beauty filled me with a great sadness. They were my friends; I had grown to love them, and now I was leaving them, perhaps for ever.

Pacing up and down, and round about, I tried to fix my thoughts on my plans, to consider with calmness my course of action. But this was the upshot of all my endeavours, the one ridiculous irrelevant conclusion at which I could arrive—"He is certainly not engaged to Costanza."

As I came round by the main door of the cathedral for perhaps the twentieth time, I saw Andrea walking across the grass towards me.

A week ago, I had never seen his face; now as I watched him advancing in the sunlight, it seemed that I had known him all my life. Never was figure more familiar, never presence more reassuring, than that of this stranger. The sight of him neither disturbed

nor astonished me ; now that he was here, his coming seemed inevitable, a part of the natural order of things. "Ah, I have found you," he said quietly, and we turned together and strolled towards the Campo Santo.

"Do you often come here?" He stopped and looked at me dreamily.

"Often, often. It is all so beautiful and so sad."

"It is very sad."

"Do you not see how very beautiful it is?" I cried, "that there is nothing like it in the whole world? And I am leaving it, and it breaks my heart!"

"You are going away?"

"Yes." I was calm no longer, but strangely agitated. I turned away, and began pacing to and fro.

"Ah! they have not made you happy?" His eyes flashed as he came up to me.

"No," I said, "I am not happy ; but it is nobody's fault. They do not like me, and I cannot bear it any more. It has never happened to me before—no one has thought me very wonderful, very clever, very beautiful, very brilliant ; but people have always liked me, and if I am not liked I shall die."

With which foolish outbreak—which astonished no one more than the speaker—I turned away again with streaming eyes.

“Let us come in here,” said Andrea, still with that strange calm in voice and manner, and together we passed into the Campo Santo.

A bird was singing somewhere among the cypresses; the daffodils rose golden in the grass; the strip of sky between the cloisters was intensely blue.

“Miss Meredith,” said Andrea, taking my hand, “will you make me very happy—will you be my wife?”

We were standing in the grass-plot, face to face, and he was very pale.

His words seemed the most natural thing in the world. I ought, perhaps, to have made a protest, to have reminded him of family claims and dues, to have made sure that love, not chivalry, was speaking.

But I only said, “Yes,” very low, looking at him as we stood there among the tombs, under the blue heavens.

* * * * *

“As you came down the gallery, in the sunlight, with the little grey gown, and the frightened look in the modest eyes, I said to myself, ‘Here, with the help of God, comes my wife!’”

I do not know how long we had been in the cloisters, pacing slowly, hand in hand, almost in silence. The sun was high in the heavens, and the bird in the cypresses sang no more.

“Do you know,” cried Andrea, stopping suddenly, and laughing, “here is a most ridiculous thing! What is your name? for I haven’t the ghost of an idea!”

“Elsie.” I laughed too. The joke struck us both as an excellent one.

“Elsie! Ah, the sweet name! Elsie, Elsie! Was ever such a dear little name? What shall we do next, Elsie, my friend?”

“Take me to the mountains!” I cried, suddenly aware that I was tired to exhaustion, that I had had no sleep and no breakfast. “Take me to the mountains; I have longed, longed for them all these days!”

I staggered a little, and closed my eyes.

When I opened them he was holding me in his arms, looking down anxiously at my face.

“Yes, we will go to the mountains; but first I shall take you home, and give you something to eat and drink, Elsie.”

CHAPTER XI.

“YOU are not afraid?” said Andrea, as we turned on to the Lung’ Arno and came in sight of the house.

“No,” I answered in all good faith, a little resenting the question.

After all, what was there to fear? This was the nineteenth century, when people’s marriages were looked upon as their own affairs, and the paternal blessing—since it had ceased to be a *sine quâ non*—was never long withheld.

If Andrea’s family were disappointed in his choice, and I supposed that at first such would be the case, it lay with me to turn that disappointment into satisfaction.

I had but a modest opinion of myself, yet I knew that in making me his wife Andrea was doing nothing to disgrace himself; his good taste, perhaps, was at fault, but that was all.

You see, I had been educated in a very primitive and unworldly school of manners, and must ask you to forgive my ignorance.

Yet I confess my heart did beat rather fast as we

made our way up the steps into the empty hall, and I wished the next few hours well over.

I reminded myself that I was under Andrea's wing, safe from harm, but looking up at Andrea I was not quite sure of his own unruffled self-possession. A distant hum of voices greeted us as we entered, growing louder with every stair we mounted, and when we reached the landing leading to the gallery, there stood the whole family assembled like the people in a comedy.

To judge from the sounds we heard, they had been engaged in excited discussion, every one speaking at once, but at our appearance a dead and awful silence fell upon the group.

Slowly we advanced, the mark of every eye, then came to a stop well in front of the group.

It seemed an age, but I believe it was less than a minute, before the Marchesa stepped forward, looking straight at me and away from her son, so as not in the least to include him in her condemnation, and said: "I am truly sorry, Miss Meredith, for I was given to understand that your mother was a very respectable woman."

"Mother!" cried Andrea, with a pale face and flashing eyes, "be careful of your words." Then taking my hand, he turned to the old Marchese, who stood helpless and speechless in the back-

ground, and said loudly and deliberately: "This lady has promised to be my wife."

For an instant no one spoke, but there was no mistaking the meaning of their silence; then Romeo called out in a voice of suppressed fury: "It is impossible!"

Andrea, still holding my hand, turned with awful calm upon his brother. Annunziata's ready tears were flowing, and Bianca gazed open-mouthed with horror and excitement upon the scene.

"Romeo," said Andrea, tightening his hold of my fingers, "this is no affair of yours. Once before you tried to interfere in my life; I should have thought the result had been too discouraging for a second attempt."

"It is the affair of all of us when you try to bring disgrace on the family."

"Disgrace! Sir, do you know what word you are using, and in reference to whom?"

"Oh, the Signorina, of course, is charming. I have nothing to say against her."

He bowed low, and, as our eyes met, I knew he was my enemy.

"Andrea," said his mother, interposing between her sons, "this is no time and place for discussion. Miss Meredith shall come with me, and you shall endeavour to explain to your father how it is you have insulted him."

“My son,” said the Marchese, speaking for the first time, with a certain mournful dignity, “never before has such a thing happened in our family as that a wife should be brought home to it without the head of the house being consulted. What am I to think of this want of confidence, of respect, except that you are ashamed of your choice?”

“Father,” answered Andrea, drawing my hand through his arm, “it has throughout been my intention of asking your consent and your blessing. Nor has there been any concealment on my part. From the first I have expressed my admiration of this lady very openly to you all. What is the result? that she is watched, persecuted like a suspected criminal, and finally driven away—she a young girl, a stranger in a foreign land. Can you expect the man who loves her to stand by and see this without letting her know at the first opportunity that there is one on whose protection she can at once and always rely?”

“Andrea,” said his mother, “we did but try our best to prevent what we one and all regard as a misfortune. Miss Meredith is no suitable bride for a son of the house of Brogi. Oh” (as he opened his lips as about to protest), “I have nothing to say against her, though indeed you cannot expect me to be lost in admiration of her discretion.”

The Marchesa shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hands as she spoke, with an impatience which she rarely displayed.

Andrea answered very quietly : " My mother, this is no time and place for such a discussion! With your permission I will retire with my father, and Miss Meredith shall withdraw to her own room." He released my hand very gently from his arm, and stood a moment looking down at me.

" You are not afraid, Elsie?" he whispered in English.

" Yes, I am frightened to death!"

" It will be all right very soon."

" Must you leave me, Andrea?"

" Yes, dear, I must."

He went over to his father and gave ~~him~~ his arm. All this time Annunziata was weeping like the walrus in "Alice," her loud sobs echoing dismally throughout the house.

" Elsie," said Andrea, as he prepared to descend with the Marchese, "go straight to your room."

I turned without a word, and stunned, astonished, unutterably miserable, fled upstairs without a glance at the hostile group on the landing.

Once the door safely shut behind me, my pent-up feelings found vent, and I sobbed hysterically.

Was ever such a morning in a woman's life? And I had had no breakfast.

I was not allowed much time in which to indulge in my emotions. Very soon came a knock at the door, and a maid entered with wine, bread and chestnuts. With the volubility of Italian servants she pressed me to eat and drink, and when she departed with the empty tray I felt refreshed and ready to fight my battle to the last. A second knock at the door was not long in following the first, and this time it was the Marchesa who responded to my "Come in."

My heart sank considerably as the stately little lady advanced towards me, and I inwardly reproached Andrea for his desertion.

CHAPTER XII.

“MISS MEREDITH,” said the Marchesa, taking the chair I mechanically offered her, and waving her hand towards another, “pray be seated.”

I obeyed, feeling secretly much in awe of the rigid little figure sitting very upright opposite me.

“What, after all, is the love of a young man but a passing infatuation?”

Thus was the first gun fired into the enemy’s camp, but there was no answering volley.

That she spoke in all good faith I fully believe, and I felt how useless would be any discussion between us of the point. I looked down in silence.

“Miss Meredith,” went on the dry, fluent tones, which I was beginning to feel were the tones of doom, “I will refrain from blaming you in this unfortunate matter. I will merely state the case as it stands. You come into this family, are well received, kindly treated, and regarded with esteem by us all. In return for this, I am bound to say, you perform your duties and do what is required of you with amiability. So far all is well. But there are traditions, feelings, sacred customs and emotions belong-

ing to the family where you have been received of which you can have no knowledge. That is not required nor expected of you. What is expected of you, as of every right-minded person, is that you should at least respect what is of such importance to others. Is this the case? Have you not rather taken delight in outraging our feelings in the most delicate relations; in trampling, in your selfish ignorance, on all that we hold most dear?"

Her words stung me; they were cruel words, but I had sworn inwardly to stand by my guns.

With hands interlocked and drooping head I sat before her without a word.

"We had looked forward to this home-coming of my son," she went on, branching off into another talk, "as to the beginning of a fresh epoch of our lives, his father and I, we that are no longer young. To him we had looked for the carrying on of our race. From my daughter-in-law we have been obliged to despair of issue. Andrea suitably married and established in the home of his ancestors, is what we all dreamed one day to see—nor do I even now entirely abandon the hope of seeing it."

With burning cheeks, and an awful sense that a web was being woven about me, I rose stiffly from my seat, and went over to a cabinet where stood my mother's portrait.

I looked a moment at the pictured eyes, as if for guidance, then said in a low voice :

“Signora Marchesa, I have given my word to your son, and only at his bidding can I take it back.”

“It does not take much penetration,” she replied, “to know that my son is the last person to bid you do anything of the kind. That he is the soul of chivalry, that the very fact of a person being in an unfortunate position would of itself attract his regard, a child might easily discover.”

She spoke with such genuine feeling that for a moment my heart went out towards her ; for a moment our eyes met and not unkindly.

“No doubt,” she went on, after a pause, and rising from her seat, “no doubt you represented the precautions we thought necessary to adopt, for your own protection as well as my son’s, as a form of persecution. If you did not actually represent it to him, I feel sure you gave him to understand that such was the case.”

She had hit the mark.

With an agonising rush of shame, of despair, I remembered my own outbreak on the piazza that morning ; how I had confided to Andrea, unasked, my intention of going away, and of the sorrow the prospect gave me.

Had I been mistaken ? Had the message of his

eyes, his voice, his manner, meant nothing? Had I indeed been unmindful of my woman's modesty? The Marchesa was aware at once of having struck home, and the monotonous tones began again.

“Of course, Miss Meredith, if you choose to take advantage of my son's chivalry, and of his passing fancy—for Andrea is exceedingly susceptible, and, no doubt, believes himself in love with you—if, I say, you choose to do this, there is no more to be said. Andrea will never take back his word, on that you may rely. But be sure of this, his life will be spoiled, and he will know it. It is not to be expected that you should realise the meaning of ancestral pride, of family honour. Perhaps you think the sentiments which have taken centuries to grow can wither up in a day before the flame of a foolish fancy?”

She had conquered. Moving over to her I looked straight in her face. My voice rang strange and hollow: “By marrying your son I should bring no disgrace upon him and his family. But I do not intend to marry him.”

She had not anticipated so easy a victory. Her cheek flushed, almost as if with compunction. She held out her hands towards me.

But I turned away ungraciously, and, going up to the chest, began to lift out my under linen, and to pile it on the bed.

“Signora, do not thank me, do not praise me. I do not know if I am doing right or wrong.”

“Signorina, you have taken the course of an honourable woman.”

I went over to the corner where my box stood, and lifted the lid with trembling hands.

“Signora Marchesa, will your servant find out what hour of the night the train leaves for Genoa? and will he have a drosky ready in time to take me to the station?”

“Miss Meredith, there is no necessity for this haste. You cannot depart like this, and without advising your family.”

I laid a dress—the little black dress I had worn at the dance—at the bottom of the box. It ought to have gone at the top, but such details did not occupy me at the moment.

“I trust,” I said, “that there may be no difficulties placed in the way of my immediate departure.”

She came up to me in some agitation.

“But, Signorina!”

“Signora,” I answered, “you have my promise. Is not that what you wanted?”

I intended a dismissal, I frankly own it, but the Marchesa took my rudeness with such humility that for the moment I felt ashamed of myself.

“You have forced me, Miss Meredith, to speak to you as I have never spoken before to a stranger

beneath my roof. To fly in the face of the hospitable traditions of the house——”

There came a knock at the door, and the servant announced that the Marchesino desired to speak with Miss Meredith.

We two women, who both loved Andrea, looked at one another.

“You will have to tell him yourself, Signorina; from no one else would my son receive your message.” The Marchesa turned away as she spoke.

“I will write to him.”

Hastily dismissing the servant with words to the effect that Andrea should be waited on in a few minutes, the Marchesa handed me, in silence, the little paper case which lay on the table. With uncertain fingers I wrote:

“We were both of us hasty and ill-advised this morning. I must thank you for the great honour you have done me, but at the same time I must beg of you to release me from the promise I have made.—
ELSIE MEREDITH.”

I handed the open sheet to the Marchesa, who read it carefully, folded it up, thanked me and went from the room.

Then suddenly the great bed began to waltz; the open box in the corner, the painted ceiling, the chest and cabinet to whirl about in hopeless confusion. I don't know how it came about, but for the first time in my life I fainted.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was four o'clock in the afternoon; already the front of the house was in shadow, and the drawing-room was cool and dark. Here Andrea and I were standing face to face; both pale, both resolute, while the Marchesa looked from one to the other with anxious eyes.

"You wrote this?" he asked, holding up my unfortunate scrawl.

"Yes, I wrote it."

"And you meant what you wrote?"

"Yes."

He came a little nearer to me, speaking, it seemed, with a certain passionate contempt.

"And you expected me, Elsie, to accept such an answer?"

Before the fire of his glance my eyes fell suddenly. "I have no other answer to give you," I murmured brokenly.

The Marchesa, who had stayed in the room by my own request, glanced questioningly from one to the other, evidently unable to follow the rapid English of the dialogue.

“Is it possible, Elsie, that you have deceived me? That you, who seemed so true, are falser than words can say? - Have you forgotten what you said to me, what your eyes said as well as your lips, a few short hours ago?”

“I have not forgotten, but I cannot marry you.”

“Then you do not love me, Elsie? you have been amusing yourself.”

“If you choose to think so, I cannot help it.”

“Elsie, whatever promise you have made to my mother, whatever promise may have been extorted from you, remember that your first promise and your duty were to me.”

I shivered from head to foot, while my heart echoed his words. But I had given my word, and I would not go back from it. Never should my mother's daughter thrust herself unwelcomed in any house.

“Have you nothing to say to me, Elsie?”

“Nothing.”

“Mother,” he cried, turning flashing eyes to the Marchesa, “what have you been saying to her, by what means have you so transformed her, how have you succeeded in wringing from her a most unjust promise?”

“Stay,” I interposed, speaking also in Italian, “no promise has been wrung from me, I gave it

freely. Signor Marchesino, it seems you cannot believe it, yet it is true that of my own free will I refuse to marry you, that I take back my unconsidered word of this morning. I am no wife for you, and you no husband for me; a few hours of reflection have sufficed very plainly to show me that."

He stood there, paler than ever, looking at me with a piteous air of incredulity. "Elsie, it is not possible—consider, remember—it is not true!"

His voice broke, wavered, and fell; from the passionate entreaty of his eyes I turned my own away.

"It is true, Signor, that I will never, never marry you."

Clear, cold, and cruel, though very low, were the tones of my voice; I know not what angel or fiend was giving me strength and utterance; I only know that it was not normal Elsie who thus spoke and acted.

There was a pause, which seemed to last an age, then once again his voice broke the stillness.

"Since, then, you choose to spoil my life, Elsie, and perhaps (who knows?) your own, there is no more to be said. Far be it from me to extort a woman's consent from her. The only love worth having is that which is given freely, which has courage, which has pride."

Very hard and contemptuous sounded his words, My heart cried out in agony: "Andrea, you are unjust!" but I stood there dumb as a fish, with clasped hands and drooping head.

"Mother," went on Andrea, "will you kindly summon my father and the others. Miss Meredith, oblige me and stay a few moments: I am sorry to trouble you.

They came in slowly through the open door, the old man, his son and the two younger ladies, anxious, expectant.

Andrea turned towards them.

"My father," he said, "this lady refuses to marry me, and no doubt every body is content. That she declines to face the hostility, the discourtesy of my family, is not perhaps greatly to be wondered at. It is evident that I am not considered worthy of so great a sacrifice on her part; I do not blame her; rather I blame my own credulity in thinking my love returned. But I wish you all to know," he added, "that I have entirely altered my plans. I shall write off my appointment in England, and shall start to-night for Livorno, on my way to America. My mother, you will kindly send for an *orario* that I may know at what time to order the carriage. Miss Meredith, I bid you good-bye."

He turned round suddenly and faced me, holding out his hand with an air of ceremony.

As for me, I glanced from the dear hand, the dear eyes to the circle of dismayed faces beyond, then, without a word, I rushed through the open door to my room.

Not daring to allow myself a moment's thought, I fell to immediately packing—fitting in a neat mosaic of stockings and petticoats as though it were the one object of existence.

I do not know if it were minutes or hours before the Marchesa came in, pale and unusually agitated, with no air of enjoying her victory.

“Signorina,” she said, “the train for Genoa leaves at 8; I have ordered the carriage for 7.15. You would prefer, perhaps, to dine in your room?”

“I do not wish for dinner, thank you.”

“You must allow me to thank you once again, Miss Meredith.”

“Do not thank me,” I cried with sudden passion, “I have done nothing to be thanked for.”

For, indeed, I was enjoying none of the compensations of martyrdom; for me it was the pang without the palm; I had fallen in a cause in which I did not believe, had been pressed into a service for which I had no enthusiasm.

“If you will excuse me, Marchesa,” I went on, “there are some books of mine in the schoolroom which I must fetch;” and, bowing slightly, I swept into the corridor with an air as stately as her own.

Andrea's room was on the same floor as my own, but at the other end of the passage, and I had to pass it on my way to the schoolroom. The door stood wide open, and just outside was a large trunk, which Pasquale, the servant, was engaged in packing, while his master gave directions and handed things from the threshold.

I heard their voices as I came.

“At what time does the train go for Livorno, did you say?”

“At 9, *eccellenza*. The carriage will be back in time from the station.”

I glided past as rapidly as possible, filled with a certain mournful humour at this spectacle of the gentleman packing his box at one end of the hall, while the lady packed hers at the other.

My room was empty when I regained it, and with a heavy heart I finished my sad task, locking the box, labelling and strapping it.

Then I put on my grey travelling dress, my hat, veil, and gloves, and sat down by the window.

It was only half-past five, and these preparations were a little premature; but this confused, chaotic day seemed beyond the ordinary measurements of time.

A maid-servant, with a dainty little dinner on a tray, was the next arrival on the scene. She set it

down on a table near me, but I took no heed. As if I could have swallowed a mouthful!

I was quite calm now, only unutterably mournful. "I have spoilt my life," I thought, as my eyes fixed themselves drearily on the river, the old houses opposite, the marble bridge—once all so strange, now grown so dear. "I have spoilt my life, and for what? Ah, if mother had only been here to stand by me! But I was alone. What was I to do? Oh, Andrea, do you hate me?"

The tears streamed down my face as I sat. "Oh, my beloved Pisa," I thought again, "how can I bear to leave you!"

Once more came a knock at the door—the little, quick knock of the Marchesa; and as I responded duly, I reflected: "No doubt she comes to insult me with my salary. And the worst of it is, I shall have to take it; for if I don't, how am I to get home?"

She looked very unlike her usual self-possessed self as she came towards me.

"Miss Meredith, my husband wishes to speak to you."

I rose wearily in mechanical obedience, and followed her, silent and dejected, downstairs to the Marchese's room. Here, amid his books and papers, sat the old man, looking the picture of wretchedness.

"Ah, Signorina," he said, "what will you think of

me, of us all? Of the favour which, very humbly, I have to beg of you? I cannot bear thus to part from my son; he is going far away from me, in anger, for an indefinite time. It is you, and you only, who can persuade him to stop."

I looked up in sudden astonishment.

"My child, go to him; tell him that he can stay."

"Signor Marchese, I am sorry, but you ask what is impossible."

"I do not wonder," he said, with a most touching yet dignified humility, "I do not wonder at your reply. My wife, it is your part to speak to this lady."

With set lips yet unblenching front the gallant little Marchesa advanced.

"Miss Meredith, do not in this matter consider yourself bound by any promise you have made to me. I release you from it."

"May not the matter be considered ended?" I cried in very weariness. "That I have come between your son and his family no one regrets more than I. Only let me go away."

The old man rose slowly, left the room, and went to the foot of the stairs.

"Andrea, Andrea," I heard him call.

"His excellency has not finished packing," answered the voice of Pasquale.

“Andrea, Andrea,” cried his father again; then came rapid footsteps, and in a few seconds Andrea stood once more before me.

He turned from one to the other questioningly.

The Marchese took my hand.

“My son,” he said, “can you not persuade this lady to remain with us?”

He looked up, and our eyes met; but on neither side was speech or movement.

The old man went on.

“Andrea, it is possible that we did wrong, your mother and I, in attempting to interfere with you in this matter. You must forgive us if we are slow to understand the new spirit of radicalism which, it seems, is the spirit of the times. Once before our wishes clashed; but, my son, I cannot bear to send you away in anger a second time. As for this lady, she knows how deeply we all respect her. Persuade her to forgive us, if indeed you can.”

Andrea, I saw, was deeply moved; he shaded his eyes with his hand, and the tears flowed down my own cheeks unchecked.

“Well, Elsie, it is for you to decide.” He spoke at last, coldly, in an off-hand manner.

I was lacking in pride, perhaps, in dignity, for though I said nothing, I held out my hand.

“Are you quite sure you love me, Elsie?”

“Quite, quite sure, Andrea.”

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"I am so glad," cried Bianca, some ten minutes later, giving me a hug, "I am so glad it is you, and not that bad-tempered Costanza."

"We are all glad," said the old Marchese, holding out his hand with a smile, while Romeo and his mother stood bearing their defeat with commendable grace.

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So it came to pass that on the evening of that wonderful day Andrea and I, instead of being borne by express trains to Genoa and Leghorn respectively, were pacing the gallery arm in arm in the sunlight.

We had been engaged in this occupation for about an hour, and now he knew all about my mother and sisters, and the details of the happy life at Islington.

"We will live in England, but every year we will come to Italy," he was saying, as we paused before the Bronzino, which seemed to have taken in the situation.

"I love Italy more than any place in the world," I answered.

A pause.

"We will be married immediately after Easter, Elsie."

"Andrea, I go home the day after to-morrow."

"And to-morrow," he said, "we will go to the mountains."

THE END.

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