VALLEY OF NIGHT

John Jeffery Farnol

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This is another triumphant episode in the career of Jasper Shrig, that shrewd, dour limb of the law whose amazing career has provided so much enjoyment for Jeffery Farnol's readers. VALLEY OF NIGHT is an enthralling tale of mystery and intrigue which is set in eighteenth-century England and ranges from London to that wild Cornish coast where the shipwreckers plied their nefarious trade. Although Jeffery Farnol has created a host of memorable characters, Edward Brandonleigh and Virginia Wrybrook will live among his best creations, and their individual love stories, beset as they were by murder, intrigue, and greed, will not soon be forgotten. Mr. Farnol has outdone himself in his exciting and eerie descriptions of the shipwreckers of the Cornish coast and in his depiction of the aged, scheming Lady Polgarth, whose desperate attempt on the life of Edward Brandonleigh, in her efforts to conceal the secret of the disinterred skull, forms one of the high lights of a book which contains the last full measure of sustained and thrilling romance. Jasper Shrig, that magnificent Cockney, who is brought into the case by Brandonleigh and whose thick accent and homely philosophy have been such a high light in other Farnol books, is once again in the center of the gripping events with which VALLEY OF NIGHT is replete. This is magnificent entertainment in the well-known Farnol manner.

Books By

JEFFERY FARNOL

VALLEY OF NIGHT
ADAM PENFEATHER, BUCCANEER
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THE HAPPY HARVEST
THE LONELY ROAD
THE CROOKED FURROW
JOHN O' THE GREEN
THE AMATEUR GENTLEMAN
THE BROAD HIGHWAY
THE WAY BEYOND
THE WINDS OF FORTUNE

Valley of Night

BEING AN EPISODE IN THE CAREER
OF JASPER SHRIG OF BOW STREET

With Particulars of His Highly Original Methods in
THE WRYBROOK CASE Set Down by ED. BRANDONLEIGH, GENT.,
and Edited by JEFFERY FARNOL

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FIRST EDITION

A FOREWORD

To the better informing of my Reader.

SIR OR MADAM: I beg you to know this for a narrative based upon actual fact; for whoso peruses that quaint volume entitled *Timb's Curiosities of London* shall find therein the account of a skull that nodded, and which, upon closer inspection, was found to be transpierced by a long, rusty nail, much as I have described. This nail, discovered by chance so extremely odd and singular, this mute, though terribly eloquent, witness to an age-old crime, was yet the means whereby the guilty person was finally brought to justice. Which goes to prove the somewhat debatable adage, to wit: "MURDER WILL OUT," together with the often-proven fact that: "TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION."

Here then was a criminal mystery new-risen from the grave of a murdered man! And who more apt to its elucidation than my old friend Jasper Shrig of Bow Street, and by his own very peculiar and extremely original methods?

Now in these most eventful days while our Beloved Isle is threatened by such storm of hatred and lashed by tempest of baffled and therefore merciless fury—in this period of troubled minds or actual pain of body, I venture to offer the following pages to all who by suffering are become my friends, in the sincere hope that they may find some small solace and forgetfulness of their own troubles in reading here of the woes and horrors endured by their companion in misfortune—Edward Brandonleigh.

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VALLEY OF NIGHT

CHAPTER I

Introduces a Skull

It is with a certain zest that I shall here attempt the portrayal of that top-booted oddity and perspicacious officer, Jasper Shrig, of the Bow Street Bureau, together with a descriptive recording of his highly original and decidedly unorthodox methods in regard to this singularly horrid and cold-blooded murder called "The Wrybrook Case."

And because, but for me, there would have been no mystery or enquiry, and therefore no case, it is necessary that I introduce some mention of myself, the which I do unwillingly because I am one who, for sufficient reason, has passed these latter years in a cloistered seclusion, a pensive aloofness, and, moreover, am not (alas!) of that rare stuff whereof your all-conquering, iron-nerved heroes are compounded, as will become too apparent towards the close of this narration. As to who and what sort of personage I am shall be made evident, little by little, and unobtrusively as possible.

So now, to begin:

It was in the late afternoon of April tenth, year of grace eighteen hundred and eighteen, that there befell me the first most extraordinary experience, the true beginning of this ghastly Wrybrook Case, which was to drag me from my sequestered ease and lead me on through peril and ever-growing horror to the very threshold of an awful death.

I had been to a sale of rare books and, the afternoon being fair, was walking home for exercise, with my man Enoch behind me bearing divers of my most treasured purchases. My way led us through St. Sepulchre's churchyard and, walking thus amid ancient tombs and headstones old and new, I was pondering the pitiful brevity of life and mutability of all human things when these meditations were rudely disturbed and myself annoyed by a sudden, startled exclamation behind me:

"Ah—merciful God!"

I halted. I turned to stare in no little astonishment, not so much on account of the words themselves as because they had been uttered by one usually so perfectly imperturbable as Enoch, this most efficient servant of

mine, this creature of ineffable calm, who seldom or never troubles me with a word unless by me addressed; hence my surprise will be the more readily understood to hear him thus suddenly vociferous and to behold him gazing fixedly where a sexton was engaged, at no great distance, digging a new grave.

"Enoch," quoth I reprovingly, "pray inform me why and wherefore you cry thus upon the Deity?"

Without so much as glancing towards me, Enoch pointed towards this grave, letting fall one of my precious tomes as he did so.

"The skull, sir—the skull!" he exclaimed, in the same remarkably perturbed manner. "Look—look at it! Watch it—the skull—yonder!"

"No!" I retorted sternly. "The book at your feet, the volume you have dropped and probably sadly damaged."

"Ah, but, sir, the skull yonder . . . If you——"

"Skulls," said I, "are to be expected in churchyards, and especially in such ancient burial grounds as this. So take up my book and——"

"Yet, sir, I assure you this skull—moved! Yes, it nodded at me quite horribly!"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, becoming a little peevish.

"However, sir, I protest it did. I swear to you most solemnly—ha, look! Look at it—now!" Glancing whither he directed, I beheld this grisly death's-head perched very precariously upon a mound of new-turned soil as the sexton's careless hand had placed it.

"Enoch," quoth I, "you comport yourself very oddly and surprisingly like an ignorant fool. Come, take up my book and——" The words died upon my lips, for, to my perfect amazement, I saw this same mouldering skull, this grim shape of mortality, was actually and indeed moving—tilting itself slowly forward as if bowing to me in lazy, horrid mockery.

Being naturally an honest man, I will here frankly confess that I stood for a moment or so, chilled with a horror that quite bereft me of speech and motion; but being also something of a philosopher, I repressed this weakness and beckoned Enoch, saying:

"Place my books carefully upon the tomb beside you and bring yon poor relic of humanity to me." Then, seeing how he hesitated—nay, blenched from this yet slightly oscillating skull—I stooped, took it up in my gloved

hands, shook it gently, and—out from the spinal cavity flopped a great, sluggish toad.

"So," quoth I, shaking my head at Enoch, "you see! That which a fearful Ignorance, not daring to investigate, would have left unquestioned, to be remembered and dreaded as a horror and supernatural phenomenon, is thus by calm Reason and philosophical enquiry proved to be no mystery and ——"

Here once again words failed me and I stood dumb and, as it were, spellbound by a new and, this time, a very real horror, staring dreadfully at the thing I had been turning this way and that in reverent hands.

"Sir," exclaimed Enoch, leaning towards me, "why d'you look so shocked? What is it? Good God! What is it now?"

"This!" I answered, between shut teeth, and from the left temporal bone of this poor fragment of misused humanity I drew, slowly and gently, a frightful, rusty object that had once been a long iron nail.

For some while he stared mutely upon this ghastly evidence of long-past, undiscovered crime made now so very terribly manifest.

"Ah—h!" sighed Enoch at last, and speaking in hissing whisper: "Here then was—murder!"

"Beyond all doubt!" I answered, whispering also. "And in what truly frightful shape! I must know more of this!" Carefully replacing the nail in its fearsome hiding place, I came to the grave wherein the sexton laboured, a brawny, rubicund fellow with a jovial eye despite his grim occupation.

"Good fellow," said I, looking down upon this man who beamed up at me from amid the mouldering bones of a long-dead generation, "can you tell me anything about this skull?"

"Ay, sir, ay," chirruped the sexton, " 'e come a-rolling out atop o' me from this 'ere old coffin as went and ketched itself agin me spade—toss 'im down and I'll pop 'im back where 'e belongs."

"Is that the old coffin in question?" I asked, peering down at the rotting thing.

"Ay, sir, ay—'tis this un, sure—plenty on 'em down 'ere; they'm a-laying precious thick and all on 'em ready to fall apart—but this un be the one."

“I see its name plate is still in place; are you scholar enough to read me the inscription?”

“That I be, sir—ah, eddicated ’bove me station as ye might say. I can read all print and most writings if wrote plain.”

“Then pray accept this half crown,” said I, dropping the coin, which he caught deftly, “and be good enough to read me all particulars.”

“Right, sir!” nodded the sexton; then, having rubbed the dim and tarnished plate with broad palm, he read therefrom, slowly and word by word:

“ ‘Sacred to the memory of Sir Jo-nas Wry-brook, Knight, aged sixty-nine, died June ten, seventeen ’undered and’—I can’t nowise make out the rest, sir, ’tis all ate away. But you’ll find ’is stone above there—ay, that un as is a-toppling beside you.”

Now bending to this lopsided headstone, I made out, in weather-beaten lettering, this:

In ever-sacred memory of
Jonas Wrybrook, knight. Of this parish
who departed this life suddenly
June 10, 1748.
Aged 69.
His end was—Peace.

“Enoch,” said I, “you will note ‘he died suddenly’ and also that ‘his end was peace’! Here is cynicism that chills me. You will take an exact copy of this, word for word.”

“And now, sir,” said the sexton, “if you’ll just drop Sir Jonas down to me, I’ll poke ’im back wi’ the rest of ’imself where ’e belongs.”

“On the contrary,” I answered, “I must retain possession of this poor relic until I——”

“Oh, but ye can’t do that, sir, no, no! Ye mustn’t go carting bits o’ folks away; ’twouldn’t be dacent—being like body snatching, bone b’ bone and ——”

“I shall also require the loan of your neckerchief.”

“Eh? Oh! But, love me eyes—what for?”

“To shroud Sir Jonas from prying eyes. And for the use of your neckerchief I shall pay you three guineas—here they are.”

“Eh? Guineas? Sir, did I ’ear you correct?”

“Catch them!” said I; the sexton did, and so eagerly that he nearly dropped them; then, having stared at them, rung and bit them, he thrust them hurriedly into breeches pocket, whipped off his somewhat soiled neckcloth, and passed it up to me, saying:

“Lord love ye, sir, you can ’ave all the rest o’ Sir Jonas if ye will.”

“Thank you,” I answered gravely, “this will be all I require of him.”

And thus it befell that with the skull of a murdered man, neatly tied up, dangling from one hand and my books beneath his other arm, my man Enoch followed me out of St. Sepulchre’s churchyard.

CHAPTER II

Introduces the Essential Feminine

More than two months had elapsed since the remarkable and somewhat gruesome incident I have so briefly recorded, though I trust with convincing vividness of detail, in the preceding chapter; and now in this fine evening of early June I sat before the open window of my chambers, gazing forth upon the peace and reposeful dignity of stately old Lincoln's Inn. There sat I, in high-backed cushioned chair, myself peaceful as this ancient inn, little dreaming how soon this gentle serenity was to be disrupted. Indeed, I was, that evening, in a particularly serene frame of mind and bodily content, for Jules, my peerless chef, had contrived to excel even himself, to my wonder, as I had troubled myself to inform him.

Now as I reclined in this drowsy satisfaction my pensive glance was attracted by three several objects approaching across the square, namely: a low-crowned, wide-brimmed, shaggy hat, a stout, knobbed stick, and a pair of glistening top boots; I observed also trim cord breeches, waistcoat of scarlet, and a blue coat adorned by eight winking, gleaming buttons, though not one of them half so bright as the eyes that, roving here and there, presently met mine. I beckoned; the eyes twinkled, while knobbed stick touched hatbrim respectfully.

Thus it was, and for the second time, that Jasper Shrig, of Bow Street, came striding into my life, this quaint-spoken, placid-seeming man who was to ruffle the leaves of my existence like a fiercely blusterous east wind.

"Well?" I enquired when, our greeting over, he was seated opposite to me with bottles and glasses upon the small table between us. "Well, Shrig, what news of this singularly horrid murder committed so many years ago; what have you to tell me?"

As if for answer, he groped in one of his many pockets, extracted therefrom a large, bulky pocketbook whence he produced a long screw of paper from which and with a care best described as "tender" he unwrapped that most repulsive object and horrid exhibit—the rusty nail, which he laid upon the table.

"Murder . . . by . . . Nail!" quoth he, beaming down upon this odious thing as if it had been some extremely rare and lovely object. "Mr.

Brandonleigh, I thought as I had met Wiciousness in every kind and sort o' shape till you was so werry o-bliging as to bring me this here rusty sap-rise. Nails, sir, is noo in my experience, and consequently I have took this Wrybrook Case to my werry H.E.A.R.T.—'eart, sir."

"Then you have begun your investigations?"

"Sir, I have set limbs o' The Law hard at it in many and warious directions, and not in wain, sir; the results is—promising."

"Meaning you have made some discovery?"

"Ar!" he nodded, touching that dreadful rusty thing with caressing finger. "If the deductions as I've drawed from evidence received is correct—the party as drove this here spike into a poor gentleman's tibby or, as you might say, nob, sir, is still alive and kicking."

"Alive?" I repeated. "Dear me, it seems quite incredible, for Sir Jonas Wrybrook was buried in 'forty-eight! Shrig, you astonish me."

"Sir, this is a-going to be a ass-tonishing case!"

"He must be amazingly old, the murderer?"

"Ninety years of age pre-cisely, sir, being ax-ackly twenty summers turned when the fact was committed."

"A mere boy!" I exclaimed. "Are you certain of your facts?"

"Mr. B., sir, I am! Wrybrook being a oncommon-ish sort o' monniker has made it pretty simple—so far!"

"A boy of twenty! And such—hideous crime!"

"Werry true, sir. Murder by Nail needs a werry cool and determin-ated effort!"

"Yes, yes, indeed!" said I, shuddering. "Strong, steady hands, nerves of steel, an—inhuman soul! He must have been a monster, Shrig, a fiend in human guise, or—a maniac, a lunatic!"

"Not a loon-atic, sir—no! Here was a Capital Act as called for Intellect vith a Capital I, a pro-digious sharp and cunning mind. And I shouldn't go for to describe her as a monster neether, for as——"

"Her?" I ejaculated, starting forward in my chair. "Great, good heavens, Shrig, you cannot, you do not mean such frightful crime could possibly be wrought by the hand of a woman! No, no, you cannot suggest such ghastly thing."

"Not me, sir—the Bible! 'Tis Holy Writ as suggests same."

"What has the Bible to do with it, or——"

"Sir, if you have pee-rused the Scripters you'll mind as there was a lady performed on a unfort'nate gent by means of hammer and nail, in a tent. I hope you remember your Bible as you should ought."

"Of course, now you mention it—Jael and Sisera. But that took place thousands of years ago and the circumstances——"

"And this, sir, no more than seventy. Vich goes to prove most convincing as Huming Natur' is pretty much the same now as then. Ar! Windictiveness still goeth up and down this poor old world, seeking oom it may devour—agin the peace of our Liege Lord the King and with your humble servant J. Shrig doing his best, day by day, to circumwent and conflummerate same, as in dooty bound, sir, dooty bound."

"But, Shrig—a woman! What grounds have you, what facts to believe any woman capable of such very terrible deed?"

"First, Mr. B., sir, let's look fax square in the blinkers, so fur as they go, and make the best on 'em. Fact Number Vun: Sir Jonas Wrybrook deeceasing as per tombstone register June ten, seventeen forty-eight, aged sixty-nine, is therefore a oldish man. Fact Number Two: Sir Jonas Wrybrook is a Knight and, from information received, a werry rich gent into the bargain. Fact Number Three: Sir J. W., aforesaid, being a vidower, has vun only son Henry. Fact Number Four: A year afore his death Sir J. W., though old enough to know better, goes and contracts marriage, May two, seventeen forty-seven, along of a female party of nineteen summers named Marianne Marbury, and by accounts a werry lovely and beautiful young party too! Fact Number Five: Sir J. W., having kicked son Henry out o' doors, goes in werry strong for Fashion and High Life along of his handsome young spouse, so much so that his lady becomes famous for her beauty at Court and a toast of every club, coffee-house, sportsman, and rakehell in Town and out."

"So!" quoth I. "The old, old story!"

"Ar! And in the Bible again, sir, only t'other road about, parties consarned being King David and a lovely young spouse so werry fond of bathing herself that she's been called Bath-she-ba ever since."

"Oh?" quoth I.

"Ar!" nodded Shrig. "And a werry good name too!"

"Then you suggest this was a crime of hot passion?"

"No, sir, of Cold Greed, for Hot Passion, him and her, can always hop the perch, cut their stick, and run off together and nobody the vorse—except, maybe, the Hot Passioneers themselves. Ah, but—Cold Greed, not content wi' passion alone, must have ease and luxury too and consequently clutch gold in hands, or, as you might say, guilty daddles stained by innocent gore. Agreed, sir?"

"By no means, Shrig. No, it seems to me far more likely such dreadful crime was the act of a desperate man—a fanatic lover wild with jealousy, for instance."

"It—might be," he answered, shaking his round head, "though Holy Writ tells wersey-wicey, and no more it don't seem like a male crime—no, not as I sees it in my fancy and wentures to suppose, from con-cloosions drawed, just how it was done."

"Then pray tell me, Jasper, how you do suppose and imagine it." Jasper Shrig took up that horribly corroded piece of iron, rusted as it was by more dreadful means than mere time, and sat for a long moment twisting and turning it this way and that, gazing hard at it the while, very steadfastly, almost indeed as if seeking inspiration from its sight and contact, and when at last he spoke it was in deep, hoarse murmur:

"Now if this here old nail could talk it might say summat like this: ' 'Tis a hot, sleepy arternoon and our old gen'leman, Sir J., Spouse Number Vun, is taking his usual nap in a nice shady corner of his gardin and birds a-vistling all about him werry bootiful and pretty 'til, all on a sudden, they shuts their little beaks and opens their little ogles as Spouse Number Two, the lovely young wife, comes a-creeping so werry soft and cautious and her two pretty daddles hid behind her back. Nearer she steals—and nearer till she can peep down into her husband's sleeping face, looking for the exact and only spot for it. She bends over him so close and loving-like that the little birds, bless their small, innocent hearts, think as she's a-going to vake him by a kiss—but no! In her left hand she hold a long, sharp nail—this here—and in t'other dainty fist she gripes an 'ammer. So, being such a werry cool, determinated young female, she chooses a spot for said nail just afore and above her sleeping partner's left ear, as'll be hidden in the side curls of his vig—she aims and steadies the nail . . . she raises the hammer . . . she strikes a sharp, smart blow . . . another——' "

"Horrible!" I cried.

"Ar!" quoth Shrig, laying the nail down very tenderly. "So werry much so, sir, that they little birds flies off to their nests—and no vonder!"

“Now upon my soul,” I exclaimed, sinking back in my chair and viewing that thing of rust and death with new horror, “you have a distressingly vivid imagination, Jasper Shrig!”

“Howsoever,” sighed he, rolling the grim object into its crumpled screw of paper and replacing it in his pocketbook, “that, or summat o’ the sort, is how I sees it, Mr. B., sir.”

“Though,” I demurred, as I refilled his glass, “it is in reality no more than mere hypothesis, the veriest guess. Have you any more absolute facts?”

“Ar!” he nodded, opening and turning the pages of his notebook. “I writ a few into my little reader here, if you’d care for to hear ’em, sir.”

“Indeed I should, very much.” And so, when he had sipped and deliberated his wine like the connoisseur he is, Shrig referred to his notebook and continued:

“Fact Number Six: On November two, seventeen hundred and fifty, being two years and five months arter Sir J. W.’s decease, his blooming young vidow and now famous beauty takes and marries a heavy-toddling sportsman and friend o’ Royalty, a reg’lar dasher named Sir Thomas Polgarth o’ Trelant, in Cornwall, barrownet, and for a time they keep a werry noble establishment in Town until all at vunce, and for reasons not yet in evidence, they sell up and depart for Sir T.’s estates in the Vest Country never to come back no more. Fact Number Seven: Henry Wrybrook, son o’ Sir Jonas, having been cast off by his pa, as aforesaid, and vithout a farden, takes to paint and——”

“To what, Shrig?”

“Paint, sir, brushes—picters and so on, and don’t make much of a go of it. Hows’ever, in seventeen ninety-seven he has a go at matrimony, ’spousing Ellen Travis, spinster, and in doo season, seventeen ninety-eight, they beget a child, o’ the female specie, baptized Wirginia, and this, Mr. B., sir, is axackly where you come into it.”

Now at this most surprising, not to say alarming, assertion I started so violently as to slop my wine over myself to my no little annoyance; so that it was with some acerbity that I now demanded of Shrig precisely what he meant and how I could possibly be even remotely concerned in this quite sordid affair. He beamed upon me until I had done, then, instead of answering my question, continued, quoting from his notes:

“Fact Number Eight: Ellen, beloved vife of Henry Wrybrook, departed this life May two, eighteen oh two.”

“Shrig, I await your reply to my enquiry—how am I concerned?”

“Fact Number Nine: In ever-loving memory of my dear father, Henry Wrybrook, who died March twelve, eighteen hundred and sixteen. And, sir—there y’are!”

“Heavens above!” I exclaimed pettishly. “What is all this confounding rigmarole?”

“Sir, I am now a-leading of you to the crowning fact—being as this here young female party is also a poor, hard-working, lonesome orphan——”

“Which female? Who and what?” I demanded.

“Wirginia Wrybrook, sir.”

“I still fail utterly to see how I am concerned——”

“You ain’t, sir—yet! But I cherish a H.O.P.E., hope, wrote very large, as you may be. For—Fact Number Ten: Wirginia Wrybrook, being granddaughter to Sir Jonas, is therefore heiress to all and everything as Sir J. died possessed of—in tail—if she can prove same. But such proving costs money, and this is how you come in—I hope!

“And I am bold so to hope because, casting my ogles back over the years into the past, I wentures to think as you, being so amazing rich, may be indooced thereto, for sake o’ the past and because—’tis me as axes you.”

“Then do not, Shrig, indeed I beg you will not. It is all too hideously fantastic! A very hateful, extremely ghastly business, a nightmare horror!”

“Them, sir, is the only vords for it! So, the question I now axes you, Mr. Brandonleigh, is—what are you a-going to do about it?”

“Who—me?” I exclaimed, heedless of grammar in my shocked amazement. “Now what can you possibly mean? How on earth am I involved?”

“You ain’t, sir, nary a bit, not a jot nor yet a tittle—except as a huming being, a man o’ wealth, a gent o’ leisure, and a Englishman as, so being, naturally rises to demand fair play—and—she being a lorn orphan, a lonesome miss, a friendless young party, and impoverished fee-male as is forced to vork precious hard for her daily crust, and being only a veak ooman in this here wale o’ sorrow, and no backers to aid nor yet to comfort, is never likely to come by her rights—and that’s all, Mr. Brandonleigh.”

“Indeed,” said I, “you make it sound a prodigious great deal. Shrig, you wax eloquent! But how does all this affect me? What would you have me

do, pray?"

"Give this here aforesaid young lady a leg-up in the matter, sir."

"Tut-tut, Jasper!" I murmured reprovingly. "To ears less chaste than mine your suggestion might sound almost indelicate! Do you propose I should afford the young lady financial aid?"

"Ay, I do, sir. For if this here case turns out as, from information received and deductions drawed, I'm pretty sure it may, than Miss Wirginia Wrybrook will be heiress to a werry pretty fortun'—but—'twill take money to prove her right and dispossess present holders in court o' law, possession being, as they say, nine p'ints o' the law. So, Mr. Brandonleigh, seeing as this here young fee-male party has no means and no influence nowhere, I make bold to ax your ass-istance, and unbeknown to her, on her behalf. And I ax it, sir, for her sake and for—old times' sake."

"Old times!" I repeated. "Ah, Jasper, there you make an appeal impossible to resist. I feel myself too greatly your debtor and always shall. So you may count upon my help and assistance to the extremest limit."

"Ah!" quoth he, beaming and rubbing the knees of his cord breeches. "I thought as how I might, sir. 'To the extremest limit,' says you. Werry handsome indeed, sir, says I. And this here young party, Miss Wirginia Wrybrook, should ought to be werry grateful, I'm sure—leastways, I—think so."

"You appear strangely interested in this young lady, Shrig."

"Eh? The lady? Oh, ah, to be sure—but 'tis this case as I've fell in love vith—up to my werry ogles! Dog bite me, Mr. Brandonleigh, I've never handled sich a case as this here, and I've handled a goodish few! Ah, but this—Murder . . . by . . . Nail, and nigh seventy year ago! This, by Goles, shall be a case as beats 'em all."

"It would certainly appear to be very strange and extremely cold-blooded, Shrig! But pray tell me, what is she like, this young person whom I am pledged to help?"

"A poor, meek young party, sir, werry shy indeed and timid—no sperrit, none of the Old Nick about her from top to toe—leastways, not apparent to the casual optic, vich can't be expected, con-sidering as how a wisiting governess ain't expected to have and therefore don't dare, poor creetur."

"One presumes the life of a demure governess cannot be altogether a gay one, Shrig."

“Sir, from personal obserwation I can tell you as it ain’t a dillying and dallying in flowery gardins nor yet on beds o’ roses.”

“And what is she like in person, Shrig, her general appearance and manner?”

“Sir, I can’t hardly pro-nounce.”

“I mean, is she plain, pretty, or handsome, tall or short, dark or fair?”

“Since you ax so p’inted I should answer—as she’s neether vun nor t’other but a bit of all.”

“That is no answer, Shrig.”

“No more it ain’t, sir, for d’ye see, she’s vun o’ these young misses as ain’t got no description. Hows’ever,” quoth he, working a large silver watch out of some pocket in his middle regions, “in about six and a half minutes, say seven, say ten, her being o’ the fee-male specie, you’ll be able to judge for yourself, sir—in ten minutes or thereabouts she’ll be here and——”

“Here?” I ejaculated, starting violently in my chair. “Do you mean she is actually coming . . . into my chambers where I never permit . . . and I in my slippers! And this dreadful coat! And you know my aversion to the sex! No, she must not . . . impossible . . . she cannot! Shrig, I tell you she must not . . . I object to all . . . young persons.”

“Hows’ever, Mr. Brandonleigh, sir, here she’ll be in about ten——”

“Preposterous!” I exclaimed in great perturbation, and, leaping at the bell rope, I tugged it violently. I also cried aloud for my man Enoch . . . yet all too late, for at this juncture I heard a sudden, though subdued, knocking at the outer door of my chambers. I scowled at Shrig, at my shabby coat and slippers, then reseated myself as Enoch opened the door to goggle at me, glance oddly at Shrig, and announce in tone as odd:

“A . . . lady, sir . . . young lady, sir . . . Miss Virginia Wrybrook.” Having said which, he vanished and . . . I saw her.

A tallish, somewhat shapeless young person and very plainly attired from deep poke bonnet, its grim austerity unrelieved by flower or feather, to slim, sandalled feet; a meekly plain young person and much too colourless except for her eyes of an almost startling blue in contrast with her tight-drawn, night-black hair; indeed an extremely ordinary young person, to be seen and forgotten, I thought, as with quick, bobbing curtsey she glided swiftly forward and perched herself somewhat awkwardly upon the chair

Shrig had placed for her while I rose to bow, then, remembering my slippers, sat down again almost as hurriedly as she had done.

"Miss Wrybrook, ma'm," began Shrig, beaming down upon her and gesturing towards me, "here you behold a gen'leman o' great leesure and greater fortun', though with an H.E.A.R.T., 'eart, ma'm, ekal to both, as is a-going to use all three to right the wronged, champeen the defenceless, and aid the forlorn and fatherless—yourself, Miss Wirginia."

Miss Wrybrook knit her slim, low-arching brows in puzzlement, and no wonder, thought I; she glanced towards me, gazed on Shrig, and said in small, soft voice:

"Sir, I fear I don't comprehend."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "it would be better if you introduced us, Shrig."

"Miss Wirginny, ma'm," said he, beaming from one to other of us, "on my left you observe sitting—no, standing—Mr. Edward Brandonleigh. Mr. B., sir, on my right, also now standing, you sees Miss Wirginny Wrybrook." I bowed and did it very awkwardly, being horribly conscious of my ridiculous slippers and old coat; Miss Wrybrook sank in a low and gracious curtsey, while on her lips, which I now observed to be ruddy, generously full, and well shaped, I glimpsed that sort of smile which I believe is called fleeting.

"So now, Miss Wirginny, ma'm," Shrig continued, "this here kind gen'leman aforesaid is a-going to ass-ist you in this here case by dipping werry deep into his purse on your behalf and use his influence for your advantage and be-hoof, ma'm."

Miss Wrybrook's meek head sank until the deep brim of her bonnet hid all her face except smooth, round chin and ruddy lips that now parted to ask shyly:

"Oh, but why should he, Mr. Shrig, if you please?"

Shrig seemed to ponder this question, while I watched this chin which, though smoothly soft and round, was firm and womanly, while the shapely ruddy lips, for all their gentleness, had in their curves such expression of resolution as caused me no little surprise and therewith awoke my interest; and now they parted again to murmur softly:

"Mr. Shrig, I await your answer."

"Ma'm," said he, "I think Mr. Brandonleigh hisself can tell you better ____"

“No, no, Shrig,” said I, “pray continue.”

“Then, Miss Wirginny, since you ax me so p’inted I’ll tell you—’tis all along o’ Mr. B.’s ’eart being as big as the dome o’ St. Paul’s, or werry near.”

Here the ruddy lips, and with no hint of smile or levity, articulated the two words:

“Poor gentleman!”

Shrig darted a quick glance at the bonnet, but he continued:

“Ma’m, in this here wale o’ sorrow and sin there’s some folk born vith a nat’ral love for their feller sufferers—result: ass-istance and dee-wotion to all in need! There’s others born nat’rally windictive—result: murder and general williany! And ’tis to down Murder and apprehend Williany as Mr. B. is a-going to ass-ist you.”

“And, oh, if you please,” she murmured, keeping her gaze downbent to the mittened hands in her lap that seemed clasping each other so nervously, “what does the . . . gentleman expect in return for his outlay and trouble?”

Shrig’s astonishment was so comical that I had much ado to prevent myself laughing outright.

“Eh—eh, ma’m?” he stammered. “Mr. Eddard Brandonleigh—expect ——?”

“Yes, Mr. Shrig, oh yes—indeed you should know that people seldom do anything for nothing in this cruel world, sir, especially any man for any woman who is young and poor and lonely!”

Shrig’s instant recovery was masterly.

“Miss Wirginny,” quoth he, beaming down on the bonnet, “your own self has said it! ’Tis pre-cisely because you are all as you describe so werry acc-rate, and because Mr. B. is all as I describe him, that he is a-going to see you come by your rights and Williany dooly confounded, and all for the J.O.Y.—j’y of it. And how d’ye say to this now, ma’m?”

And the lips made answer instantly, softly as ever, yet with the utmost finality:

“NO!”

Jasper Shrig started, much as if a mouse had roared at him; his round eyes grew rounder; he rubbed square chin, ruffled his short, spiky hair, and,

gazing thus upon the bonnet, the lips, and the chin, sat back in his chair and, pursing shaven lips as if about to whistle, spoke instead:

"Lady . . . young ma'm, did my y-ears deceive me or did I——"

"You heard me say 'no,' Mr. Shrig. And I say it again—no and no!"

"Miss Wirginia, if you please, hold hard, ma'm, for this here is fair flying in the werry phiz or, as you might say, face o' Prowidence, oh, indeed it is! So take a werry deep breath, ma'm, count a dozen, and think most extreme pro-found and—tell me again."

The bonnet was lifted so suddenly that I found myself gazing into wide, bright eyes that were gazing as directly into mine, though she continued to address Shrig:

"Though poor, I am above charity, Mr. Shrig, and, being a woman, cannot accept help from gentlemen, especially strange ones. Ever since I . . . was left alone I have fought my own battles and contrived to live by my own efforts as I always shall while I have strength, and when not I hope I may die. You will please tell all this to your Mr. Brandonleigh, such a very silent, grand gentleman." Here her wide blue gaze swept me from head to villainous slippers and back again ere she rose and turned to the speechless Shrig. "You may also convey my very humble gratitude for any offers of help he may have made on my behalf, when a little more talkative, but which I now take leave to as humbly decline. Mr. Shrig, I now bid you good-day and good-bye."

Then, with the quick, gliding movement, she crossed to the door, curtseyed demurely to the empty space between us, and so was gone, leaving Shrig staring round-eyed on me and myself smiling on him.

"Well, Jasper?" I enquired. "What now, pray?" He ruffled his bristly hair again, stretched out his booted legs, shook his head at them, and answered softly:

"Blow my dickey! Sir, this here is a partickler rum go, this is! Ar, conflummeration is the only vord for it! Here she sits, so meek as a mouse, as a bleating lamb, as a cooing dove—and yet! Mr. Brandonleigh, sir, I tell you as Prowidence may strike me everlasting blue if I ever clapped my peepers, my dee-looded ogles, sir, on sich a ass-tonishing, onexpected young party!"

"Jasper," said I, smiling, "to use your own phrase: 'unexpected' is the only word for it!"

"And yet, sir, a properer vord might be—wixenish!"

“No, oh dear, no! If you desire another epithet I should suggest ‘tantalizing.’ Is she a demure miss all coyly timid virginity or a scheming woman? Is she engagingly good or enticingly bad or, again, merely indifferent? However, she is, beyond all doubt or cavil, The Essential Feminine!”

CHAPTER III

Introduces Mr. Vokes

A WEEK or so had elapsed when the even tenor of my existence was disrupted by the second of those incidents which were to compel me to the final abandonment of my cherished hermitlike existence, leading me again into the hurly-burly of Life, through the grim shadow of Death, to that which I had never hoped to realize.

And this incident befell me in the following strange and wholly unexpected manner.

The hour was approximately two-thirty in the afternoon, and, having partaken of my solitary midday meal with my usual leisured enjoyment, I was reclining at ease in that dreamy content habitual with me at this hour, when my pleasing somnolence was rudely dispelled by a knocking on the door which, shocking me to a complete and most unwelcome wakefulness, filled me also with an amazed annoyance since my man Enoch is, of course, fully aware I hold this hour sacred from all and any least interruption.

Therefore, closing my eyes again, I cried out, and in no small indignation:

"Go away, Enoch! How dare you trouble me? Go away at once!" But to my growing anger and astonishment, I heard the door open and, troubling to glance thither, I saw Enoch goggling at me.

"A gentleman to see you, sir, very important—name of Vokes."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "You know perfectly well that I never am to be disturbed at this hour. Begone—instantly."

"But, sir, this young gentleman——" Enoch was drawn suddenly backward, set aside, and in his place stood an unpleasantly brawny young man who, scowling on me and round about, demanded harshly:

"Where is she? What have you done with her? Speak up and no gammon, now!" Closing the door with violence, he leaned his broad back against it and scowled on me, a square-faced, blunt-featured, wholly detestable young man.

"If," said I, sitting up in my armchair, "you will have the kind intelligence to inform me whom you mean——"

"Yah!" he exclaimed, with such coarse vehemence that I could not refrain from starting. "You know who I mean! Hookey Walker! Oh yes! Who the devil should I mean but Miss Virgie . . . Virginia . . . Miss Wrybrook? Well, what have you done with her? Where is she? Out with it!"

"My good young man——"

"Cut that! I ain't yours, not by a long sight, and I ain't particular good. So now, let's have it plain—where's Miss Virginia?"

"I have not the remotest idea. And let me say that I resent your base suggestion as strongly as your air and behaviour. I know nothing whatever as to the whereabouts of the young person you name. Now you may depart."

Instead of so doing, this most objectionable young man clenched two formidable fists, set his arms akimbo, and glared down on me with a white-toothed grin of such hideous ferocity that instinctively I reached for the bell rope.

"No!" he growled. "Don't call your man or I'll have to knock him down."

"Well," I enquired, leaning back in my chair, "what now?"

"You're Mr. Edward Brandonleigh, eh?"

"I am."

"And you know nothing of Miss Virginia?"

"Precisely."

"That means 'no'—does it?"

"It does."

"Ah, well, it's taken my friend Mike nigh two weeks to find out your name, where you lived, and—that exactly two weeks ago Miss Virginia came here. Do you deny she did?"

"Oh no."

"Yet you tell me as you don't know anything about her."

"Nor do I, except——"

"Ah, 'except' now, is it? Well now, Mr. cursed Brandonleigh, I say you're a liar, but you're a liar that's going to tell me the truth——"

"I have, and I am doing so."

"Or," he continued, scowling blacker than ever, "I'm going to pound it out o' you wi' these!" And he showed me two fists that seemed all knuckles.

To be faced thus suddenly with actual bodily violence was for me an experience so peculiar and altogether novel that for the moment I felt entirely at a loss how to cope with such a preposterous situation, that for one brief instant I even entertained a wild notion of snatching up the poker, but, checking this rash and very undignified impulse, I summoned all my resolution and fronted the brutal menace of this revoltingly powerful young man with, I am happy to think, an equable mien and unshakable serenity.

"Mr. Vokes," said I, "if this indeed is your name, were I truly the vile scoundrel you evidently deem me, I should merit far more than a mere pounding from an honest man's fists, for honest I believe you and well-meaning, though grievously mistaken. When Miss Virginia Wrybrook came here she did so at the invitation not of myself but of a Mr. Shrig with whom she found me and——"

"What—Jasper Shrig o' Bow Street?"

"The same," I answered. "He is an old acquaintance—I might even describe him as a friend of mine."

The knuckled fists unclenched themselves; the blunt features assumed an expression of such painful, though comical, embarrassment that, quelling an impulse to smile, I bade Mr. Vokes to be seated, whereupon he snatched off the hat he had worn cocked to such defiant angle—and at me, as it were—and now stood staring down into it, so completely at a loss and ill at ease that when at last he spoke it was in a voice as shaken and altered as his look:

"I'm always . . . blundering, it seems . . . so if this is another of 'em, I can only ask your pardon and take myself off; the sooner the better."

"Wait!" said I, as he turned towards the door. "I apprehend that Miss Wrybrook is a friend of yours?"

"A . . . very dear friend, sir," he answered, shaking his head rather forlornly; "as dear a friend as the distance betwixt us will allow. . . . You see, she is a lady, and I am . . . only myself!"

Now he said this with such look and a humility so perfectly sincere that I found myself actually beginning to like the fellow.

"Mr. Vokes," said I, beckoning him to be seated nearer to me, "am I to understand from your so evident and somewhat violent anxiety that Miss

Wrybrook has disappeared?"

"Yes, sir, that's it! She left Ma's fourteen days ago, and not a word, not a single line from her since. She left a note for Ma telling her not to worry, that she'd gone to investigate this tale o' murder and her rightful heritage."

"So she told you this dreadful story?"

"Yes, sir, she talked it over with Ma and Mike and me without mentioning any names o' people and places, saying as Shrig had warned her not to, and a wild black business it sounds, as I says to Ma, and Ma agreed, though too long ago to matter now, and small chance of any heritage for Miss Virgie after all these years, as I tells Ma."

"Ma?" I enquired. "Is she your mother?"

"No such luck, sir! I'm an orphan and always was—dragged up anyhow, and always a precious lonesome chap till I found Ma. Ma's my landlady, but I call her Ma, like everyone else does."

"From which," said I, "one may argue that she is a good, kindly person."

"She's all that and more, ah, by George, she is!" he answered fervently. "There's nobody like Ma—there never was! She's everybody's mother and always helping someone or other, though so precious busy on her own account and a hard job she has of it sometimes."

"You make her sound a quite interesting person. Pray, what is her name?"

"Mrs. Harriet Dolittle, which is wrong, for she does an uncommon lot all day and every day, what with running a boardinghouse singlehanded—only little Susan to help. But the question that's worrying her and me is—what's become o' Miss Virginia? This is what brought me to you, Mr. Brandonleigh . . . and . . . if I showed a bit rough-like at first, I ask you to excuse it by reason of our anxiety. A fortnight and no word or sign of her! Sir, fourteen days is a longish time . . . anything, ah . . . lots o' things might happen to her in fourteen days, which God forbid!"

"You say she left Mrs. Dolittle word that she had gone to investigate this strange and quite horrid old murder?"

"Yes, sir. And what's troubling me is this—murder begets murder, and what's happened once, so long ago, might happen again—nowadays! 'Tis a dread as I'm keeping to myself so far, and, sir, 'tis a dread as grows on me daily, by the hour!"

Now remarking this young man's furrowed brow, troubled eyes, and restless motions of powerful hands, I felt his gnawing anxiety begin to obtrude itself upon my own leisured ease and comfort in a manner that profoundly surprised and, at the same time, irritated me. For, after all, he was most surely nothing to me, and, moreover, beyond my chance discovery of the skull, I had no least interest in this sordid affair and was absolutely determined to remain aloof, remote, and completely immune from any further contact with this case or people concerned, with the possible exception of Shrig. Thus, I told myself, the woes of this troublesome young man and welfare of this meek-faced, headstrong young miss were, and could be, no possible concern of mine.

These ruminations were suddenly dispelled by the young man in question saying rather wildly, and in voice I can only describe as groaning:

"Oh . . . God help her! At this very moment—yes, as we sit here, she may be in some foul danger! She may be hurt or . . . lying dead! What can be done—what, sir, what?"

And, to my own vast astonishment, I heard myself answer:

"We must begin a search for her immediately."

"We?" he repeated. "Ha, sir, d'ye mean as you'll help, will you, sir, will you?"

And instead of saying "No," as cold Reason dictated, I replied, as hot Impulse compelled:

"Of course. Certainly. No more time should be lost—we must start enquiries at once!"

"Yes, sir—yes, indeed!" cried he, leaping afoot. "I'm ready now." Here, with wild, despairing gesture very youthful and ungoverned, he threw wide his long arms and, looking down on me with haggard eyes, demanded: "Ah, but how, sir, how? Where in the wide world must we begin to search?"

"In Cornwall, of course!" I answered rising. "We must follow her."

"Follow her? Cornwall?" he repeated, frowning suddenly. "Why, then, you know . . . ha, you knew all along where she is?"

"No!" I retorted, frowning also. "I can merely surmise. All I know is, according to Shrig, that Sir Wilfred Polgarth's estate, called Trelant, lies somewhere between Truro and Land's End. I deem it very probable your Miss Virginia may be found thereabout."

“Then,” cried this impetuous young man, “we’ll go soon as possible—the night mail—or leastways I shall.”

“No,” said I, “we shall go tomorrow in my light travelling carriage; it will be much faster, especially with my fellow Enoch riding ahead to order relays of post horses. Meanwhile I desire the favour of a word or so with Mrs. Dolittle and a glance at Miss Wrybrook’s letter, if possible.”

“Certainly, sir, nothing easier—though I expect she’ll be up to her eyes and elbows in flour.”

“Flour or flowers?” I enquired.

“Flour, sir—puddings, pies, and so on; Ma bakes today.”

“Then perhaps I had better defer my visit.”

“No, no, sir, oh no. Ma won’t mind if you don’t. Ma’s always busy at summat or other but always ready to listen and help. Oh, let’s go now—please!”

So I rang for Enoch to induct me into my boots, waistcoat, coat, etc., and thereafter order my light town carriage to the door; and thus very soon, in company with Mr. Vokes, had myself transported whither he directed.

To a tall, grim house in a small, grim street in the vicinity of Eastchepe, the door of which house, yielding to the hand of Mr. Vokes, admitted us to a somewhat dingy hall adorned with a dim mirror, a dejected fern languishing in a highly polished brass pot, and a long clothes rack bristling with stags’ horns whence dangled several coats, shawls, surtouts, topped by hats at different angles. Among these Mr. Vokes clapped his own, raising his voice in cheery bellow:

“Ma! Oho—Ma!” And from the profundities below another and distant voice answered:

“Kitchen, Eustace!”

“Eustace?” I enquired. Mr. Vokes eyed me askance, swallowed fiercely, and growled in sullen answer:

“Yes—but everyone, except Ma, calls me ‘Bill’—I make ’em! This way, sir, follow me.”

Along a passage, down a gloomy and precipitous stair, along another passage and into a wide kitchen, very trim and orderly, where a woman who seemed all apron, elbows, and mobcap was busied at a large table with a ponderous rolling pin and, as Mr. Vokes had foretold, extremely floury. A

tallish woman, sharp of feature and general outline, particularly as to knuckles, nose, and chin, all of which were besmudged with flour, so that a somewhat unprepossessing person I deemed her—until she looked at me and spoke.

"Ma," quoth Mr. Vokes, "this is—the gentleman!"

"Oh?" she murmured, and glanced at me.

"Ma—Mr. Edward Brandonleigh!"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, and turned to look at me. Eyes large and brown, very keenly bright, and yet that gave me the idea they were looking not for the worst but the very best in me—and finding it; a voice unexpectedly refined and sweetly modulated:

"Well now, Eustace, he don't look the salacious villain, the lascivious satyr we feared."

"No, Ma, he don't."

"On the contrary, Eustace, my dear, he shows like a gentleman, and therefore a man and honourable."

"Madam," said I, bowing, "pray believe it."

"Why, then, take a chair, Mr. Brandonleigh, and a cup o' tea so soon as the kettle——"

At this moment the door swung wide and in upon us paced a slender, youngish gentleman with look of heavy portent, one hand thrust within the bosom of an extremely shabby coat, the other smoothing back wandering locks of his lank black hair. Beholding me, he halted with dramatic suddenness to exclaim:

"What-ho! A stranger within our gates? Fair sir, be welcome, may Fortune kind ever smile upon and cherish thee! Oh, Ma, blest soul and my ever-present help, help thou me now! I have the lines pat at last, sweet Ma, and tripping o' the tongue, five sides, dear soul! List thou, oh, list and hear me!" And forthwith striking an attitude, he mouthed the words:

" 'NOw is the winTAR of our DIScontent made GLORious sumMAR in this sun o' York and all——' "

"Oh, pray, no—not yet, Roddy," said Mrs. Dolittle. "I'm too busy for proper attention, my dear; besides, I've company; come in an hour and I'll hear you with pleasure." The youngish gentleman sighed, did business with his eyes, and answered:

“As thou sayest, Ma, so let it be—within one little hour. Grammercy, sweetest o’ souls, grammercy!” So saying, and after some intricate business with slim legs, this youngish gentleman stalked majestically forth.

“Mr. Rodrick is an actor, sir, as maybe you’ve guessed, and doing better, I’m happy to say. . . . And now for a nice cup or should it be ‘dish’ of tea!” said Mrs. Dolittle, clapping the flour from her bony, though very capable hands. “Ah, surely tea is one o’ the divinest gifts of a beneficent Providence! Bring me the little table from the corner, Eusty.”

“Yes, Ma—only I do wish you wouldn’t bring it down to ‘Eusty.’ Lord knows t’other’s bad enough. So if you could manage to call me ‘Bill’ just now and then, Ma, I’d thankee and be uncommon grateful, that I would!”

“But, my dear, Eustace is a bee-utiful name!”

“Ah, too beautiful to suit me, Ma, or go with a phiz like mine.”

“Fiddlesticks, my dear! Reach me the tea caddy yonder, and if the kettle’s boiling bring it.”

So tea was brewed, and almost before I knew it I was seated at a small table, sipping the beverage and finding it all surprisingly pleasant.

“Mrs. Dolittle,” I began, but ere I might say more a feminine voice called from regions above:

“Oh, Ma, do you spell ‘audacity’ with an O or an A, and how many ESSES, please?” And in her strangely pleasing voice Mrs. Dolittle answered:

“With an A, my dear, and no S.”

“Oh, but, Ma, how ever may one spell the ‘dacity’ part without lots of ESSES?” Mrs. Dolittle spelled the word with a sweet patience, whereafter was murmur of thanks and silence.

“Ma,” said Mr. Vokes, “this gentleman is going to drive me all the way to Cornwall and in his own carriage for speed.”

“Gracious me! But why Cornwall?”

“To search for her . . . Miss Virginia.”

I now explained briefly as possible my reasons for assuming Miss Wrybrook to be in Cornwall, and went on to describe something of the unlovely business from my finding of the skull with its dreadful evidence of

murder and so on to the visit of Mr. Vokes, whereto she listened with an ever-growing interest.

"Horrible!" she exclaimed when I had ended. "And oh, my goodness! That headstrong, wilful child, to dare such wild and desperate venture—and with her eyes wide open to her peril!"

"The epithets 'wilful' and 'headstrong,' " said I, "would seem to describe the young lady's character very aptly, madam."

"Alas, yes, sir! Virginia is truly the sweetest, most lovable, and drattedest headstrong, determinedest girl alive today, I do believe, sir."

"And yet shows so extreme meek—at first glance!" said I.

"Mr. Brandonleigh, she is indeed the meekest-seeming, coyest-looking of creatures—yet with a will of iron, flint, steel, and the cold, calm courage of a . . . a Lord Nelson!"

"Have you known her long, madam?"

"Years, sir, ever since her poor pa died. A true gentleman, sir, an artist who painted indefatigably—pictures nobody ever seemed to buy, or only very occasionally, poor gentleman! Her mother I never knew, died young, I believe, but——"

Once again the door swung wide to admit a feminine creature who swam in upon us, all billowy petticoats, bonnet, and lacy fal-lals, crying in pleading tones:

"A pin, Ma, a pin for the love o' modesty; the string broke and they—— Oh, merciful heavens—men! A strange gentleman too!" and, wailing, she clutched herself and, turning, sped away.

"Pin indeed!" snorted Mrs. Dolittle. "I do believe Arabella depends entirely on pins—from head to foot. She's always coming apart somewhere or other. . . . Oh, there's Michael!" she exclaimed as from above came a reverberating bang of the front door and thereafter a throaty tenor voice:

"Whirroo, Ma acuishla! Ma, mavourneen, here's your own Moike to bless ye wid his presence and something better!"

A patter of feet upon the stair, feet that tripped along the passage—and into the kitchen danced an extremely boisterous person, a round-faced, bright-eyed, red-haired, plumpish person who tossed his arms and whistled shrilly, keeping in time with his feet in what I believe is called "heel and

toe"—a dashing, horsy fellow in garments loud of pattern and boisterous as himself.

"Whirroo!" he exclaimed. "Here's mesilf, me darlint, come loike the blessed prodigal t'other way about, for me pockets are loined wi' the rhino! The blissed horses . . . a sixty-to-wan chance . . . and won ut, so I did; faith, Oi couldn't lose!"

"Which is a great wonder, Michael!"

"B' the powers and so 'tis, Ma! I'll be able to pay off phwat I'm owing ye for back rint, me darlint—some of it."

"Which will be another wonder, my dear. But don't you see we have company? Sir, this is Michael O'Dowd."

"Indade and Oi do, Ma—'tis Misther Brandonleigh himself! The top o' the day t' ye, sorr. Ye don't know me, but 'tis mesilf knows your honour, your front, your back, your face, your feet, the clothes ye wear, the horses ye roide so seldom, the curricle ye droive, the carriages ye're driven in, your chambers in the Timple, your lordly mansion in Mayfair where nobody lives but your caretakers Sam Brown and his woife Bess. Oho, Oi know all about ye, Misther Brandonleigh, and a bit more then!"

"Indeed?" said I, allowing myself to manifest some of the abhorrence with which this person inspired me.

"Yis and indade, sorr!" he answered, no whit abashed. "I've had me twinklers on ye pretty often o' late, for when not following the gee-gees, sir, the kingly sport so it is, I'm the bhoy for jealous husbands and suspicious woives! Shure and bedad 'tis mesilf can see as far through a brick wall as most and further than some, aha, and the nose for a cold scint better than any bloodhound. 'Tis mesilf smelt ye out, sorr, ran ye t' earth, and b' the powers—here y' are!"

"And here's your tea, Michael," said Mrs. Dolittle, cutting short this wearisome tirade.

"Tea is ut now, me darlint? Faith and I'll down ut to the swate face o' ye, and to do ye more honour I'll lace ut wi' a drop o' the craythur, so I will." And, whipping out a small bottle commonly known as a "pocket pistol," he uncorked it, topped his tea with spirit, and flourished the bottle aloft, crying:

"Will anyone join me now? Will you, sir?"

"Thank you—no!" I answered shortly. And now, while this fellow checked his verbosity to drink, Mr. Vokes seized the chance to speak,

voicing what was in my own mind:

"Ma, Mr. Brandonleigh came hoping as you might show him Miss Virginia's note."

"Eh? Virginia?" quoth O'Dowd, smiting himself on the breast. " 'Tis mesilf ye'll be wanting to nose her out, the pretty craythur! Ay, whereiver she is, Moike's the bhoy to nose her out—living or dead."

"Drink your tea, Michael!" said Mrs. Dolittle, with look and gesture so compelling that this vociferous fellow subsided awhile.

"Mr. Brandonleigh," said she, turning to me, "I'll be glad to let you read it if it will anyways help. 'Tis in my workbox, Eusty, yonder; please get it."

"Ma, say 'Bill' and I will."

"Gracious, Eustace—don't make rhymes at me! My workbox, please—Bill!" It was brought instantly, and therefrom Mrs. Dolittle produced the note in question, which she unfolded and passed to me, and I saw these words written in fine, bold script:

> My dearest, don't worry. I have gone to seek my fortune. When I come back a vastly rich lady rolling in my carriage you shall roll too. There shall be no more slavery for you, my blessed and unselfish one, but my fortune shall be yours because my love is yours, now and always, you precious Ma. This swears your ever-faithful Virginia.

"Mrs. Dolittle," said I, refolding this note and returning it with a bow, "these words honour you because they ring so simply true, and in so honouring you Miss Virginia honours herself also."

"Yes," she murmured, folding the note tenderly between work-roughened hands. "I shall keep this always; it is precious to me because, as you say, sir, it is so truly sincere. God bless and watch over her!"

"Madam," said I, rising, "I thank you for the tea, but I am more grateful for your so kindly reception of a stranger and for making me so welcome. It has afforded me a pleasure so very singular that I hope it may be renewed someday, if you permit."

"Why, of course," she answered, rising for curtsey to my bow, and with all the grace of a gentlewoman, "I shall be happy to see you at any time since you can be so at home in my kitchen, Mr. Brandonleigh. Now God speed your efforts and good-bye!"

So I took leave of this lady whom poverty and hard work had only glorified—or so I thought as I followed Mr. Vokes up the narrow, precipitous stair. Attaining the front door, Mr. Vokes halted to glance at me, somewhat askance, clear his throat, and say very awkwardly:

"Sir, I . . . I'm afraid you . . . well . . . don't take kindly to my friend O'Dowd."

"Your fears are amply justified," I answered.

"Meaning as you . . . didn't and . . . don't?"

"Precisely!"

"Well, I . . . I'm sorry, sir, because d'ye see, he is really one o' the best fellows alive and almighty sharp, keen as mustard and precious knowing, a regular downy bird, sir, a remarkable smooth file, and pretty useful with the naked mauleys. I . . . mean his dooks, fists, sir. And I'm wondering, if I can persuade him to come, if you'd mind us . . . taking him along of us . . . to Cornwall?"

"I should object extremely!" I answered.

"But, sir," said Mr. Vokes, swallowing hard, "if I make it a . . . a personal favour?"

"Impossible!" said I. "For such long and tedious journey as lies before us, I can imagine no worse travelling companion." So saying, I opened the door for myself and stepped into the street; but then, arrested by the young man's stricken look, I turned to say: "Mr. Vokes, I am of course wholly unaware of your situation or resources, but you will permit me to be your host on this expedition."

"Host?" he repeated, as if pondering the word. "D'you mean . . . pay all my expenses?"

"Certainly!" I answered. "So tomorrow morning, at eleven o'clock promptly, I will pick you up here. Good afternoon!"

Then, stepping into the carriage, I was driven homewards, leaving this rather odd young man staring after me, and, as I thought, quite sullenly.

CHAPTER IV

Gives Some Description of Our Journey

RETURNING to the luxurious comfort of my chambers, where everything is wont to go with smooth and clocklike regularity by reason of my man Enoch's quiet efficiency and my own love of order, I began to regret, and very bitterly, the ridiculous impulse that had led me to undertake and adventure the perils and stark discomforts of this long and tedious journey to which I had so wantonly pledged myself.

Therefore, having regard to the many difficulties of the way and known badness of the far western roads, I decided to use my great four-horsed chariot instead of the lighter vehicle; on the which reasoned forethought I was to congratulate myself warmly later on.

And so next morning, with a sufficiency of what I considered were necessaries packed in three or four trunks and valises in the boot and with Enoch on the box beside Bennet, my coachman, I set forth on this adventure which, as I have suggested in another place, was to lead me through dangers undreamed and deepening horror to the very threshold of death, to alter and broaden my viewpoint on life and change the whole future course of my somewhat too pampered and cloistered existence.

By my direction Bennet drove at such pace as to arrive before Mrs. Dolittle's grim house precisely on the stroke of eleven, and, as precisely, the house door opened and forth stepped—Mr. O'Dowd, all dashing sportsman from hat crown to boot heels, though his general effect was marred somewhat by the bulbous carpetbag he bore.

"Well, sir," cried he boisterously, "here's me, and there's yesilf, and 'tis the top of the morning I'm after wishing your honour. And where'll I stow me bag now?"

"Allow me, sir!" said Enoch, before I could find adequate speech; thus Mr. O'Dowd's impedimenta was deposited in the boot and this most unwelcome person, actually in the carriage, had shaken my hand and was saluting somebody or other from the window with the preposterous cane he bore, and all this ere I might give vent to my surprised indignation.

Now could I have looked forward into the dreadful future and glimpsed the crumbling ruin of a certain grim and age-worn tower, my reception of this most egregious young man might have been a little kinder; at least I think and hope so.

However, and before I might suit look with adequate speech, Mrs. Dolittle appeared, carrying a parcel.

"No, no, please!" said she, crossing hastily to the open carriage door as I made to descend and greet her. "Pray don't trouble, sir. I come only to bring you a few comforts for the road, chicken and ham sandwiches and a few cakes, and to wish you all a safe and comfortable journey—which seems very possible in such fine, great carriage, my—my! I think you will find my two great boys cheerful companions, sir, especially Michael, and together you'll find them equal to a regiment o' soldiers should you be attacked by highwaymen or footpads in the wild parts—which God forbid! Come, Eustace . . . yes, you may kiss me good-bye, since Michael did—there, my dear! Now mind, I shall expect letters——"

"Letters is ut, me darlint?" cried O'Dowd. "Shure now, if he don't write I will, and if Oi forget he shall remind me. And oho, Ma, will ye regard our lordly equipage! Four gee-gees and ivery wan a bit o' blood! Here's travelling in the lap o' luxury."

"In with you, Eustace!" said Mrs. Dolittle, patting his broad back affectionately. "Don't keep Mr. Brandonleigh! Good-bye—Bill dear! God prosper you all!"

Mr. Vokes instantly kissed her again and swung himself nimbly into the lofty carriage; Enoch put up the steps, closed the door, and climbed to his box seat; the sixteen powerful hoofs clattered, the great wheels turned, and, amid cheers of the street urchins and idlers gathered to watch our departure, the ponderous vehicle rolled away, bearing us to that which was to be—for the working out of our individual destinies.

I will omit all mention concerning the minor happenings of this long and most wearisome journey, for, though our way led through some of the loveliest country of this most lovely England (and therefore, I dare to affirm, of the whole earth), it was spoiled for me by the ceaseless, empty chatter of O'Dowd who, when not talking, must hum, whistle, or troll forth ditties reminiscent of stable yard and tavern.

It was towards evening and we were traversing the wild desolation of Bodmin Moor, and, what with the vague depression of my spirits induced by this dreary scene, the never-ending rumble and grind and jingle of our

progress, O'Dowd became for me, and all at once, such intolerable nuisance that I felt myself compelled to inform him of it at last, and in such unmeasured terms that, in the very middle of a vulgar song concerning the woes of some person named Villikins, he became suddenly mute and, after gazing on me some while in the utmost astonishment, he shook his head as though reproving some petulant child.

"Misther Brandonleigh," he sighed, " 'tis surprised Oi am entoirely, for it almost seems me convivial soul is after displeasing your foine gentleman sobroiety—or is ut me fancy?"

"Mr. O'Dowd," I replied, using one of Jasper Shrig's characteristic phrases, "since you ask me so pointedly I answer you very plainly——" But at this moment, with confusion of outcries and thudding of hoofs, the carriage lurched to a jolting stop and in through the open window, which I had let down for air, came an extremely formidable pistol which a grimy hand was levelling at my astonished and shrinking person, for behind this hand I glimpsed a dusky arm and a swart visage made the more repulsive by a hideous black half mask; I espied also unshaven lips backdrawn from yellow fangs that snapped on the words:

"Hand over! Shell out and sharp about it all! Your purses, rings, and tickers, or a lead pill—which'll ye have, my lords? Take y'r ch'ice and quick, or I fire!" I glanced helplessly from this threatening firearm to my own, hanging in their slings completely out of reach, and groped for my purse; but, even as I did so, this dreadfully menacing hand was grasped and bent upward by two other hands very quick and powerful.

"Got him!" exclaimed Mr. Vokes cheerily.

"Right, Bill, me bucko!" said Mr. O'Dowd and, opening the opposite door, leapt down into the road and vanished awhile. Ensued sounds of conflict without, shouts, a cheer, and, descending in my turn, I beheld Mr. O'Dowd seated astride a prostrate fellow whose head he was rapping smartly in the dust.

"Do not kill the rascal!" said I. Mr. O'Dowd merely glanced at me, ripped off his captive's mask, and shouted:

"Whirroo—Bill! Phwat o' your haythin rogue? Mine's disarmed."

"So's mine!" answered Mr. Vokes, and presently appeared, urging the first highwayman towards us at the muzzle of his own pistol.

"What shall we do with 'em, sir?" he enquired.

“Let them go,” I answered.

“No, no!” cried O’Dowd. “They’re a public menace! ’Tis tie ’em up we will and haul ’em along to the nixt town.”

“Not we!” quoth Mr. Vokes. “It shall be as Mr. Brandonleigh says—we’ll let ’em hop. But we’ll nab their barkers to remember ’em by and drive off their nags and leave ’em afoot.”

The which being duly performed, back we clambered into the chariot and on we went again, leaving two very sore and dejected rascals behind in our dust.

On and ever on, up hill and down, through this never-ending desolation, with ceaseless rumble of spinning wheels, jingle of harness, and dust-muffled thud of galloping hoofs; and all of us very silent now, since O’Dowd neither hummed, whistled, nor sang, and Mr. Vokes was, as I found, a naturally silent young man.

And so, after we had progressed thus some distance, I spoke:

“Gentlemen——” I began.

“Here! Here!” cried O’Dowd. “Gintlemen ut is, b’ the Powers! So, gentlemen both, order, order and pray silence for the honourable chair!”

“Mike,” quoth Mr. Vokes, “stow it!”

“I was about to say,” I continued, “I find myself much beholden to you both for your extremely efficacious handling of a very awkward and ugly situation. Your promptness, Mr. Vokes, was my great relief from possible bodily harm and certain loss of property; pray believe me grateful——”

“Are ye so, truly, sir?”

“I am indeed!”

“Then I’ll ask ye to show it by calling me ‘Bill’—just plain ‘Bill’!”

“No,” I answered. “I shall name you not ‘Bill’ but William or even Will, and without the adjective. As for you, Mr. O’Dowd, pray accept my hearty thanks, and as a mark of my sincerity——”

“Oho—aha!” exclaimed O’Dowd, interrupting me thus coarsely to leer from me to his friend in very odious, knowing manner. “Bill, he don’t cotton to me—and to mark his displaysure he’s going to offer me go-hold—a guinea? A fiver? A pony? A monkey? Phwat’s the betting?”

“Mike,” quoth Mr. Vokes, “close your potato trap!”

“Faith and so Oi will now! Order—order, Michael O’Dowd, ye spalpeen, order and silence again for the chair!”

“And, as a mark of my sincerity,” I continued, “should you feel the urge to hum, whistle, sing, or even dance, hereafter, I shall endeavour to endure it with what stoicism I may.”

Now at this, and to my no small surprise, O’Dowd slapped himself on the thigh, his friend on the shoulder, and extended his hand to me, saying:

“Now, b’arl the sweet saints, Misther Brandonleigh, ye’ve touched the very heart o’ me, so there’s me hand too—if ye’ll be after taking ut?”

“Gladly!” said I, and did so. “And now, if you will trouble to pull the tassel—there, above your right shoulder—we will drink to our better understanding.”

“Faith now, sir,” he laughed, “it’s touching me heart again ye are, but this toime through me stomach.” Thus saying, he pulled the tassel cautiously and thus disclosed a cellarette well stocked with bottles and glasses, beholding which he clasped his hands as if in prayer.

“Tare an’ ages!” he exclaimed. “Did ye iver see the loike o’ such illigant contraption? Has this travelling palace any other marvels to show?”

“One or two,” I answered; “if Will troubles to pull the cord behind him, it will not be labour in vain.” Will obeyed and thus discovered a larder and compactum whence, at my bidding, he took a cold chicken, with ham, bread, butter, etc., which were duly set forth upon the collapsible table I had drawn out from the door panel; and all so much to their joy and wonderment that I told how this vehicle had been built to my own design for my travels abroad. And this, as we ate and drank, led to my telling of the long journeys I had made in this same carriage through France, Spain, and Italy, though I said nothing of the reason for those years of exile and mournful wandering.

So the weary miles passed unnoticed until, the desolate moor behind, we came to Bodmin, and next afternoon to Truro and the Red Lion Inn where all things, ordered beforehand, were waiting to our comfort. And here, at this the best and most commodious inn of the town, befell a third incident sufficiently remarkable to merit a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER V

In Which Jasper Shrig Utters a Warning

I WAS seated in my dressing gown before a sea-coal fire, for, though early June, the nights were chilly, and, yawning, was about to complete my disrobing and go to bed, when I was startled very unpleasantly by a sudden furtive tapping at my chamber window, a sly, insistent beat of fingers upon the pane, which, having thus startled me, now perplexed me extremely, for I remembered my chamber was upon the second floor high above the street.

For a long moment I sat wondering and at gaze, but this stealthy sound nowise abating, I rose, crossed to the window, jerked aside the heavy curtain, and thus beheld against the glass a dim face peering in at me and beside the pallid face a bony finger. I was about to let fall the curtain and ring for assistance when the finger recommenced its tapping—three soft raps, one and then two, repeated over and over again; and now, remembering this was Shrig's long-ago preconcerted signal, I peered closer, saw the head nod, and, obedient to the gesture of this finger, I unlatched and opened the window, and into the room slipped a man who, nodding again, turned swiftly to reclose the casement, a small, grey, nondescript person apparently weak as to eyes that blinked, hair and whiskers that were sparse and straggly, and voice which was hoarsely feeble when he spoke:

"Mr. Brandonleigh, I——"

"How do you know my name?" I demanded in some dudgeon. "Who are you?"

"Nobody, sir, only Dan'l, and——"

"How did you reach my window?"

"Means o' bal-cony, sir, but I——"

"What do you want—how dare you disturb me at this hour?"

"Jarsper Shrig's compliments, sir, and he's in the stables, fifth stall, right-'and side——"

"What in the world is he doing there?"

"Waiting for you, sir."

“For me? Then why in a stable?”

“Reasons, sir. Fifth stall, right-’and——”

“But I’ve no least intention of visiting any stable or stall. If Shrig desires to see me, and at such very unreasonable hour, let him come here.”

“Can’t be done, sir, nohow.”

“Why not, pray?”

“Reasons aforesaid, sir.”

“Nonsense!” I exclaimed indignantly. “What possible reason can there be for such ridiculous secrecy? And why must you come creeping on me and rapping with such an odious furtiveness? What is your explanation for such preposterous behaviour?”

“Eyes and y-ears, sir!”

“Whose, and what, and where?”

“Jarsper’s a-waiting to explain, sir—fifth stall on your right——”

“Preposterous!” I repeated.

“Yessir!” murmured this meek, colourless creature, blinking. “As you say, sir. And you’ll find Jarsper in the stables, right-’and side, and I were to tell you very important, life and death.”

“What is, man—what?”

“Jarsper’ll tell ye, sir, in the stables, fifth——”

I tossed off dressing robe, donned hat and coat, nodded to Blinking Meekness, and followed him from my warm and cosy chamber, along a draughty passage, down a back stairs, and out into a darkness where a chill wind blew. Following my guide, who went before me, silent and furtive, we crossed the wide inn yard, edging our way between great country wains, tilted waggons, and vehicles of every sort until we reached the stables, and at last a stall dim lit by flickering lanthorn; and here, seated upon upturned bucket and puffing serenely at a short clay pipe, sat Jasper Shrig.

At sight of me he arose, touched the wide brim of his low-crowned, shaggy hat, and beamed.

“Shrig,” said I sternly, “I desire to know why you summon me in such ridiculous fashion, at such unreasonable hour, and to a stable, of all places? Why must I be startled by this creeping, stealthy man of yours—where is he now, by the way?”

“Keeping a spry ogle, sir, or as you might say—vatching.”

“Whom is he watching? And why?”

“Them as needs it, sir.”

“Then I’ll trouble you to explain your reasons for such egregious show of secrecy.”

“Spies, sir.”

“What spies, man, and where?”

“Werry owdacious-bold and cunning spies, Mr. B., sir, as has spied on me constant and con-tinual ever since I set my stampers in Trelant willage.”

“But why should you be thus spied upon?”

“P’raps because I’m a stranger, and all strangers is regarded as furriners hereabouts and treated according, or p’raps because said spies have been ordered so to do. Hence and therefore, sir, I have drawed you out o’ your lux-oorious apartments to this here stable—at the midnight hour, to tell you a thing or two and——”

“Then,” said I, “you may tell me first precisely how you learned so soon of my arrival here.”

“Obserwation, Mr. B., sir. But the matter as sapprises me is as you should trouble to come so far from your London chambers and the comfort thereof.”

“Oddly enough, Shrig, I hardly know; call it a whim. A young friend, a Mr. Vokes, was greatly concerned for the safety of Miss Wrybrook, and, being fairly certain she would be hereabouts—she had disappeared, you must understand—I took the fancy to drive with him into Cornwall.”

“Werry re-markable, considering as you ain’t nowise given to travel nowadays.”

“I detest it, Shrig! But, as I say, the whole affair is odd.”

“Ah! And along o’ you came Michael O’Dowd.”

“Then you happen to know him, do you, Shrig?”

“Werry well indeed, sir. But the reason as I drawed you here is to utter a solemn varning!”

“Dear me, Jasper!” I exclaimed. “Against whom do you warn me, pray?”

“Myself, sir! Should you chance to meet me here or theer and I don’t take no notice o’ you, I ax you to do ditter by me. To be a friend o’ mine or even a acquaintance ain’t a-going to be particularly healthy for a bit.”

“Do you mean that you are in actual personal danger, Jasper?”

“Sir, I only know as I ought to be, judging by past ex-perience of other cases—and oh, Mr. B., sir, this here case looks like being all as I hoped it might be, ar—that it do!” Here he nodded and beamed on me so happily that I wondered, but ere I might speak he continued: “Also, I had to tell you a thing as you’ve guessed for yourself—Miss Wirginny is here in Cornwall, but vat you don’t know is as Miss Wee, our werry meek young party, has stole a march on me!”

“Indeed? How, pray?”

“Sir, by good luck—or bad, by fortun’ fair—or foul, and by her own quick int’lects, she is now a res-i-dent in Trelant Manor House—vich is the home o’ Sir Wilfred Polgarth, who is the son o’ Sir Thomas Polgarth, who seventy year ago married Marianny Wrybrook, vidow o’ that theer misfort’nate gent as died of—a nail!”

“Good heavens, Jasper!” I exclaimed, not a little disturbed. “You tell me she is under the roof of—and therefore in the power of these people we believe were concerned in the murder of her grandfather?”

“Seventy year ago, by means of a nail now in my right-hand veskit pocket!”

“But this is terrible! Her life also may be in danger if they ever suspect her identity.”

“ ‘If,’ sir, though a small vord, is a werry important vord—and our Miss Wirginia, being sharp and amazing smart, and therefore no sort of fool, has been and gone and changed her monniker or name and ditter her looks.”

“How in the world did she contrive to gain admission to this house, Shrig?”

“By means of her own vits, a pony as bolted, a little gell as fell off said pony, and a pool o’ vater not deep enough to drowned aforementioned little gell. . . . And, Mr. B., sir, I find this here fam’ly o’ Polgarth werry inter-esting indeed, con-sisting of father, Sir Wilfred P., son, Mr. Jason P., son’s daughter, Miss Tamsin, same as pony tossed into pool, and—last, Great-grandma Polgarth, as is great and grand in every manner, being grandly tall,

greatly old, and greatly respected by the poorer sort o' fishing folk—some on 'em!"

"What do you mean by 'some'?"

"Sir, there's some o' these here fishing folks as fishes only for fish and some as fishes for—other things!"

"As what, for instance?"

"Let's say, f'rinstance—'tubs.' "

"Ah, smugglers?"

"Right, sir! Then, let's say again—'wrecks'! Ay, wrecks, Mr. Brandonleigh, poor ships drawed to death and destruction by false lights and suchlike tricks . . . drownded sailormen, sir, but waluable cargoes!"

"Do you suggest the Polgarths are implicated in such black villainy?"

"Mr. B., sir, not having never a fact to go by—all as I says is this—ekker alone can answer! Hows'ever, sir, here again is the caution as I drove here to utter you—until further notice you and I are strangers most com-plete; also, taking example of our werry sharp, young Miss Wee, I have also changed my monniker; for the present I answers to the name o' Thomas Rigg, as you'll kindly give notice to your companions, Vokes and O'Dowd. Verefore and therefore Jarsper Shrig ain't and Thomas Rigg is, and us all strangers as I'll beg ye to bear in mind."

"Very well, Mr. Rigg."

"And now, sir, since the cocks is beginning to carol and crow so hearty, and the hour a-going on for ha'-past three, I'll bid you good morning and pleasant dreams!"

CHAPTER VI

In Which I Meet with "Cecily Dare"

I SLEPT late next day and, waking towards noon, breakfasted in bed attended by Enoch, who informed me "the two gentlemen had gone a-walking."

And so, after some while, being dressed for riding, I ordered a saddle horse and ambled forth to view the country.

I rode haphazard, and yet, guided by Chance or that Destiny which, and all unsuspected of me as yet, was urging me so insidiously step by step towards those horrific events I shall do my best to here record, I came into a small, sleepy-seeming coastwise village which upon enquiry I learned was Trelant. My informant was a swarthy, middle-aged man with gold rings in his ears, so very dark of visage and black of hair that he might have been a Spaniard, a morose, unlovely fellow in long sea boots who scowled, eyed me askance, chewed tobacco, and spat towards me, and, as I fancied, so ostentatiously that I urged my horse a little nearer.

"So this is Trelant?" said I, looking down on this man who gazed so steadily up at me and answered with a surly nod.

"Do you live here?"

"Mebbe."

"Where is the Squire's house, Trelant Manor?"

"Upalong."

"How far?"

"Be ee friend o' Squire?"

"Maybe!" I retorted, and, nodding down into his unfriendly face, I rode on slowly along the narrow cobbled street, very aware of other unfriendly eyes that peered on me from open doorways and lattices. So came I to a small tavern calling itself the Three Pilchards, Job Polwheil, and about which were other men in sea boots or smock frocks, and these also scowled and eyed me askance; indeed their looks were so evil that, instead of pulling up to quench my thirst and pass the time of day, I rode on and up a steeply winding hill, leaving this most unfriendly village and pondering the possible reason for such animosity.

Reaching the crest of this hill, I reined in to breathe my horse and glance back and down over such glory of sea and beauty of coast line as I think goes almost beyond compare. Sitting thus in a charmed delight, my gaze wandering from Trelant Cove, almost immediately below, across deep blue ocean to a certain noble headland and conical rock, I heard a woman singing, and in voice of a beauty and power quite above the ordinary, and, glancing around, espied the singer; tallish and young she seemed, and dressed in a clinging gown of a blue that, against the green upland behind her, made each the more beautiful. She appeared to be gathering wild flowers or herbs into the straw bonnet that swung by its strings from rounded arm, checking her song to stoop for them ever and anon. Now as I listened to her singing and watched the unconscious grace of her movements my horse, wholly unregarded by me, turned from the road and ambled in between two granite pillars where no gate swung and began to crop the grass, and myself still unheeding. But presently this seeming country maid, hearing the chink and jingle of his bit chain, turned and looked at me with eyes of vivid blue in startling contrast to her night-black hair that, dressed high upon shapely head, yet contrived somehow to frame the oval of her face in coquettish glossy ringlets. And in this moment, though she was so completely changed and strangely beautified, by these eyes I knew her.

"Miss Virginia!" I exclaimed, and, baring my head, bowed as well as I might from the saddle. She neither moved nor spoke, so that for a moment I felt a qualm of doubt.

"Miss Virginia Wrybrook?" I repeated.

"No, sir," she answered, shaking her head, "dear me, no, Mr. Brandonleigh. I left poor Virginia back in noisy, smoky London Town; you address Cecily Dare."

"A pretty name!" said I.

"Of course," she answered, lowering her voice and glancing about us almost furtively, " 'twas why I chose it, and do pray remember to use it—should we ever chance to meet hereabouts."

"Rely upon me, Miss Dare, and . . . give me leave to say I hope you do not dare too much . . . to adventure yourself alone in . . . that house."

"Meanwhile," she answered lightly, "I pick herbs and simples for Great-grandmama."

"Marianne Polgarth," I said, leaning near and now speaking in a whisper, "the widow of your——"

“Hush!” she exclaimed, throwing up slim hand to check me. “I have heard too much of that hideous and wicked tale.”

“Wicked?” I repeated.

“Base and untrue!” she nodded.

“Are you sure, and—so soon, Miss Dare?”

“Nearly a month, sir, and of close and constant association. Indeed I have met with more gentleness, more kindly consideration than I have ever known—since my dear father died . . . of course except for Ma, bless her.”

“Then you have no more belief in this dreadful story—no least suspicions or——”

“None whatever, no—not one!” she answered, and almost passionately. “To hold such now would be mere folly and wicked injustice. Whatever fearful mystery the dead past holds, the answer cannot possibly be here, so let it remain buried in the past.”

“But,” said I, “can such dreadful thing remain buried always forever? I wonder!”

“However, sir, you see me today happier than I ever thought or hoped to be.”

“Indeed you are . . . greatly altered.”

“You mean the poor slave who must look her worst and show all meek humility may venture to live, may dare to be herself at last, with spirit bold enough to dare fortune and circumstance. Yes, I am changed. I am Cecily Dare who came here to dare peril and instead found only gentle sympathy and kindness. And as regards change, Mr. Brandonleigh, you are altered too!”

“Pray, how?” I enquired, amazed by the new air of conscious dignity that seemed now to clothe her like a garment.

“A silent gentleman, far too stately for idle speech, despite shabby slippers, can actually talk and may even condescend to answer questions. So now Miss Dare will dare to ask what should bring so languid a fine gentleman so far from his beloved, noisy London into these sweet and lovely wilds—what?”

“Yourself!” I answered. “He comes with your friends Messrs. Vokes and O’Dowd, in quest of you and with the blessing of Mrs. Dolittle, to bear you safe back to her.”

"Then you will please assure dear Ma of my safety, give her *my* blessing, and say that being here, well and happy, here I shall remain for several reasons. And now please go back onto the road because you are trespassing here."

"Very well," I answered, "though first may I venture to enquire your reasons?"

"No," she sighed, "no, I think not, but the chiefest and best of them is running to me—yonder!"

Glancing whither she directed, I saw a little girl, a pale, slim, elfin creature, who fled towards us down the steep.

"Oh, Cic-ly . . . Cic-ly . . . darling," she panted, "her's been looking and looking for you, and called and called, and ran and ran froo the copse, so now—kiss her for finding you at last." Down stooped shapely young Womanhood to clasp and cherish her small suppliant and then gently bid her:

"Make your reverence to the gentleman, Tamsin." So the pale, pretty child curtseyed demurely to my bow, then, with smile and parting word, they left me, going away together hand in hand.

Thus, presently, I rode on again, a very thoughtful man, until, rousing from my abstraction, I found the road had dwindled to a lane that wound a devious course, turning and twisting back upon itself downhill through bosky dells and up again to an eminence at last, from which altitude I now beheld the whole sweep of rock-girt coast, bay, cove, and headland kissed by a sapphire sea. Now as I gazed down and away at this glorious scenery, wrapt, as it were, in a charmed delight, I was aroused by a pleasant, sonorous voice near by, uttering these words:

"Good friend, I dare to affirm you have never gazed upon a lovelier prospect."

Glancing about, I espied a large man, perched upon a very small and quite inadequate folding stool, busied with palette and brush upon a canvas; taking him for the speaker, though he had his broad back to me, I answered forthwith:

"Never, sir, and foreign travel has convinced me that I never shall."

"Travel?" repeated the Painter, dabbing colour upon his canvas in a sort of fury. "I also have rambled pretty far and wide seeking the uttermost

beauty in Nature and kindliness in man, and, after all my wanderings, came back home to find them—here."

"Then, sir," I took him up, "you are more fortunate than myself."

"Eh?" he exclaimed, glancing round at me; then he swung about on his small perch rather precariously and sat looking up at me. Thus I saw him for a man of herculean proportions, habited very shabbily as something between fisherman and parson; yet no intelligent person, beholding this refined, attractive face with its wide-set, lucent eyes beneath broad sweep of brow, its gentle mouth offset by craggy chin, would think twice about his clothes; his was a face that lifted the man far above such mere trivialities. And now, as I smiled down on him, he smiled up at me, saying:

"Why, to be sure, our Cornish folk do not take overkindly to strangers."

"Especially in Trelant!" I added.

"Oh—Trelant!" he exclaimed, in very evident disgust. "All strangers are regarded as enemies thereabouts, and used accordingly, I fear."

"And why there especially, sir?" I enquired.

"Well," he answered, staring beneath wrinkled brows at the paintbrush in his fingers, "Trelant and the villages adjacent are part of the great Polgarth estates."

"Polgarth?" I repeated. "Are they an old family?"

"Indeed, one of the most ancient; they reach back into antiquity; there has always been a Polgarth at Trelant."

"Are they well esteemed by the County?"

"Far from it, alas—except in their own immediate neighbourhood. In Trelant and their other hamlets and villages conditions are still medieval, quite distressingly feudal, the folk little better than serfs, and the evil of it is that, being extremely ignorant, they are perfectly content with their lot. . . . Ah, a wild, sullen folk to all but their own, very grimly secretive, utterly lawless yet as utterly devoted to their overlords, the Polgarth family."

"Old Lady Polgarth?" said I.

"Yes, sir, to her most especially. A strange, grand old creature, immensely old yet beautiful in age, who rules her grim community like medieval chieftainess. Indeed, their devotion to old Lady Marianne comes very near idolatry."

"Sir," said I, "you seem well informed of matters hereabouts."

"I should be," he answered, sighing; "for some years I held the cure of souls here but gave it up owing to illness, yielding place to a younger and, let me add, a less anxious and enquiring man than myself. So today I live in my own cottage with my sister, and, when not fishing or tending our garden, I attempt the impossible—to reproduce in colour something of God's own handiwork, and alas—I am no genius! Today my attempt is more feeble and disheartening than usual, so I'll go home and dig potatoes . . . a mattock is more fit for my clumsy fist than the brush of an artist! By the way, my name is Samuel Roger Trevanion, much at your service."

"And mine, sir, is Edward Brandonleigh, humbly at yours."

Having packed together his artist's paraphernalia, Mr. Trevanion turned to go, then paused, and, looking down on the wide prospect of blue ocean and noble headland, said, in hushed, reverent voice:

"Great God of Beauty and Goodness, Lord of Light, I thank Thee for eyes to see and ears to hear all the loveliness and music of thy handiwork! Mr. Brandonleigh, look around and be assured of God. For in this lovely land is not only beauty for the joy of all His children but music also. Hear now the names of the beauties you see. I will name them—from St. Anthony to Pen Nair, yonder, now hearken to their music!—Zone Point, Porth Beor, Porth Trunkas, Porth Mellin, Alwannack Cove, Killy Gerran, Hellingstone, Towan, Grebe, Porthangissen, Ravenshole, Peter's Splash, Pencabe, Crewes Rock, Crockanellyus, Porth Scatha, Porth Curnick, Pedn-Vadn, Tallow, Porth Bane, Cregoes, Morvises, Pendower, Carne, Polreda, Tregeagles Cave, Pen Nair. Now, Mr. Brandonleigh, would you meet right, kindly folk, go with me and you shall talk with such Cornishmen as I am proud to call friends—if you are not above a village alehouse?"

"With pleasure, sir," I answered, dismounting that I might walk beside him. "Pray, whither do you take me?"

"To a little fishing village near by, called Porth Scatha, sir."

So on we went together, conversing in a growing amity, for the more I heard and saw of this gentleman the better I liked him. Thus in a little while we reached a place where we looked down upon a huddle of cottages set above and about a small rocky cove; such was my first glimpse of this village as we descended the hill.

Upon nearer approach, these cottages showed something less grim, and amidst them, standing apart, a white-walled, steep-roofed inn with a sign

above the door that proclaimed it

THE PLUME OF FEATHERS, V. PETERS.

The village seemed to comprise but one street and this wholly deserted, for no man or woman either was to be seen; here were no idlers to lounge and scowl strangers out of countenance, no faces to peer furtively from door or window, and no sound to hear save the murmurous lap of the incoming tide and merry voices of children at play somewhere on the green uplands out of sight.

Now glancing in some surprise from this emptiness to my companion's gentle, kindly face, I thought to see there a look of troubled apprehension.

"Cornwall," said I, "would seem to be a land of mysteries?"

"Yes," he sighed, "yes. As you know, it was the land of King Arthur and his knightly paladins, of the old British Saints and Martyrs, of giants, demons, and monsters, spells, witchcraft, and magic, black and white . . . Today it is——"

"Smuggling!" said I as he paused.

"In Cornwall," said he rather mournfully, "we name it 'The Free Trade.' Ah well, our visit here would be but vain labour; there is scarce a boat in the porth, the men are all at sea . . . though why so early . . . fishing . . . I hope. Howbeit, sir," sighed he, turning away, "we must defer our visit. Are you staying hereabout?"

"At the Red Lion, in Truro."

"Then, Mr. Brandonleigh," said he, giving me his hand, "I hope we meet again, and soon. Pray call upon us as soon as you will . . . anyone will direct you to our cottage."

"Sir, I shall be honoured," I answered. Then, mounting my horse, away I rode, leaving Mr. Trevanion gazing after me with his dreamy, wistful eyes.

CHAPTER VII

In Which My Man Enoch Surprises Me

A CONCATENATION of most discordant sounds awakened me next morning and at uncomfortably early hour—such a hoarse bellowing of cattle, bleating of sheep, barking of dogs, squeal of pigs, and shouting of men as shocked me to an aggrieved awareness, so that I must needs lie hearkening to this very distressing uproar in an unwilling and indignant wakefulness; for, being usually a late sleeper, I resented this rude disturbance bitterly, yet made determined attempts to forget it awhile in slumber. But this horrid clamour persisting—nay, rather increasing in volume—I abandoned all hope of further repose and rang for my man Enoch. His response was so tardy that I was compelled to repeat the summons thrice ere he made his appearance somewhat tousled of head and still blinking sleep from his eyes.

"Enoch," quoth I, cutting short his excuses for such unwarrantable delay, "be good enough to shave me. I intend to get up."

"But, sir," he exclaimed, aghast, and no wonder, "it is not yet half-past six!"

"Yes," I sighed, "an outrageous hour, but yonder obscene clamour in the High Street forbids me sleep. Did you not hear this most infernal hubbub?"

"No, sir," he answered. "Oh no, fortunately I occupy a small, pleasantly dark back chamber with a fine view of the stable yard. Hot water, sir, excuse me." He bowed and went out, leaving me to wonder, yet again, if he was quite such a spiritless nonentity as he has so persistently hitherto allowed me to suppose, and I was pondering this question, somewhat drowsily, when he returned, and drowsily I questioned him:

"You have been in my service precisely how long, Enoch?"

"One year, eight months, and four or five days, sir," he answered, busied with soap and shaving brush.

"It was, I remember, Jasper Shrig who first brought you to my notice."

"Therefore, sir, I am profoundly grateful to Mr. Shrig. I trust you find me efficient and worthy his kind recommendation?"

“That you are with me still is sufficient answer, Enoch. Though indeed Shrig spoke of you very highly.”

“Then, sir,” said Enoch, lather brush at my chin, venturing to take this as an affirmative, “I am duly gratified.” I sat up not a little surprised, for this indeed was an Enoch wholly new. I stared, but at this moment he began lathering and thus, for the moment, rendered me speechless; and thus busied with his brush, this new Enoch continued:

“From recent enquiry, sir, I learn this is market day in Truro, which will explain the bovine and other clamour you find so distressing. And indeed, sir, being privileged to know you as I do, I can well appreciate how you must yearn for the chaste seclusion of Lincoln’s Inn.”

“Enoch!” I exclaimed, and heedless now of lather. “In heaven’s name . . . what is all this? What means this . . . well . . . quite astounding transformation? Who are you and what? For upon my soul I am at a nonplus. My man Enoch seems to have vanished and in his place a perfect stranger. So I demand an explanation.”

“Sir,” he answered, stropping the razor with his usual dexterity, “you behold that same Walking Obedience and colourless nonentity called Enoch who has served you the best he may and will so long as he may—this same drab creature, sir, who, waking to your bell from dream of other days, has merely reverted to his former identity for a brief while.” Here, with flourish of razor, he proceeded to shave me while I, looking up into his intent face as I had never troubled to do until now, saw there so little or so very much that my interest quickened.

“Enoch,” said I, seizing the first chance to speak, “you have earned my gratitude.”

“Pray, sir,” he enquired, wiping the razor with his usual care ere putting it away, “may I enquire precisely how?”

“By affording me the complete and perfect emotion of surprise, nay—of absolute astonishment. And do not tell me you are ‘gratified’ this time, or bow and flourish, but sit down, like the person of education I perceive you to be, and oblige me with your history or so much of it as you will. For instance, what were you prior to entering my service?”

“A felon, sir, condemned and transported for attempted murder.”

“Dear me!” I murmured, leaning back on my pillows and passing hand over my smooth-shaven chin. “And you have had a razor at my throat very frequently during these past eighteen months!”

“Excuse me, sir, one year and eight months,” he corrected, “and since you desire, I will tell you my case fully yet very briefly.”

“Then pray be seated, and take your time.”

“By your leave, sir, I had rather stand.” Then, having put away the case of razors and set all things orderly, my man Enoch, standing beside the bed, folded his arms, looked down on me from his face wherein I seemed now to read so very much, and spoke thus, in his usual low, even tones:

“Sir, it all began because in my youth I was a fool who believed all men too readily, loved too deeply, hated too fervently, and acted too naturally. I married young and was ridiculously happy until she fled with a rascal who eventually left her to starve and die. She wrote pleading my forgiveness, and I found her in time to learn all. When I had buried her I spent my life and resources to hunt out her deceiver and, having done my best to rid the earth of him, gave myself up to the law that condemned me to many years’ imprisonment, let me off with half, and cast me forth to starve or sink to Lord knows what of infamy—which I probably should have done but for—one man.”

“May I know your preserver’s name?” I enquired, for he had paused as if somewhat overcome at last.

“Jasper Shrig!” he answered, soft and reverently. “So there is my story, sir.”

“And indeed,” quoth I, “you continue to amaze me.”

“Well now, sir, should you have any least qualms in entrusting so much of your welfare—and your throat so often—to the care of a convicted felon, you have but to speak and——”

“Not a word!” said I. “Jasper Shrig spoke for you a year and eight months ago, since when your conduct also has spoken, and so eloquently that I have no word to say.”

And so, with the assistance of my ex-jailbird, I performed my morning toilette—my new blue frock with gold, crested buttons, kerseymeres, and hessians. Thus attired, I made my way downstairs, intending to visit the market, but on the way was assailed (and, as it were, challenged) by the delectable fragrance of coffee and frying bacon, so that I ordered instantly and presently consumed a hearty breakfast. Thus the clocks were chiming nine when at last I strolled forth into this thronged and busy scene where men and animals still made prodigious clamour, yet one that, hearkened to

with more sympathy and understanding, became to me now a great symphony of teeming life and joyously vigorous humanity.

CHAPTER VIII

Tells How I Saw—a Face

VERY slowly I walked amid this hurly-burly of stir and bustle, where farmers' buxom wives and daughters, in their town finery, talked and laughed and filled the shops with their merry chatter while their stalwart spouses and sires, in broadcloth tailcoats, cords, and tops, hobnobbed in corners or, clustered about the penned cattle, questioned besmocked drovers, handling fleecy sheep, prodding fat pigs, viewing cows, and slapping calves amid a cheery babblement, and all with the greatest good humour. On amid this motley concourse I took my leisured way, an interested spectator, for such scenes were new in my experience; thus I also inspected these animals with what I was pleased to think a knowing air. I even ventured to prod a temptingly corpulent pig with my cane. I inspected the booths and stalls lining the way and found myself taking unwonted interest in such mundane objects as vegetables of heroic size and rolls of golden butter peeping coyly from green leaves or snowy gauze. Then also I must needs stand entranced where some cheap-Jack drove his roaring trade. It was as I stood thus before the stall of one such verbose tradesman, thralled and amazed by the unending torrent of his perfervid eloquence, that I felt someone jostle me and thereafter heard a cry and sounds of scuffling behind me. Glancing over my shoulder, therefore, I beheld a pallid, scrawny individual struggling desperately and quite vainly in the clutches of Will and his friend Michael O'Dowd, who, shaking their writhing captive, cried gaily:

"Arrah now, will ye hould still, ye spalpeen, or 'tis me boot Oi'll be after giving ye!" Then, hailing me: "Hurroo, Governor, ain't Moike the bhoy now? Oi copped the omadhaun prigging your tattler, nabbing your ticker."

"And here it is, sir!" said Will, handing me my watch and fob seals. But now the crowd began to push and surge all about us with cries of: "Thieves!" "A pickpocket!" "Kick the rogue! Run him in!"

"No!" roared a fierce, fat man flourishing a whip. "Stand back and lemme take a cut at his carkiss."

"Certainly not!" quoth I, fending the speaker off with my cane, for this man, being so furious and so fat, disgusted me as something approaching the

unnatural. “Have the goodness to lower that whip and mind your own business.”

The fat man gobbled at me ferociously, saying:

“But ’tis my business! A rascal thief is everybody’s business, eh, neighbours, eh?”

“Yes!” roared the crowd, surging round us again.

“Go on, lay into him, Tiny!” cried a rakish-looking person in whiskers and what is vulgarly known as a jerry hat. “Take a cut at him, Tom Thumb!”

“Do, and take the consequences!” cried I, now flourishing my cane and quite to my own surprise. “It was my property he attempted to steal and ——”

“What’s to do here? What’s all this?” cried a gay, ringing voice yet one also of assured and arrogant authority. “Make way, some of ye! Make way, d’ye hear?” To my surprise the crowd parted at once very submissively and to us strode a tall young man somewhat too loudly clad for my taste but evidently one of the Quality, whose comely face, a little too flushed, matched the arrogance of his tone.

“Well, what’s to do?” he demanded again. The crowd hastened to inform him in a dozen different voices.

“Aha, a sneaking thief, hey? Well now, m’lads, let’s ha’ some sport with him! Up with the rascal and heave him into the horsepond. See if he can swim; if he can—in with him again; if he can’t, so much good riddance.”

“A quite villainous proposal!” said I, that all might hear, and conscious of such quick fury of anger as caused me again no little surprise at myself.

“Eh—what? What?” demanded the young man, eyeing me and toying with the heavy hunting crop he bore. “Can you be alluding to me?”

“Certainly!” I answered, fronting him eye to eye. “Any man who would so wantonly excite a crowd to violence is a villain!”

“Oh?” he exclaimed, viewing me between narrowed eyelids while his nostrils seemed to dilate quite unpleasantly. “To be sure you don’t know me.”

“Nor have I the least desire to!” I retorted.

“Yet you shall!” he nodded. “Sir, I am Jason Polgarth!”

“Which information leaves me entirely unmoved,” said I, “except that should you feel yourself sufficiently affronted, you may have my card for the asking.” Now, even as I uttered this defiance, I shocked myself yet again and to the very soul since, because of a certain grievous past event, I have set myself most sternly against the egregious stupidity of duelling. But this young man merely laughed and shook his head at me, saying:

“Oh no, my buck—no, none o’ your damned London tricks here! No, you don’t! I’m none o’ your hair-trigger specialists, not me! I believe in Nature’s weapons or, on occasion, a horsewhip. So now you will apologise or feel mine.”

“Stow it—you!” snarled a voice, and beside me was Will, his powerful shoulders bowed, and once again I beheld his great knotted fists clenched, but this time in my defence.

“Ha!” exclaimed young Polgarth, “so you travel with your bruising bullies, do you, sir?”

“Another word,” growled Will, “and I’ll alter the cut o’ your pretty face . . . I’ll crack your mug.”

“Excellent!” laughed Polgarth. “Rally to me, lads!” he cried to the swaying crowd. “Rally to me and let’s set about these damned Londoners.” And rally they did; whips and sticks threatened us on every side; the situation became desperate, when rose the loud clatter of hoofs with a harsh voice shouting: “Way there! Give way!” and through the shrinking crowd rumbled a ponderous chariot drawn by great, floundering cart horses; beholding which strange equipage, young Polgarth instantly took off his hat as did certain others of the concourse, for this heavy vehicle had pulled up with a jerk. And in it, looking out and down upon us from one window, the face of a pale, frightened child and from the other . . .

Here I pause, at a loss how justly to describe all and what I saw. I remember gazing up spellbound by such face as I had never seen and shall certainly never look upon again—a vision of Beauty in Age and Age shrined in triumphant Beauty. An oval face lit by long, dark eyes beneath black, low arch of brows, eyes that, chancing to meet mine, seemed to gaze at and in and through me, eyes quick with such passionate life in the still beauty of this face that now seemed to have something quite dreadful in its smooth, deathlike placidity.

This stately head crowned by its silvery tresses, for it was covered by no bonnet, swayed out from the open carriage window and then, in the act of speech, the shapely mouth became a furrowed slit, the too-perfect beauty of

this face was split, marred and riven asunder by a thousand dreadful lines and wrinkles—majestic Beauty was not and repulsive Age was—I beheld a mouthing hag who cackled:

"Jason, ye've been at the drink again!"

"No, ma'm, I merely——"

"Liar! I saw ye!"

"Indeed, My Lady, I did but——"

"Ah, little grandson," cried Terrible Old Age, nodding and beckoning with one bony, talonlike finger, "come you in beside dear Grandmama!"

"But truly, ma'm, I give you my word——"

"Come!" The word was a fierce, piping screech so wild and piercing the very horses started, or so I imagined, then while the awed and silenced crowd shrank back and away the talonlike finger became a menacing claw and Jason Polgarth, casting a quick, almost furtive glance about him, wrenched open the carriage door, leapt in, and was borne away.

CHAPTER IX

Concerning Nothing in Particular

"Lord love me!" exclaimed Will, glancing after this carriage as we turned to leave this noisy market place. "Did you ever?"

"No!" I answered. "An amazing old lady! But our pickpocket has vanished, I perceive, and so much the better. But what has become of O'Dowd?"

"Keeping dark, sir. Ducked the moment Polgarth showed up. Ye see, he scraped acquaintance with this fellow b'means of a horse; there's nothing Mike don't know about horses, having been a jockey once in Ireland, and he and Polgarth were drinking to each other's better acquaintance not an hour since; he's on the track o' summat, like the downy bird he is."

"Whose track, do you suppose?"

"Well, I don't rightly know, Mike not having told me, but I reckon 'twill be Polgarth . . . p'raps in the business o' Miss Virginia and the murder of her grandfather."

"How much does O'Dowd know about it?"

"I can't say. But all as I know of it is what Miss Virginia told us and Ma."

"Do you think O'Dowd, being such a perfect chatterbox, is to be trusted not to betray the reason of our presence in Cornwall? It might prove a trifle awkward should he do so and perhaps dangerous for your Miss Virginia. Are you sure of him, Will?"

"Certain, sir. Oh yes . . . perfectly . . . sure, except for . . . unless——"

"Well?" I enquired. "Unless——?"

"Why, sir," answered Will unhappily, "unless he should take a drop too much."

"So? He gets tipsy, does he, drunk and talkative!"

"Not often, sir, not often. But he can't stand much. 'Tis his one weakness. Mike's one o' the best o' fellows, bold as a lion, generous as may be and even more so when anyways bottled, but whenso—he talks."

“Ha—so!” I exclaimed, in growing dismay. “Then we, and especially you, must take particular care to keep him sober, for should he talk it may bring disaster upon all of us and, as I say, most certainly upon Miss Virginia.”

“God forbid!” exclaimed Will fervently.

“Amen!” I responded. “But we, and especially you, must forbid O’Dowd all chance of succumbing to his weakness or betraying any least hint of this affair—especially to young Polgarth, Miss Virginia being now a member of the Polgarth household.”

Will turned on me with a sort of leap.

“Is she—by God!” he exclaimed. “Sir, how d’ye know this? Are you sure?”

“Quite sure. I had speech with her yesterday.”

“Yesterday!” he repeated, scowling. “And you made no mention of it!”

“I had small opportunity until now.”

“How did she look? What did she say? Is she well?”

“Very well. And her looks are . . . improved.”

“Did she happen . . . to make any . . . mention o’ me?”

“And she is living with these Polgarth people,” I continued, unheeding his question, “as governess to little Miss Polgarth and under the assumed name of Cecily Dare.”

“Do you think she’s in any danger there, sir?”

“No, Will, not the least—at present.”

“Ah, so you think she might be?”

“Yes. I think she would be in gravest peril should her identity be discovered or the reason for her and our presence in the neighbourhood. Thus, should O’Dowd in his cups be lured to——”

“He mustn’t! By God, but he shan’t. But oh, sir, we must have her safe out o’ this . . . out o’ that cursed house! We must get her safe back to London . . . soon as possible.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “this would be our best course. But could she be induced to go? She appears to be a young lady of a firm, not to say extremely stubborn, will.”

“She is, sir, yes—but we must manage it somehow. She ought never to have come here to run such fool risks!”

“Agreed, Will. But since she is here, what is to be done?”

“Ay, what indeed, sir? The Lord only knows!”

“Will, am I right in assuming that you are profoundly interested in Miss Virginia?”

“I love her, sir, ever since I first saw her, though I know as she don’t feel the same for me and never will . . . that’s the sort o’ fool I am.”

“However, could you not prevail upon her to forgo this rash enterprise and return with us to London?”

“Who—me?” he exclaimed, smiting himself on broad chest quite violently. “No, sir, no—I’m the last in the world for such job! You now, Mr. Brandonleigh, you’d have far more chance; she’d listen to you or . . . well . . . she might.”

“She should!” I said. “Yet I feel so convinced my efforts would be perfectly vain, I shall spare myself the trouble.”

“Eh—trouble, sir?” he repeated, and began to scowl.

“Indeed,” said I, “the older I become the more I detest troubling myself, and more especially when I know such trouble mere wasted effort.”

“Mr. Brandonleigh,” quoth he, shaking his head at me reprovingly, “in such case as this . . . and her . . . there’s no trouble we should shy from, even if it don’t work. And so, for her sake, I ask you to go and talk it over with her again. For her own sake, I’m bold to ask you to beg and plead, forgetting all your pride and dignity—beg her to go back to safety in London . . . plead with her, sir, as if . . . you loved her too. Will you, sir—please?”

Now remarking the speaker’s honest, troubled face, furrowed brow, and anxious eyes, I changed my mind, answering again on impulse, which until lately was quite extraordinary and clean contrary to my nature.

“Yes, I will, on condition that you go with me.”

“Why, sir, I’d rayther not, but—if you insist——”

“I do insist. And no time better than now. Trelant House is near the coast, fifteen miles about. You ride, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir; y’see, I was a dragoon none so long ago, one o’ the Heavies, but I got bought out after Waterloo.”

“So? You were in the battle?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And why did you buy out—were you wounded?”

“Never a scrat, sir. But the fighting was done and I got tired o’ soldiering, so my captain bought me out and was going to set me up for life.”

“Why, pray?”

“On account o’ me doing him a bit of a service, and so he was going to make——”

“What service, Will?”

“Oh . . . well . . . he was desperate hurt . . . horse killed, and I got him away on mine. But as I say, sir, he was going to breed horses . . . I was to be his stud groom . . . settled for life, only he died of his wound.”

“Then what did you?”

“Anything and nothing till I met an old comrade, Tom Brace, a blacksmith, Kensington way, and took on with him as journeyman. So that’s me, Mr. Brandonleigh, a jobbing smith all day and studying books of a night along with Toby Spence, a shoemaker friend o’ mine and prime scholar besides . . . Latin and Greek! And now, sir,” said this somewhat remarkable young man as we turned into the wide stable yard of our inn, “if we’ve got thirty mile to do I’ll go see the chief ostler, by your leave, and cast my eye about for the likeliest nags.”

CHAPTER X

Mostly Concerning Will

"WILL," said I, as we ambled side by side through the busy streets, "how old are you?"

"Rising thirty, sir, and feel a precious sight older!"

"And you thoroughly understand horses? I mean that besides being a horseman you are also a horse master?"

"Sir, you may take it I am that very same."

"And, I presume, know something of breeding and so forth?"

"That's why my captain would ha' made me his head stud groom—if only he'd lived."

"May I enquire his name?"

"The Honourable Eric Chetwold."

"Oddly enough, I know his father—or did."

"They've a great place in Sussex, sir."

"Oddly again, I have a place in Sussex too—though I seldom trouble to go there. But I have no stud farm . . . yet I might start one, of course. The horse is a splendid, noble animal."

"None better, sir."

"And to rear such creatures, endeavouring always to better the strain, this were something to interest and amuse one—extremely worth while."

"Nothing more so, sir."

We were by this time well clear of the town, trotting smoothly up hill and down through a glorious stretch of rolling, richly wooded country, when from behind us rose the thud of hoofs approaching at headlong gallop—on they came until, with never a let or stay, a horseman charged past us, enveloping us in such choking dust cloud that I reined up indignantly for the nuisance to subside.

"Did you see who that was?" Will enquired.

“No, but a very impolite, ill-natured person.”

“ ’Twas Mr. Polgarth. I wonder why he’s in such sweating hurry?”

“Possibly to escape his ‘dear Grandmama.’ ”

“However, I’m glad he’s safe out o’ Truro!”

“Why so?”

“Well . . . Mike’s there, and since what you said, I’m that damned anxious lest he get Mike boozy and talking, yes, I’m that anxious as I can’t say!”

“By the way, being a Londoner, you have probably heard of that famous law officer Jasper Shrig of Bow Street?”

“Yessir.”

“It seems that O’Dowd knows him pretty well. Do you?”

“Yes, but not like the same as Mike does. You see, Mr. Shrig happens to be friends with an old comrade o’ mine which is Corporal Dick Roe.”

“Yes,” said I, “a very tall man who lost an arm at Waterloo.”

“That same, sir, and a better man and smarter soldier never was, like Jessamy Todd.”

“The name,” said I, “is familiar.”

“And no wonder!” quoth Will, shaking head at me. “Jessamy is reckoned the greatest middleweight champion as ever was, and would be yet—if he hadn’t retired unbeat on account of his bad luck in killing a man accidentally. So he’s sworn off the game ever since and for good, which is a pity. Did you ever see him in action, sir?”

“Never! I have always deemed prize fighting a barbarous sport, a pastime extremely low and vicious.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Will.

“What are you pleased to mean by ‘Oh’?”

“Only, sir, as there’s other gentlemen thinks quite the reverse.”

“I am aware of it. Yet this cannot alter the fact that for two more or less intelligent creatures to batter each other out of all semblance to humanity—and for mere money, this, I maintain, disgusting the eye, debases the mind. And what have you to advance against this assertion?”

"Well, sir," he answered rather laboriously, "only this—that for two men to be able to hammer each other, fair and square, and yet be friends and admire each other all the better, has something about it as appeals to a man and 'specially an Englishman's fancy. For, after all, an honest fist is better than a Froggie's pistol or an Eye-talian's dagger. At least, I think so."

"Have you yourself fought in the Ring?"

"Yessir, and didn't do so bad—but then I learned all as I know from Jessamy."

"Who was forced to forgo such brutality because he actually killed a man!"

"No, sir! Who, after that misfortune, gave up of his own accord and took to praying and preaching instead."

"Praying?" I enquired.

"And preaching! Sir, Jessamy never fights now except what he calls 'The Lord's Game'—to protect Innocence from Brutality and Weakness against Strength, and when he's hammered the Brute and downed the Strong he prays over 'em, very eloquent, and makes 'em pray too."

"An odd sort of person!"

"No, sir, just Jessamy Todd, a man."

"However," said I, "fisticuffs is and always must be highly undignified and brutalizing!"

"Though sometimes needful, sir!"

"Agreed," said I, "though the fact remains." After this we rode in silence until, reaching a wayside tavern called The Wheel, I called a halt to rest our horses and refresh ourselves with a crust of bread and cheese and tankards of frothing brown ale, a beverage I have small taste for usually, yet which, on this occasion, taken thus in the open air of our English countryside, I found to be far more delectable than any wine, French, Spanish, or Italian, could possibly have been. We were seated on rustic bench, beaming upon one another across our depleted vessels, when unto us appeared an itinerant peddler, a very dusty, extremely hairy fellow with a pack behind and a tray before him suspended by a strap, a son of Israel with abominable lisp, who leered upon us through tangle of black whiskers that sprouted profusely, to riot, as it were, about so much of his tanned visage as could be seen.

“Gen’lemen, vill I thow ye a penknife vith a edge like a rathor, or a pair o’ thoo buckleth as’ll vear like reel thilver? Vill ye buy?”

“Nothing, thank you!” said I.

“But oh, thir, I’m offerin’ bargainth as you’ll never thee the like on again —at yer own prithe.”

“No, thank you!” I repeated, waving him away.

“But oh, thirth, if ye’ll only catht yer eyeth——”

“Be off!” growled Will.

“Don’t be harth, young thir; uth all hath to live! Tho now—won’t ye buy a pair o’ ruffled garterth with mottoth onto ’em—pretty garterth for your thweetheart?”

“Off now, d’ye hear?” quoth Will, rising.

“Thith moment, thir! No need for vi-lenth!” And with another horrid leer and clumsy skipping motion of powerful legs, he ambled away into the yard to reappear mounted in rickety, weather-beaten pony cart that creaked and jolted him out of sight.

“Sir,” enquired Will, frowning into his tankard, “how d’ye propose us getting word with her—Miss Virginia?”

“Well,” I answered, pondering this problem, “we should, of course, ride to the house and ask for her.”

“No!” said he. “This might set folk wondering . . . asking her questions . . . besides, she might be out.”

“Then,” said I, and very unwillingly, “our only recourse is to endeavour meeting her by chance, as I did yesterday—though I greatly dislike its suggestion of furtiveness.”

“Sir, for her safety I’d be no end furtive, ay, or anything else! But if we don’t meet her, then I beg as you’ll go to the house alone and ask; one caller’ll be less remarkable than two—will you please, sir?” This, after some demur, I agreed to do; then, our homely meal ended, I paid the score and we rode on again. And after losing my way once or twice, by reason of these narrow and tortuous Cornish ways, I beheld at last the two yawning gate pillars each crowned with a rampant something or other that by stress of time and weather might have been a lion, a griffon, or a rabbit, so indefinite were they.

“This the place?” Will enquired, as I reined up before this gateless barrier. “Does this lead to Trelant House, sir?”

“One would opine so,” I answered. “However, it was here I met your Miss Virginia, though——” I paused as from behind the trees and boskages crowning the upland before us came a clear, childish voice:

“Wait! Oh, wait for me, my Ciss-ly!” This call answered by such other voice that Will started violently in his saddle; but instead of glad welcome, his blunt features showed more grim than usual, his thick brows knit themselves as if in pain, and I saw his great hands, his whole powerful body shaking as, with dainty gown a-flutter against the wind, betraying all the lovely rounded shape of her, Miss Virginia descended the grassy slope till, suddenly beholding us gazing up at her, she halted for a moment, then came on at faster gait. I bowed, hat in hand, whereat Will started again, snatched off his own hat with very awkward reverence, and, horseman though he was, even contrived to appear awkward in his saddle, and, striving to speak, fidgeted nervously, and finally said in extremely harsh, jerky manner:

“Miss Virgie, I . . . how de do?” And now what must the minx do but mock the poor fellow with laughter in her blue eyes.

“Will!” she exclaimed. “You on horseback! Can you ride? Though, oh my, you show quite gallant—almost!”

“Miss Virginia,” said I, for poor Will sat scarlet and dumb, “soldiers usually do, especially a soldier of such famous cavalry regiment as my friend Mr. Vokes.”

“A soldier? Will?” she exclaimed unbelievingly, glancing from him to me. “Will—a soldier?”

“Certainly!” I answered. “Are you not aware he was a soldier, and one indeed who dared his life for you—and me and England, of course, at Waterloo?”

“No—no, I did not . . . I was not aware . . . I had no idea of it,” she answered somewhat breathlessly. “He never mentioned it . . . never told me! Why did you never tell me, Will?”

“Oh, well . . . well, I mean,” he stammered, “why should I? It never occurred to me. Y’see, I was only a private . . . a common soldier.”

“Who carried his wounded officer out of the battle,” I added.

“Oh!” she murmured. “A hero? Will?”

“No!” he muttered ungraciously. “Just a soldier. But I ain’t here . . . I mean we didn’t come all these miles for talk o’ me, Miss Virginia.”

“Then why are you here?” she enquired, looking from him to me again; wherefore, seeing Will only muttered incoherencies, I made answer:

“We are here, Miss Wrybrook, to beg you will forgo this whim of yours, this too-venturesome quest that is causing your friends such deep anxiety.”

“Oh, but, Mr. Brandonleigh,” she retorted, with all the fine arrogance of careless youth and heedless inexperience, “what perfect nonsense! Why should anyone be anxious for me—if you please? Such great silliness!”

“Yet believe me,” I persisted, “there are sufficient and very cogent reasons. So much so that again we ask you, indeed Will and I beg and plead with you to relinquish your situation here, to leave the menace of this house and return to the sanity and safety of London.”

“Now is your turn, Will,” said she, turning on him; “speak for yourself, what do you say?”

“I say—come back!” he answered hoarsely, and with such desperate earnestness that he looked and sounded quite ferocious. “Go with us, for your own sake, for my—own sake. . . . Oh, for God’s own sake, go with us —now, Virginia, now!”

“Gracious, Will!” she exclaimed, with such laugh and such icy coolness that I could have shaken her very joyfully. “To hear you one might suppose I stood in the very jaws of ghastly death! How ridiculous! For truly I am strangely happy here, as I tried to assure Mr. Brandonleigh, happier than I have ever been—with little Tamsin to love and teach and see her growing love for me and . . . everyone treating me with such great kindness and consideration. To leave! Oh—to run away from all this, and for no reason, would be worse than silly, I should despite myself. So please, oh, please don’t waste your time or efforts any more on my account. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go back to my little pupil.”

“One moment!” said I, staying her with a gesture. “Should you ever find yourself in any least danger, ridiculous though you deem such an idea at this moment, should you ever need help, we shall be found at the Red Lion in Truro for the next week or so.”

“Longer!” said Will. “I shall stay while my money lasts, and even then I shan’t go.”

“Thank you—both of you!” said she more kindly. “I know you mean me well and I suppose I should be flattered by your anxiety were it not all so perfectly needless. But thank you again and good-bye. I really must go now. Please, Will, give my love to our dear Ma when you see her and——”

“Ah-h-h! Trespassing now, I see!”

At these words, uttered so suddenly and behind me, I started and turned to find that Jason Polgarth had approached unseen, by reason of our preoccupation and unheard because of the thick grass, and now stood regarding us from an opening in the tall old yew hedge near by and with two sturdy fellows behind him.

“Trespassing this time, eh?” he repeated, and very offensively. “Miss Dare, are these persons annoying you, because——”

“No, of course not, Mr. Jason,” she replied; “these gentlemen are friends of mine.”

“Miss Dare,” said I gently, “Mr. Polgarth means to affront me and does it so clumsily, being little better than country oaf, that his insolence merely diverts me. Mr. Polgarth, permit me to——”

But he interrupted with a fury so hardly restrained as pleased me much:

“Well, Mr. Whoever-and-whatever-you-are, I tell you again you trespass and that this lady is my daughter’s governess. . . . By the way, Miss Dare, where is my daughter Tamsin?”

“She went back to the house for her doll, sir.”

“Then may I suggest you go after her, Miss Dare?”

“Sir, I was about to do so when you interrupted us—so very suddenly!” she retorted with, I thought, very admirable self-possession; then with graceful farewell gesture to us she turned and walked demurely away.

“Now,” snorted Polgarth, so soon as she was out of hearing, “you’ll come here trespassing, will ye? Now, mark this, we allow nobody about here, so—be warned and—take yourselves off!”

At this, and before I might retort, Will spoke:

“ ‘So ye’ve been at the drink again,’ have ye, sonny lad? Go your ways to Grandma!”

These remembered words, uttered with such grim mockery, seemed to drive Polgarth perfectly frantic, for, uttering inarticulate cry, he sprang at the

speaker like a madman; but, as if expectant of this, Will was off his horse and in action with quite astonishing rapidity. I heard, rather than saw, the impact of two lightning blows, and Polgarth, whirling futile arms, went down backwards; then, over-leaping his prostrate form, Will met his two new assailants, and with such resistless force, speed, and accuracy of attack that one was running and the other prone and motionless before I had the least chance to intervene.

"This," said Will, glancing from one to other of his fallen assailants, "is what I'm made for!" So saying, he plucked Jason Polgarth to his feet, shook him gently, patted his bare head tenderly and, falling back a step or so, squared his mighty arms:

"Any more, sonny lad," he enquired, "or are we done?"

Polgarth looked vaguely about and, espying his fallen hat, took it up, put it on and, with no look for his still-prostrate fellow, who, to my relief, was beginning to stir and groan, walked somewhat unsteadily away.

"Ah well," sighed Will, "all pleasure must end. Get up—you! On your pins now!" quoth he, stirring the groaning fellow with the toe of his boot. "Up with ye and say if you're man enough to want a bit more?"

"No!" quoth the fellow, and very decidedly, as he rose, and whom I now recognised for that same Spanish-looking, morose fisherman I had met in Trelant village.

"Why, then," growled Will, "trot after your governor and tell him to mind his eye next time we meet!"

Now when Will had swung lightly to saddle we rode away, myself not a little perturbed by all that had befallen; and perhaps because of this I went astray again so that presently we found ourselves traversing a narrow, winding lane climbing steeply upwards between high, grassy banks that shut off all view of the country about us. Yet on I rode, led, as I think now, by the Fate that was to bring me eventually to such dire extremity, on I went until —quoth Will from behind me, since we were riding single file because of the narrowness of the lane:

"Sir, this can't be right; where are we getting to?"

"The devil knows!" I answered fretfully, being in anything but a sweet temper, and no wonder. "But there we are going, devil or no!"

"Well," he answered, "I suppose this damned track must end somewhere."

And truly enough it did! For, reaching the top of this steep, we came suddenly into a little, gloomy, dreadful wood, a place dank and noisome, of tangled underbrush and stunted, evil-looking trees, so that a very detestable place I thought it.

And so indeed it proved when, following a close track zigzagging amid these lowering trees and thickets, I pulled up all at once and felt my breath catch, the flesh creeping on my bones like chill foreboding of things to come, a premonition of stealthy evils and horrors to be, as I stared wide-eyed upon the grisly shape upstarting from this gloom of tangled boskages. Yet this actually no more than the crumbling ruin of an age-worn tower.

Grim and square it rose before us, massive walls, scarred and battered by the devastating hand of time and man's violence, pierced by arrow slits, with gaping holes and jagged fissures; a moss-grown, ivy-clad antiquity reared, as I judged by its primitive form, by the will of mighty Rome and added to thereafter by the art of conquering Norman.

"A hell of a place!" growled Will, frowning up at it.

"Yes—yes indeed!" said I fervently. "There is evil here, or has been . . . shame of mind . . . suffering of body . . . so terrible I can feel it yet! Here is no way for us, so back we go."

"Eh, back, sir?"

"Yes! And at once!"

"Why not push on?"

"Not a step!" quoth I, with a violence quite strange to me. "Back we go, I say—there's evil here!"

"But there's a bridle path too," said he stubbornly, "and I don't like turning tail."

"Nor do I usually. But here and now I will and right speedily! Come!" I wheeled my horse and, after momentary hesitation, Will did the same, albeit so unwillingly that as we descended the narrow, winding lane he questioned me reproachfully:

"Lord, Mr. Brandonleigh, what harm can be in an old ruin?"

"I don't know, but—harm there is, there was, and I'm horribly afraid—there will be."

"Now what d'ye mean by that?" he demanded.

“I have no least idea,” I answered, “but the whole ghastly place affects me as though . . . yes, as if I had suffered there . . . very terribly. . . .”

“But, Lord, sir, how could you have?”

“Perhaps in another body . . . in another age.”

“Ha!” he exclaimed, “then you believe in reincarnation!”

“Will,” said I, troubling to turn and look at him, “you surprise me!”

“Oh, why, sir?”

“One would not expect a Waterloo soldier turned blacksmith to speak so glibly of such matters.”

“Well, I shouldn’t, only for my old friend Toby Spence.”

“Ah, your literary shoemaker?”

“Yessir. He’s a great scholar, is Toby, and has learned himself to read in the Greek and Latin, yes, with French and Eye-talian as well.”

“A truly remarkable cobbler!”

“He is, sir. There’s something great about him too!”

“You make me desirous of knowing him.”

“Nothing easier, sir, when next in London—if you should still so desire.”

“Which I certainly shall, unless of course it escape my memory.”

“Which I expect it may!” said Will.

“Why so?” I enquired.

“Nothing, sir, only you’d be so devilish out o’ place in Toby’s little workshop!”

So we descended this abominable hill and after some wandering search found the highroad.

“Will,” I enquired, as we jogged along side by side, “how do you think she looked—Miss Virginia?”

“Changed!” he answered, frowning.

“And for the better, don’t you think?”

“I wonder!” he growled. “She’s smarter dressed and shows more beautiful . . . p’raps, but . . . I wonder!”

“What, pray?”

“A precious lot, sir, but—no matter! No sooner do I meet her than—there I am like a stuck pig, damme, and dumb as an oyster! I’m always at my worst in her presence.”

“So it seems!” I nodded. “And why?”

“Oh well,” he answered mournfully, “because she’s herself and I’m—only me!”

“So you told me before, Will, and if I thought it so ridiculous then, I deem it perfectly idiotic now.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because she is the merest feminine and you show very much a man, singlehearted, honest and clean of soul, and such man is certainly one of the noblest works of creation.”

“Sir,” he murmured, keeping his gaze between the ears of his horse, “is—all that—your idea o’ me?”

“It is.”

“Well, sir, I’m grateful, for ’tis heartening to a poor chap as is longing so desperate hard to make the most of himself and do his best with so little. But—I’d give my right arm . . . I’d do or suffer a lot to have her think one hundredth part so kindly of me.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

“Don’t I—what?”

“Endeavour to be and show always at your best?”

“Sir, I’m doing my very damnedest that way! You may have noticed as I don’t talk so rough as some, except now and again when I forget, and though first a street Arab and then a fighting man and then a dragoon, I don’t curse and I don’t swear—much. Well, sir, this is all owing to her, and my old cobbler, and my own desire to do the best I may with what Nature’s given me to do it with. And though never a drinking man, by reason of Jessamy Todd and the Game, for no man can drink and fight his best, I made up for it by being an uncommon hard swearer, and it was my degrading language first got me acquainted with my little old cobbler.”

“Pray tell me of it, Will.”

“Well, sir, I was out o’ work and feeling pretty low in every way and hanging about Covent Garden Market in hopes of a job when I see two porters laying into a little, oldish cove with his back to a wall. So naturally I charged ’em at the gallop and laid ’em out, but took a regular rib-roaster in doing it, and, what with this and being pretty hungry besides, I told ’em very blunt what I thought o’ them—very blunt indeed! When lo and behold you—this little old chap taps me on the arm and says: ‘My good friend and brother,’ says he, ‘after such noble fist work why debase yourself with such foulness o’ speech? Why waste your breath by mouthing vile garbage o’ the gutter? If you must blow off steam,’ says he, ‘why not do it in noble, scholarly fashion?’ ‘As how?’ I asks. ‘Why,’ says he, ‘instead o’ calling these fallen wretches such obscene names, you might address ’em thus.’ Then, standing above these two porters, who lay where they’d fallen, for I’d hit ’em pretty hard, ‘Hi, you down there,’ says he, ‘we hereby denounce ye as an unmatched problem in trigonometry, a malformed pair of isosceles triangles, vertiginous rhomboids, and preposterous parallelograms!’ Sir, this shook those two porters more than all my cursing . . . and so ’twas I met old Tobias Spence and began to learn Euclid, Algebra, and Geometry that very same week. Ay, and what’s more, he lent me money, did Toby, to tide me over till I could find a job.”

“Will,” I exclaimed, “positively I must meet and know your cobbler so soon as we are back in London—whenever that may be.”

“Ah—when?” sighed Will.

“This,” I answered, “depends on the whimsies of a wilful young lady—at least, for a week.”

“So you’ll return in one short week, sir?”

“Yes, decidedly!”

“Well, I shan’t!”

“You are a dogged fellow, Will.”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Are you pretty well supplied with money?”

“Fairish, sir. I managed to put a bit by, and when that’s gone I’ll turn my hand to something or other; a man needn’t starve.”

“And,” said I, “you understand horses.”

“Yes, I might get a job as groom or ostler. Ay, ’tis good suggestion that!”

Thus we talked as we rode these bosky ways, and came into Truro as evening fell, myself jaded, wearied with our fruitless errand, and much in need of a bath. As for Will, learning upon instant enquiry that O'Dowd was still abroad, off he rode again in quest of the truant, and a grimly purposeful fellow he looked.

CHAPTER XI

Of "Neptune" and an Oath

"PRIME!" sighed Shrig, pushing aside his empty plate. "After having ate, ay, and drunk, along o' you so hearty and free, all as I can say is prime! Also I have never sported my ivories on a finer, tastier cut o' beef! And, talking o' beef, Mr. B., I suppose you don't feel inclined to go a-fishing, say?"

"Fishing?" I enquired, in no little surprise.

"Ar!" he nodded. "In a boat, along o' me."

"No," I answered, "I have not the least inclination."

"Though," continued Shrig, his bright eyes roving, " 'tisn't exackly fish as I shall fish for—not exackly—no. 'Tis summat more in my line than anything as can be caught by any sort o' line or even hook or net."

"Shrig," said I, "pray now what are you driving at?"

"Williany, sir!" he answered, fixing me suddenly with his eyes so that I must needs observe, as I ever do, how peculiarly keen and searching they can be. "Sir," he continued, lowering his voice and tapping the table with blunt finger tip, "in this last year, on a stretch o' this here coast not five mile long, six good ships, or as you might say, wessels, has been wrecked and not a living soul, no—nothing saved of 'em except a few battered timbers and, let's say p'raps, the best part o' their cargoes!"

"Ah," said I, "of course you mean——"

"Sir, I mean sich a pro-digious lot as it don't do to talk about—not even in a visper. But vun o' them ships homeward bound from the Indies—a werry rich cargo and named *Neptoon*—comes ashore at a place called Killigerran, and all as the rocks leaves of her and crew is a-laying at this moment under the ocean wave! But, sir, I've seen Neptoon, her figurehead! He's lost most of his paint, or had, and his trident is broke off short, but he's got his name carved on to him in a scroll, werry nice and plain too."

"Where did you see this?"

"In the back gardin of a tall, painting cove as used to be the parson hereabouts, and a werry nice gardin it is."

“Strange!” said I.

“Ar!” nodded Shrig.

“And, oddly enough, I believe I had some talk with this gentleman recently.”

“Yes, sir, you did. Said gent was p’inting out to you all the dangerous rocks o’ the coast and naming of ’em werry perticular.”

“He did. But how in the world——”

“Obserwation, sir! Now I’d take it werry kind if you’ll conwerse vith said gen’leman again and prewail on him to tell you how Neptoon got hisself into sich a reg’lar bower o’ peace all flowers and hollyhocks afore him and cabbages and the like in his rear and a painter to touch him up where needed—if you’ll be so obleeging, Mr. Brandonleigh?”

“Certainly, Shrig, I’ll ride over tomorrow morning. And now I should like to know how you progress with the case, Jasper?”

“Sir,” he answered, shaking his head gloomily, “I don’t! I am continually running my beezer, or, as you might say, my snitch, agin brick valls as meets me at every turn. Mr. B., sir, each time as I takes this here old rusty nail from my veskit pocket,” sighed he, suiting act with word and placing the dreadful thing upon the tablecloth, “each time as I so do, it seems no more than a rusty mockery and re-proach. Yet I know and so do you, none better, that seventy year ago this same, being then a nail bright and noo, drove by the hands of some party or parties yet unknown, did by means of a hammer, through the temporal bone, pierce into the tibby, or, as you might say, the head and brain of Josiah Wrybrook, whereby said Josiah did instantly languish and die, same being against the King’s peace. Verefore and therefore The Law, as embodied by Jarsper Shrig, demands to know: By oos hand was the fell deed committed? And, sir—ekker answers and says: ‘Ax me another’!”

“All of which means,” said I, smiling despite his gloomy visage and the rusted horror on the table before us, “that so far your investigations have proved vain.”

“Wain, sir, is the only word for it—almost!”

“Then,” said I, “you have discovered something, Jasper?”

“Sir, I have, yet so precious little as makes me pretty sure as there’s a mighty lot to find. Seventy years is a longish time, and yet, sir, I still dare wenture to—hope (though wrote werry small indeed) as Justice shall be

windicated at last. But things at present is far from rosy, and this here Cornwall is such a rum sort o' country, a werry outlandish sort o' place!"

"Yes," said I, "a strange, mysterious county full of age-old memories and memorials of the Forgotten Folk. Hut circles, monoliths, and cromlechs set up by giants, it would seem, that loom more tremendous through the mists of hoary legend and the dust of vanished years."

"Ar!" Shrig nodded, "and so werry far from London, from Bow Street, from The Law! To apprehend crime, to clap my fambles, or, as you might say, my daddles on Williany in London is vun thing; to do ditter in Cornwall is another pair o' boots! And talking o' boots, Mr. B., how did you find things yonder at Trelant s'arternoon?"

"Who told you I was there today, Shrig?"

"Obserwation, sir! By means o' my ogles, my blinkers, or peepers I observed you and that young Vokes in conwerse along o' a certain young feemale party as——"

"You—saw?"

"Ay, I did, sir. Enough to de-dooce as our young miss was saying you a werry determinated 'No.' I also observed young Mr. Polgarth a-spying and a-harking to you—and all that thereafter followed. And though finding no manner o' fault wi' young Vokes's fist play, I could vish as he'd played 'em on others instead o' Mr. Polgarth and his two men."

"But," said I, greatly wondering, "how on earth could you possibly see all this?"

"By means of a old, ruinated tower in a vood, as seems set there for the werry purpose."

"Ah! So you have seen that ghastly tower, Jasper?"

"Ghastly?" he repeated, pondering the adjective. "I dunno as I should call it that exackly, though to be sure I never see a properer place for it."

"For what?"

"The Deed, sir! The Capital Act! So werry nice and lonesome and a old dungeon below, all complete verein to dispose o' the remains or corpus derrylicktus—till it can be took out to sea and disposed of for good and all. But up above in this here tower, reached by stone steps in werry good repair —ar, remarkable good, considering—said tower affords a precious good view o' the country round about, the sea on one side running into Trelant

Cove and werry pretty too, and the old Manor House on t'other, in a little walley all set about by trees. And, talking of trees, sir, have you had the pleasure or fortun' yet to meet young Mr. P.'s pa—Sir Wilfred Polgarth?"

"Not as yet."

"Nor, sir, you ain't likely to, not for a day or so, considering as he's laid up at this i-dentical minute, owing to a damaged trotter, a sprained ankle, or summat o' the sort."

"Indeed?"

"Ar, owing to his having fell down some o' them same steps into dungeon aforesaid."

"How?" I exclaimed. "In that dreadful tower?"

"That werry same place, sir."

"But what could he want—and what could anyone possibly want in that hideous ruin?"

"Sir, since you ax me so werry p'inted, I'll answer you frank and free—ekker alone answers, for I dunno. But a thing I do know is, he gets tripped down them said steps by means of a rope tied there for the purpose!"

"Villainous!" I exclaimed. "But how do you know, and who would play such abominable trick?"

"Sir, to the best o' my belief, 'twas tied there by a werry owdacious peddling cove, a Jewish-looking customer as I've took partickler notice of thereabouts."

"Shrig, I've seen the rascal, an extremely hairy fellow! He tried to sell me some of his trumpery on the road."

"That sounds werry like the wagabone—viskers, a pack, and a tray?"

"Precisely! It seems the fellow is a menace."

"Werry true!" sighed Shrig, picking up the rusty nail and shaking his head at it. "Menace is the only vord for him. And, talking o' menaces, sir, seventy year ago this here as looks no more than a innocent bit o' rusty ——"

"Don't!" I exclaimed. "Don't dwell on the horror! Put the thing away and take another glass of this quite drinkable port."

"Thankee, no, sir!" He sighed, pocketing the grim trophy with elaborate care. "Instead, sir, by your good leave, I'll bid ye good night and trip up the

dancers to kip."

"I fear all that is beyond me, Shrig."

"Vich, sir, don't nohow sap-rise me, considering as how 'tis thieves' flash patter and means 'go upstairs to bed.' So pleasant dreams, sir; expect to see me ven ye do and hear from me any time. And, Mr. Brandonleigh, sir, I depends on you to larn all as you may consarning poor old Neptoon."

It was perhaps an hour later and I had just lighted my bed candle when someone tapped softly on my sitting-room door and, receiving permission, Will entered also bearing a lighted candle.

"I just looked in," said he gloomily, "to tell you I found Mike . . . he's safe in bed."

"So he's been drinking?"

"Yes, but . . . nothing to matter. All the same I gave him the length o' my tongue and very near both my fists as well. In the end he took his oath not to drink again. You see . . . he's off tomorrow with . . . Polgarth to some race meeting or horse sale . . . and I can't go with him now because Polgarth would know me, of course."

"Do you think he will keep his word?"

"Well," answered Will, scowling at the flame of his candle, "he gave me his sworn oath."

"And are you afraid he will break it?"

"No," answered Will, but in the same hesitating manner. "No, I don't . . . he wouldn't dare—not after the oath I made him swear . . . he wouldn't . . . no, he couldn't!"

"What was the oath, Will?"

"I made him say: 'I won't drink again or may God strike me dead.' "

"A rather terrible oath, Will."

"Yes. That's why he won't . . . no, he couldn't . . . he'd never dare to break it. Good night, sir!" And, with the word, Will turned and went his way, leaving me to stare now in my turn at the flame of my candle.

CHAPTER XII

Introduces Miss Evadne Trevanion and Ghosts

NEXT morning, in pursuance of my promise to Shrig, I set forth at reasonably early hour upon my inquisitorial visit to Mr. Trevanion.

Having a native abhorrence for all unseemly haste, I rode at leisured and dignified amble through a golden young summer morning by winding, leafy roads amid a country of wooded hills and umbrageous valleys where sleepy hamlets nestled, while all about me, in shady trees and blooming hedgerows, birds carolled so joyously that, reining up to enjoy a particularly beautiful prospect, I was amazed and not a little shocked to hear myself whistling with a vulgar shrillness—like the ploughman who was driving his team in a field near by and who now, chancing to catch my eye, halted his plough, touched his hat, and ceased his whistling to bid me a smiling, cheery "Good morning." And this surely the comeliest, neatest of ploughmen, from trim, gaitered legs to smooth-shaven face.

"You appear," said I, returning his salutation, "to be extremely cheerful."

"Well, so I d'be, sir."

"Because of this very beautiful morning?"

"Well . . . no, can't say as I've took any notice o' the morning."

"Then, pray, why are you so lighthearted?"

"Because I ain't my brother 'Arold. Y'see, sir, 'e's married and I ain't! Though I were as big a fool as 'Arold—tried for her myself, I did, but she picks poor 'Arold. So 'Arold married of her, and there they be, over to Portscatha, man and wife! Ah, there's poor old 'Arold tied up for the rest of 'is days—and here's me, a free man! So do ee wonder as I be that cheerful as I could sing and dance for j'y?" Here he blinked up at me with eyes suspiciously bright, chirruped to his horses in tone that seemed almost too cheerful, and ploughed off along the new furrow, whistling louder and more cheerily than ever. And when I had gazed after his retreating form I rode on again, pondering whether or no this extremely merry whistling was not the song of a grieving heart.

And now, putting my horse to an easy canter, I continued my going until I came to a place where three ways met and, of course, no finger post to direct me. But as I halted, at some loss which way to take, I beheld a shortish, broad-backed fellow leaning dejectedly against a stile that gave upon a sloping meadow, beyond which stretched this blue Cornish sea all a-sparkle to the glad sunshine.

"Can you," said I, approaching this solitary individual, "direct me to Mr. Trevanion's house, Mr. Samuel Trevanion?" The man turned slowly and showed me a well-featured, youngish face though of a singularly gloomy cast.

"Ess, I can, sir," he answered, "though I don't s'pose as 'twill be no manner o' good ef I do."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll be pretty sarten to find as 'e ain't at 'ome."

"I must risk that possibility, so tell me where I——"

"Down along, sir," answered the man, pointing, "twixt yere and the porth, a li'l lane t'y'r left."

"Thank you!" said I. "A beautiful morning."

"I've see better!"

"Indeed?"

"Ay!"

"Are you in any trouble?"

"Plenty! Up to my y'ears. I always am."

"Do you require any immediate assistance?"

"No! Nobody can't 'elp me—except them as could and ought—and won't! And now it's me jaw!"

"Toothache?"

"Ah—an old 'un it d'be—savaging o' me for days."

"Why not have it attended to?"

"I be a-makin' up me mind to 'ave it drawed."

"Why hesitate?" I enquired, coming a little nearer, for to find this man so persistently mournful and determined in his woe afforded me no little

interest and amusement. “Why do you hesitate?” I repeated.

“Becos,” he replied in moaning accents, “I don’t s’pose as I’ll be any better when ’tis out.”

“Are you always so unhappy?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Why should you?”

“There’s reasons!” He sighed. “Plenty on ’em—ah, too much to tell and too many to remember!” Here he turned back to the stile again, thus cutting short my further inquisition and I was about to continue on my way when a voice, pleasingly familiar, arrested me and, glancing round, I beheld Mr. Trevanion himself in the act of climbing a gate on the opposite side of the way.

“Good morning, sir!” said he, flapping his shabby old hat at me. “I trust you are well. Aha, Henry, is it out, that troublesome molar? Is it extracted, evicted, cast forth into the void; art free of it and thy dolour, my Henricus?”

“No, sir, it ain’t,” groaned the sufferer. “So no more ain’t I.”

“Why so, my Henry, why so?”

“Becos, sir, if out—oo knows as I shan’t miss it and want it in again? And if drawed I ain’t nowise sure as I shall be any better.”

“Ho!” exclaimed the tall ex-cleric, shaking his head at this gloomy fellow as any indulgent father might have done. “Must it be myself and the pliers again, Henry?”

“No, sir!” answered Two-legged Gloom, recoiling. “Ef it must be, I’d sooner heave un out wi’ my sheath knife.”

“Nay, a butcherly method, Henry! Mr. Brandonleigh, I present my doleful Henry, my grievous Cragg, a most determined despondent, yet expert boatman, an itinerant fishmonger, a somewhat indifferent gardener, but an all-round handy man. Now, Henry, off with you to the village and out with that tooth, then back to the cottage and help me dig potatoes.”

“Ay, sir, though they’m pretty sarten to be blighted and——”

“Blighted indeed—my potatoes? Begone, thou dismal Jeremiah, and come not back with thy tooth or I’ll use the pliers again! Now, Mr. Brandonleigh, the cottage is close by if you care to step so far.”

“Gladly, sir,” I answered.

“So,” said he, as I walked beside him, leading my horse, “you and your companion have been exploring the country hereabouts; you were lately at Trelant, I understand?”

“We were,” I answered, and in some surprise, “but how should such small item of news reach you?”

“Aha, sir,” he smiled, “you are in Cornwall, you are also a stranger, and consequently your comings and goings are noted—more especially in this neighborhood.”

“Why hereabouts especially, Mr. Trevanion?”

He seemed to debate this question almost as if it troubled him and, glancing askance at me, answered:

“Sir, we Cornish are a . . . a secretive folk, and if you ask me why this should be, all I can tell you is . . . ‘The Free Trade.’ It is in our blood, high and low, gentry and commonality, and,” he ended with sigh and tone very like relief, “here we are at the cottage! Oh yes, pray bring your horse; we’ve plenty of stable room. Oho—Evadne!” he called in his clear, ringing voice. “Evadne, where are you?”

“Here, Sam!” answered another voice as clear and even sweeter, I thought. “Good gracious, Sam, why bawl? Where should I be, on such a morning, but in the garden? What d’you want now?”

“I bring a guest, my dear, a Mr. Brandonleigh.”

“You would!” she retorted. “And poor me not fit to be seen. Will he stay for dinner?”

“Of course, Evadne.”

“No, no!” I demurred.

“Indeed, yes!” he nodded, and then called, “By the way, Evadne, I suppose we’ve something worthy to offer him, eh?”

“Oh yes,” she laughed back, “if your Mr. Brandonleigh can make do with fried plaice and stewed rabbit. If he can you may bring him and present him to your hard-working sister.”

So to the garden we went, a place trim and orderly yet where all manner of flowers bloomed in a riot of colour and fragrance, such garden as may only be or exist by reason of constant loving care, an oddly peaceful, very English garden set within such landscape as only England may show; and

amidst it all, like the presiding genius of the place, a woman upon her knees busied to plant something with a trowel.

And now as she rose to greet me I saw that, like her brother, she was tall and nobly shaped, with an oval face framed in chestnut, wind-blown hair and lit by long grey eyes in whose steady deeps a twinkling imp of mischief seemed to lurk. She acknowledged my bow with a stately curtsey, saying laughingly:

"I must look a terrible fright in this old gown and with earth to my elbows! But Sam always chooses such occasions for showing his poor sister to strangers. So, by your leave, sir, I'll go and try to make myself a little more presentable . . . and peep at my stew!"

And now from the joy of this fragrant, sunny garden I let my gaze wander across the magnificent sweep of a bowery countryside trending down to rocky foreshore and blue expanse of ocean, and with no least thought as yet of "Neptune."

"Mr. Trevanion," said I, "here you have beauty all around you."

"Yes," he answered, "this was my reason for buying the cottage and nearly ruined myself to do so, but here is abundant repayment. Down there you see Pendower, with Carne beyond, rising to the noble swell of Pen Nair. An Irish friend of mine—now dead, alas—blessed with the gift of words, once wrote of a far less noble landscape:

"*I know a storm-lashed headland*
Where the land in glory dips
In waves of purple heather
To the ocean's foaming lips."

Now it was as I listened to this quotation that my wandering glance lighted, and quite by accident, upon the chief object of my visit—a startling shape of heroic proportions upstarting from riot of simple cottage flowers; this glaring incongruity stood in the fragrant shade of a roomy arbour bowered in great, heavy-headed roses, and thitherward I directed my steps, followed, and almost unwillingly it seemed, by my host.

Yes, here plainly confessed stood Neptune, this storm-battered god of the wide seas, grasping the broken shaft of what once had been his trident, his scars now hidden by garish paint—with the blackest of wind-tossed hair and beard, the fiercest of round eyes, and the yellowest of crowns—a staring,

glaring, preposterous thing, altogether out of place amid the simple, gentle beauty of this lovely, peaceful garden.

From this outlandish object I glanced at my host to find him regarding me with that same half-furtive, wistful look wherein I now seemed to read a latent anxiety akin to apprehension; and now, as if conscious of this, he sighed and spoke:

"Alas, this that was a battered relic, a memorial of human craftsmanship and heroic endurance, a reminder of Man's agelong struggle against great Ocean's might, has been transformed by Henry's too-perfervid brush into . . . well . . . what you see!"

"The figurehead of some ship," said I, "wrecked presumably on the coast hereabout."

"Yes, sir," he answered, making as if to turn away, "one of that countless host of lost ships that lie all around this storm-beaten island of ours."

"Especially," I added, my gaze still upon this too-vivid Neptune, "this part of England named Cornwall." Mr. Trevanion turned on me so suddenly that he may be said to have jumped, but, finding me apparently still intent upon my inspection of the sea-god, sighed again, saying:

"Yes, my poor, beautiful Cornwall, though so lovely, is set within a cruel coast, grim and merciless—if a ship strikes she is too often—doomed!"

"Inevitably!" said I. "And, with her, all poor souls on board." At this he was silent so long that at last I turned and beheld him with greying head bowed and long, nervous hands clasped like one who prayed.

"Indeed," I continued, "on such rock-bound coast no ship, however strong, and no frail human body could possibly survive."

"No," he answered, in strange, hushed tone, "no ship . . . no man . . . could hope . . . to live! Ah, kind God have pity, show mercy on this frail Humanity!" So saying, he turned and began to pace across the smooth lawn, and I with him. Thus presently, because of my promise to Shrig, I propounded the question:

"Referring to your Neptune, sir, one naturally is inclined to wonder how you came by it?" And, after a momentary hesitation, he made answer:

"It was some time ago . . . there had persisted a strong east wind, not a storm as we know such, but the seas had been thundering in the cove for days . . . the skies overcast all day and the nights pitch-black. . . . We heard

some ship had . . . driven ashore off Killigerran . . . broken up and gone down . . . with all hands."

"Not one survivor?" I enquired.

"No!" he answered in groaning voice. "No—not one!"

"Is that part of the coast too perilous for any attempted rescue, Mr. Trevanion?"

"Sir, it is a jagged precipice few or none may scale."

"And was it thereabouts you found Neptune?"

"No, in the cove beyond called Alwannack, where some weeks later I chanced to see divers of the fishermen with fire and a cauldron tanning, or, as they call it, 'barking' their nets. So down I went for word with them and then it was that I beheld yonder melancholy relic all scarred and battered by the rocks and, seeing they were about to burn it, I begged it of them, for being then without Henry's dreadful paint, it seemed well conceived and executed, but Pentreath, a morose fellow from Trelant, refused my request and so ungently that—God forgive me—I shook the poor wretch for his insolence, forgetting my strength, alas—and dropped him into a pool. However, the other men bestowed it upon me and were even so obliging as to haul it all the way up to my garden and set it up for me. Ah, and there is my sister Evadne beckoning to us at last!"

Nor did she merely beckon, but came to meet us across the smooth turf, a woman of no particular beauty, as I thought then, but gracious of bearing and of such form as made her clinging gown a joy to the beholder.

The room we entered was very simply furnished, and yet instantly I knew this for that best and most sacred of earthly places—a home; for, though void of all extravagant luxury, it possessed a far richer blessing and one that my own spacious chambers, with all their many aids to my personal comfort, had never given me; thus, as we took our seats at the table, I was pondering this question, namely: What is it that has the divine power to make the meanest habitation "home"? Why can roof and walls—themselves no more than mere shelter for animal comfort—become a sacred place? What is it can endear such place to the heart, ennoble it to the soul, can elevate it into the symbol of all that is best in life, something to live for, joy in, and, if need be, to die for? Palace or cottage, mansion or hut—what is it that can make them "home"?

So lost was I in this problem that I started to a light touch upon my arm and, turning, beheld Miss Trevanion smiling at me.

“Mr. Brandonleigh, the picture you were gazing at so intently—of the mournful gentleman in that most uncomfortable periwig—is the portrait of our great-grandfather; he seems to so enthral you that my question is still unanswered.”

At this I fell to such fervour of apology that she laughed, then, looking at me with her steady grey eyes, spoke her question again:

“Have you had the supreme honour and extremity of joy to meet Her Ladyship yet?”

“Forgive me, Miss Trevanion, but I fear I don’t apprehend——”

“But, sir, whom could I possibly mean but that old . . . person, Lady Polgarth—have you?”

“No,” I answered, looking into the eyes that met mine so squarely; and thus I fancied to read there that which surprised me to sudden interest. “No, we have not met, but I have seen her from a distance in Truro High Street, but her appearance, her air and manner, struck me so very forcibly that I should greatly value your feminine opinion . . . to know your estimation . . . what you think of her?”

“Oh, I don’t, if I can help it, and if I do I think of her as the Hoary Evil, the Ancient——”

“Evadne!” exclaimed her brother in strange agitation.

“Well, but I do, Sam! I execrate the dreadful old creature and——”

“Evadne, I must protest!”

“Then so you shall, Sam dear,” answered Miss Trevanion, patting his nearest hand with a caress I thought very tender and motherly. “All the same, my dear, it was due to her evil influence, that seems so all-powerful, that you nearly broke your poor heart and gave up your life’s work.”

“Not altogether,” he sighed, “no, it was not her influence decided me; there were other . . . circumstances even more compelling, my dear.”

“Other circumstances—yes!” she nodded. “Mr. Brandonleigh, I wonder if you can guess just what they were?”

“Well,” I answered, glancing from troubled brother to placid, comforting sister, “smuggling, perhaps?”

“Dear me—no!” she exclaimed, with smile almost roguish and the imp of mischief dancing in her eyes. “We are all smugglers about here—except

Sam, of course, and he doesn't have to because I do! Oh yes, Mr. Brandonleigh, I am a most abandoned smuggler, terribly hardened! The silks and satins and laces I wear—sometimes the tea I drink—too often the spirits I force Sam to gulp down when necessary—rum hot with sugar and lemon peel is so excellent against chills—the delicate china I use—on state occasions—the Orient rugs I love to look at and scarce dare to tread upon—are all smuggled! We could never afford them else. Oh no, gracious me—I don't mean smuggled! No, Mr. Brandonleigh, that which is my dear brother's grief and this lovely county's abiding shame is something far, far worse."

"Evadne, pray hush thee now!"

"Why, so I will, Sam dear, in a moment. Mr. Brandonleigh, it is something so dreadful, so wickedly inhuman, I dare not speak of it except ——"

"Then don't!" cried her brother in voice that was a groan. "For God's sake, Evadne—don't!"

"Nor is there any need," said I gently, "for by the whispers I have heard before today, and remembering that glaring, battered shape of tragedy out there in your garden, I am only too certain of the fearful, the abominable truth—ships lured to their destruction on these terrible coasts and . . . none left alive to tell the ghastly story."

"Sir . . . sir," cried Trevanion, reaching forth his hand to me in passionate appeal, "I ask you to believe . . . you must believe . . . these wrecking gangs are shunned and bitterly condemned by the better sort—honest fisherfolk and the like . . . so much so that they are forced to live apart in the wilder places, remote villages and lonely hamlets where none save their own wicked sort are welcome and all strangers feared and held suspect. Our Cornish people are really and in truth a sweet, kindly, honest folk, reverent and law-abiding—except, of course, for the smuggling. You will believe this, sir, you must."

"I do!" said I.

"Yet," he continued, clenching his powerful hands like one in bodily sufferance, "it was because of these wild, sinful ones that I gave up my ministry, for how . . . ah, how might I pray God's blessing on them . . . and their hands red with innocent blood . . . how could I——?"

"There, there, Sam!" murmured Miss Evadne, taking his great, quivering fist and kissing it until it opened and became a hand that seemed to clasp

hers rather pitifully. “I did but tell Mr. Brandonleigh what he must have learned soon or late and perhaps to our poor Cornwall’s more disadvantage. For, though smugglers, we are not murderous wreckers, Mr. Brandonleigh. But now, to change this odious subject, I should be interested to hear what you were doing at the haunted Tower?”

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “Of course you mean that very repulsive ruin.”

“My gracious!” she exclaimed, for I had spoken with an unwonted vehemence. “Why, Mr. Brandonleigh, I have sometimes thought it beautiful, very picturesque and quite pathetic in its poor, weak old age—such stately giant as it must have been in its youthful strength so long ago.”

“And it is haunted, you tell me, Miss Trevanion?”

“Of course, sir! Most ruins are, or should be—especially Cornish ruins! However, this particular one of Trelant Tower is extremely well haunted.”

“Lights?” I suggested.

“Of course!” she nodded. “But also by far more than such ordinary, commonplace horrors as mere ghost lights.”

“Rattling chains?” I enquired.

“Well—no, by some strange oversight, rattling chains have been omitted, but instead sounds have been heard there—far, oh, far more awful!”

“You interest me extremely!” said I.

“I am doing my best that way!” she retorted, with smiling nod.

“I should like to hear more of these mysteries.”

“You would be a very bad listener if you didn’t.”

“Have you yourself heard these sounds, Miss Trevanion?”

“Good gracious—no! What should I be doing in such place at the fell midnight hour? Oh no—but Henry tells me—by the way, Henry is our figure of Gloom who condescends to look after Sam’s boat and even helps in the garden—when so disposed—well, Henry tells how one night Harold Nicholls and Charles Over with Ronnie Greet and Gordon Oliver—out after rabbits and other game, you’ll understand; they are all most expert poachers and keep me well supplied—out one midnight in Trelant Woods, saw a light, green or blue or red, I forget which exactly, but very ghastly and horrid, heard the most terrible sounds of—struggling in the old Tower.”

“Struggling?” I repeated. “You mean——”

"Just struggling, sir, and most desperate, that stopped—all at once, and —then——"

"Well," I enquired, for she had paused to nod at me, "what next, pray?"

"And then," she continued, her shapely lips curving to roguish smile, the imp of mischief dancing in her fine eyes again, by reason, as I suppose, of my eager interest, "then, Mr. Brandonleigh, they all heard something so awful that Charles says 'his flesh felt all fishhooks,' Harold declares he was 'all shiversome cold'—what Ronnie and Gordon said I'd rather not repeat—so very awful was this dreadful sound!"

"But how . . . what . . . pray, how did they describe it?"

"Well, they declare, and they are all very honest, truthful men as a rule, they declare this dreadful struggling was suddenly cut short by a . . . long . . . horrible . . . bubbling . . . scream! Now isn't that deliciously ghastly—especially the 'bubbling'—so perfectly gruesome!"

"Can you say just when this was heard?"

"Yes, it would be about six months ago."

Now here, with movement rather startling, so very sudden was it, her brother rose and, crossing to the open lattice, leaned there, gazing out into the fragrant, sunny garden.

And presently, our meal being ended, to the garden we all repaired, to sit within the rose-girt arbour which, his sister informed me, had been constructed by Trevanion's very capable hands. Here then I sat in pleasant converse with this brother and sister, for truly the more I saw and heard of them the better I liked them.

Thus the afternoon was well advanced when, with hearty farewells and grateful promises of future visits, I mounted and turned my horse's nose towards Truro, touching him with my spurs to a fast canter since I feared to lose my way and had no mind that night should catch me on the road. But I had gone no great distance when I espied a small, shambling figure flitting before me in shadow of the hedge and should have passed unheeding had not this furtive shape halted suddenly, turned with arresting arm outflung, and showed itself for Shrig's go-between, the little whiskery nondescript called Dan'l.

"Well?" I demanded none too graciously, as I reined up beside him.

"Evenin', sir!" said he in his toneless voice, lifting one finger towards hatbrim. "Jarsper's compliments, and I were to say: 'Neptoon' and wait your

reply."

"Oh well," I said, "you may tell him that about six months ago, as he is already aware, a ship, almost certainly the *Neptune*, was wrecked at Killigerran, and a little later, and this he does not know, a Trelant man named Pentreath was discovered, with others unnamed, in the act of burning the figurehead of Neptune at a place called Alwannack Cove. Also," I continued, beckoning Dan'l nearer and lowering my voice, "Trelant Tower is said to be haunted and there is a tale abroad concerning sounds of desperate struggling heard there about six months ago and a dreadful, bubbling scream." And I added, moved by sudden impulse, "Like the cry of one whose throat is cut!"

The man Dan'l merely blinked, nodded, and touched the brim of his nondescript hat.

"Right, sir. Jarsper's gratitood!" he murmured, and vanished through some opening in the hedge. Then on I rode again, my mind now greatly exercised by this tale of haunted tower, wondering if (since I gave no credence to anything ghostly or supernatural) my instant and instinctive horror of the place had been induced by some strange sense warning me of evils past and perhaps yet again to be, or whether my loathing dread of the place was but mere phantasy induced by a too-perfervid imagination. And I was yet pondering this and had reached no decision when I came into Truro town with the shadows of approaching night all about me.

CHAPTER XIII

Concerning the "Luck of the O'Dowd" and a Broken Oath

"Sir?" enquired Enoch, presenting himself in answer to my ring.

"Come in," said I, "close the door, and pray sit down." Enoch bowed and obeyed, that is to say he seated himself upon extreme edge of the nearest chair and remained there so uncomfortably stiff in the back and blankly wooden of countenance that I shook my head, saying:

"No, no, don't perch, sit, man; sit and be human, for I desire your assistance and advice. Though first I am bound to say I find you something of an anomaly."

"Though a useful one, sir, I trust?"

"Most certainly. But since listening to your troublous story the other morning I am aware that you are a person of education and were, perhaps, a man of some condition and therefore above your present position."

"Your pardon—no, sir! I am perfectly content to be and to remain your very obedient, humble servant and, as such, beg to know how I can possibly advise or assist you."

"Have you no desire to better yourself?"

"None whatever, sir! My young ambitions died in prison."

"Nonsense, Enoch! How old are you?"

"Forty-six, sir, and feel a hundred."

"And but six years my senior."

"Yet feel and look much older, sir."

"Enoch," said I pensively, "a man of forty should have learned some wisdom of Life. What has it taught you? And pray answer as a man of the world and not as a gentleman's gentleman."

"Why, then, Mr. Brandonleigh, experience has taught me to make the best of things no matter how bad they seem, and to fight shy of women—especially young ones!"

“A sound philosophy, Enoch. May I know what you were before . . . a woman broke your faith and ruined your life?”

“A nobody, sir!” he answered, becoming again stiff in the back and wooden of visage.

“Quite so!” I retorted, a little huffed to be put off thus. “However, I desire your co-operation in a matter that interests me.”

“You shall find me zealous, sir.”

“I believe you and Will have discovered a liking, a friendship for one another?”

“Well, sir, Mr. Vokes has been good enough and so condescending as to ____”

“Enoch,” quoth I a little peevishly, “pray continue to speak as a man!”

“Very well, sir. Then I am proud to believe Will does indeed esteem me as a friend.”

“Excellent!” I nodded. “For you will please understand I am much interested in this young man’s welfare, his success in life and future happiness, and am therefore determined to mould him, polish . . . shape him.”

“Certainly, sir. But—into what?”

“A gentleman, or at least into something more easy and gracious of manner than he shows at present—and much less grim.”

“Indeed, sir? But do you think this possible?”

“Why not, pray?”

“Well, for one thing, he is a man, set in his ways, and of such downright, honest nature that I venture to think he will prefer to remain himself rather than become a mere copy.”

“But,” said I, “pray do not forget that this Will, like every other human being, possesses several different selves; it is the best I would draw forth and exploit to his own future betterment. Moreover, he has an extremely powerful incentive, indeed such potent inducement as should make such man attempt anything.”

“A woman, of course, sir!”

“And a remarkably attractive one, and not so much because she is personable as that she is peculiarly evasive and surprisingly—unexpected.”

“You make her sound the perfect Feminine.”

“Yet speak no more than absolute fact. You saw her advent upon the scene, Enoch, yourself introduced her into my bachelor establishment. What, then, was your estimation of Miss Wrybrook?”

“Sir, if I must answer I should say she is a veritable daughter of Lilith—Eve incarnate!”

“Meaning precisely what?”

“The sort of Eve who knows herself perfectly able to the management of the Adam she fixes her choice upon.”

“Dear me!” said I, “you appear to have observed a great deal in a short time, Enoch!”

“Sir, I had the advantage of a preview. I happened to be cleaning your boots in the pantry and, glancing through the window, beheld this young lady crossing the square and, sir——”

“Enoch,” said I, “you are about to tell me that, on this occasion, Miss Wrybrook did not creep or glide like modest miss with eyes demurely downcast and was anything but meek or mouselike?”

“No, indeed, sir! She walked with the resolute air and swing of a young Amazon girt for combat. If ever I saw a feminine body instinct with determined purpose, it was hers!”

“Precisely, Enoch! As I said, Miss Wrybrook possesses the attraction of unexpectedness——”

At this juncture we were disagreeably interrupted by a too-familiar clamour without; then the door swung wide and O’Dowd appeared and, to my annoyance, in extravagantly boisterous mood and so extremely Irish as goes, I fear, beyond my powers to justly set down. He seized and wrung my hand, he slapped Enoch upon the back, he tossed his hat upon the couch whence it rolled unheeded to the floor, supplied himself with a chair, all in as many moments, talking the while of horses, form, betting odds, and the “luck o’ the O’Dowd”—so that I gathered he had been spending his time on some race track or other and had returned thence a heavy winner.

“Foive hundred and nointy-three thick-uns, Governor!” he cried, reaching out to slap my knee, in which I baulked him, though narrowly. “ ’Tis the ‘luck o’ the Oirish’ b’ the powers! Ay, and ’tis ‘luck o’ the O’Dowd’ in particular, ay, faith, and so it is now. For didn’t I win the most of ut on an Oirish horse rid by an Oirish lad and called Oirish Proide—and

him an outsider at a hundred to wan? Shure an' Oi did then—though, says Jason to me: 'Moike,' he says——"

"Jason?" I enquired. "Do you mean Mr. Jason Polgarth?"

"Himsilf, Governor! Och, shure 'tis 'Moike' and 'Jason' with us already, ay, 'tis ateing out o' me hand he'll be!" Here O'Dowd laid finger against nose and winked. "But, as Oi'm tellin' ye: 'Hould hard, Moike!' says Jason. ' 'Tis never risk so much ye'll be after doing now on such no-account baste?' 'Jason, me buck,' says Oi, ' 'tis an Oirish baste and for Ould Oirland's blissed sake the "luck o' the O'Dowd" goes on him!' 'Moike,' says Jason, ' 'tis desprit-bould sportsman y'are!' 'Sure,' says Oi, ' 'tis the "luck o' the O'Dowd!" ' And down goes me money on Oirish Proide, ivery stiver—at a hundred to wan, and Jason, shaking his hid at me Oirish audacity, plays the favourite at six to four. And thin," cried O'Dowd, leaping afoot in his excitement, "the field is set—they're off! No, bad cess, 'tis a false start! Now—no—yes! Whirroo—away they go, hoofs thundering, clods flying, whips flailing! On they come, the favourite well away and moighty well placed, wi' Oirish Proide nowhere. 'Oi tould yez so, Moike!' cries Jason. 'Shure, 'tis your Oirish Proide will be your own ruin!' 'Why, then,' sez Oi, 'the "luck o' the O'Dowd" shall support me,' and then, just as I spoke, b'all the swate saints—out from the ruck o' galloping hids and tossing manes pokes a nose and hid, the blessed nose and hid of Oirish Proide! Ha, b' the powers—he wins free o' the field! He's chasing the favourite! He's up wi' the favourite's tail . . . and still coming! Whirroo, he's level—they're racing neck and neck for the winning post! The favourite's jockey is using his whip like a madman—the Oirish lad on Oirish Proide lets out an Oirish yell and . . . Oho! Aha!—that Oirish horse gathers himself in such a leap as carries him clear o' the favourite and flashes past the post like a blissed rocket, a winner by a couple o' lengths. 'Well, damme,' cries Jason, 'damme if I iver saw the loike! 'Twas witchcraft, spells, and black magic!' says he. 'No,' says Oi, ' 'twas the "luck o' the O'Dowd!" ' So now here's mesilf stuffed wi' the rhino and here's you going to crack a bottle with me and drink to——"

"No!" cried a harsh voice, and upon the threshold stood Will, fierce and grim, at sight of whom the irrepressible O'Dowd instantly began to dance what I suppose was an Irish reel, to the accompaniment of his own singing, which ended in sudden, shrill cry and stamp of foot.

"Whist now, Will, me laddo!" cried he gaily. " 'Tis an occasion calls for a bottle o'——"

"You promised!"

“Faith and so Oi did, but ’tis an occasion, as Oi’m tellin’ ye, to disremember such fool promise and let jollity rule and good fellowship hould sway!” And, speaking, he reached and tugged the bell rope.

“A promise is a promise!” growled Will.

“And so it is, me bucko, till it’s out o’ mind, so our bottle shall be a magnum——”

“You . . . swore an oath!” growled Will.

“Shure Oi did then,” laughed O’Dowd, “and swear it again I will—never to drink or may God strike——”

“Stop!” cried Will, advancing into the room and closing the door.

“That Oi’ll not!” retorted O’Dowd, with another dancing step. “I swear so I will—never to drink again or may God strike me dead—until the next occasion.”

“This is no promise!” said Will.

“ ’Tis my promise,” laughed O’Dowd, “and wan Oi’ll keep.”

At this moment, in answer to the bell, appeared a trim chambermaid to whom O’Dowd instantly wafted a kiss, saying:

“So there y’are, mavourneen, the saints bliss the pretty face av ye! Champagne and glasses, me dear, a magnum, and be spry, me darlint!” So the wine was brought and the glasses brimmed by O’Dowd who, lifting his own and smacking his lips at it, cried gaily:

“Now—drink, bumpers all and no heeltaps—drink to the ‘luck o’ the O’Dowd!’ ”

“No!” growled Will, retreating to the door.

“Eh—you won’t?”

“Not I! And I won’t stay to see you perjure yourself! No, I’d be afraid to!” And he went out, slamming the door behind him.

“Faith now,” quoth O’Dowd, nowise abashed, “the poor laddo takes loife too serious entoirely! Eh, but you will, sirs,” said he, turning to us, and now almost pleadingly, I thought. “Come now, ye won’t be after denying me, ye won’t be for dishonouring me toast, breaking the heart o’ me and laving me to drink alone, come now!”

So we drank, myself unwillingly yet with the best grace I could, one glass only, refusing more; as for O’Dowd, he filled again and gulped

thirstily more than once and with a feverish eagerness that came near to disgusting me and which (it grieves me now to remember) I took small pains to hide.

"Ha!" he exclaimed at last. "Now Oi'll be after going to comfort Will—faix, 'tis too much of an ould sobersides he is. But first, Governor, I'm letting ye know I've shifted me quarters to the Coach and Horses—for sufficient reasons, for 'tis not only for racing and betting. Oi've made mesilf indispensable to young Polgarth—och and begorra, Oi've nosed out so much, d'ye see, and suspect so much more that 'tis back in London Oi'll be, the case finished and guilty parties jailed, before Shrig so much as suspects the who or what or where of ut all, so Oi will."

"Then you know Jasper Shrig?" I enquired in some surprise. "Are you also a law officer?"

"Phwat, Governor, hasn't Will tould ye? But no, he wouldn't, he promised to keep mum. Faith, now, thin Oi'll be tellin' ye 'tis the broightest, most particular star o' the Bow Street Office Oi was until . . . for the least little bit of a small indiscrition in the world Oi was riprimanded—ay, b' the powers, riprimanded—me! Sir, the O'Dowd proide took me out o' the Bow Street doghole that same hour, so it did, and set me up in an office o' me own. So, Governor, you may tell Shrig to mind his eye, for I've got this case in me hand; another day or so, wan more piece of evidence, and Oi'll have proof enough for foive or six hangings. The Wrybrook Case is moine! Tell Jasper Shrig he's left at the post!"

So saying, Michael O'Dowd laid finger against his pugnaciously impudent nose, winked, nodded, and swaggered blithely away.

CHAPTER XIV

Of Tea and Virginia

It was about this time that I began to know and more justly to appreciate the strength of mind and complex character of Virginia Wrybrook, finding beneath the light gaiety natural to her youth a somewhat mordant and disconcerting wit, together with a judgment and understanding far beyond her years.

My first real meeting and conversation with her, and this the first of many, happened suddenly and quite by accident, for I had set out intending for the Trevanions' cottage but, losing my direction, as usual, in these labyrinthine Cornish lanes and byways, I found myself riding along a leafy bridle path that brought me into a pleasant woodland, its quivering green shot athwart by beams of sunshine and all about me the merry, tuneful clamour of birds. But as I rode slowly on through these leafy ways in this remote solitude I was surprised by that which I thought far sweeter than any note of bird—a woman's voice that sang, richly soft, from somewhere near by yet completely out of sight. Looking about me, therefore, I espied what I took to be a track of some sort, hard to see by reason of dense undergrowth, and, guided by this voice that I had recognised instantly, I pushed in among the bushes, whereat the singing was suddenly hushed because, as I suppose, of the prodigious rustling of my approach. But on I went until from my tall horse I could see over and through the leafage and thus beheld a little green hollow or dingle and in this bower, throned upon the mossy bole of a fallen tree, Miss Virginia Wrybrook.

She had been engaged upon needlework but now sat utterly motionless, gazing up at me and with expression so very like terror that down towards her I rode, hat in hand, eager to reassure her.

Now as I checked my horse and looked down upon her she flushed very engagingly and in her vivid blue eyes such expression as I can only describe by saying that I found it extremely grateful and flattering to sober middle age and such staid person as myself; though to be sure, I have preserved all my youthful slimness with a chaste particularity of attire and am, of course, aware that I present no mean appearance in any circumstances, especially on horseback. Yet, as I confess, her look of instinctive welcome caused me such

pleasure and surprise that I had dismounted and taken her hands almost before I knew.

"Oh . . . Mr. Brandonleigh," she exclaimed, and quite breathlessly, "to see it was you . . . and so suddenly!" And now I could feel she was actually trembling. So, drawing her a little nearer, I looked down into her half-averted face whose strange charm was enhanced by the graceful shyness of her pose.

"I hope," said I, "that my sudden appearance does not distress you?"

"No, sir," she murmured, "quite the opposite." Here her slim hands freed themselves, and, sitting down demurely, she took up her fallen needlework, saying:

"But that you should be here, of all places, so entirely out of your own world!"

"And pray, Miss Wrybrook, where is that?"

"London, of course, sir. You are so very much out of place here!"

"Why so?" I enquired, a little huffed. "Why, if you please?"

"Because here is only Nature, simple and unadorned, so remote from all worldly things. I call it my Pixey Dell . . . and you are not very like a pixey or a fairy elf, are you, Mr. Brandonleigh?"

Now at this, feeling inclined to frown, I laughed instead; then I enquired:

"Am I then unwelcome here?"

"Sir," she retorted, "should I say so if you were?"

"Yes, Miss Virginia, I'm sure you would."

"So am I!" she nodded.

"Well, am I unwelcome?"

"Not—at present," she answered demurely. "You see, I usually come here to be alone."

"Are you so fond of solitude?"

"I adore it—sometimes. Today I am free until six o'clock."

"Then," said I, glancing at my watch, "except you now desire solitude, we have two and three quarter hours."

"Oh?" she murmured, with swift upglance, half shy, half calculating.

“Or, again, unless I am an intruder.”

“Well—no!” she answered, and very dubiously. “Though I do believe you’ve made me lose my needle—no, here it is! However, I am certainly not waiting here to meet anyone else, so you cannot be an intruder in that sense, but——”

“Well?” I enquired, for she had paused to sew some intricate stitch, it seemed.

“Well,” she replied, “it seems to me that so much elegance is wasted and quite absurdly out of place here—for instance, sitting on a log in such sartorial splendours! Indeed, sir, you are a work of art designed for town, not country!”

Now at this I felt inclined to shake her—instead I busied myself with my horse, loosing girths and bit that he might better crop the grass that grew very lush hereabout. This done, I turned, to see her regarding me beneath her low-arched brows so intently that I wondered.

“Well,” I enquired, “pray what now?”

“Now,” she answered, in her sweetly murmurous voice, “I suppose you are thinking me an impertinent ‘young party’—as Mr. Shrig would say?”

“Almost!” I answered, and laughed again, and she so surprised by this that I laughed the more.

“Then you are not in a cold, fine-gentlemanly fury to have your stately dignity so outraged?”

“Oh dear, no!”

“Then you are more human than I dared suppose, though always the superbly aloof gentleman, of course!”

“Aloof?” I questioned.

“Extremely!” she answered, with the utmost finality. “You were born so, you have lived so, and so of course you are and must remain.”

“At least,” I retorted, smiling at her serious look, “I am very humbly grateful you esteem me ‘human.’ ”

“Most male creatures are detestably human, it seems,” said she, head bowed above her busy needle, “yes, even the proudest, stateliest of arrogant fine gentlemen!”

“Pray, Miss Wrybrook, is this levelled at me?”

"Of course, sir."

"Then I beg leave to deny the justice of your remarks, for I suppose there are few men alive less arrogant than my humble self."

"Do you truly believe this?" she enquired, with another of her quick, searching glances.

"I do indeed."

"Then, sir, you astonish me! For you are a person—no, I mean a personage whom accident of birth and power of wealth have lifted high above all chance of humiliation. It is only the poor and friendless who can ever know the bitter shame of it. However, sir, if you care to accept such poor hospitality as I can offer you here in this pixey dell, you may sit down on my tree—just there!" And with darting needle she indicated a spot on this mossy log at least three feet from her own shapeliness. Nevertheless I bowed and seated myself exactly in the place assigned and watched the quick play of her fingers as they plied her flashing needle.

"Are you still quite happy at Trelant?" I enquired at last.

"Per-fectly!" she answered, but without looking up. "Little Tamsin seems to love me, yes—and to need me more and more; there is a sweet plaintiveness about her, perhaps because she has no playmates, and besides she is motherless, poor lamb!"

"Dead?" I enquired.

"No—fled!" she answered, still without glancing up. "The tale they whisper is that she ran from the house in a night of black tempest with a strange man from the sea who shot and nearly killed Sir Wilfred . . . some man from a wrecked ship—and she has never been heard of since. It was all too long ago for the child to remember, but she has missed a mother's love. I am doing my best to fill a mother's place, and I so love her that her little hands seem to clasp my very heart."

Here Miss Virginia looked at me, and her eyes so very gentle and yet so troubled that instinctively I moved nearer.

"Is anything grieving you?" I enquired.

"No! Oh no, indeed!" she answered, and a little too vehemently, I thought.

"And this child's father is——?"

"Mr. Jason Polgarth, of course."

“And, of course, he admires you!”

“And why ‘of course’?” she demanded. “And please don’t give the obvious answer.”

“No!” said I. “Instead, pray tell me of old Lady Polgarth.”

“Well, she rules Mr. Jason and everyone else, even Sir Wilfred, with a rod of iron. Oh, she can be quite . . . strangely terrible . . . coldly furious . . . except to the child and me. She dotes on little Tamsin.”

“Is she often abroad, or visited by the county folk?”

“Never. She receives no one and seldom leaves the house—except to shop or visit her village folk when they are ailing or in any trouble, for she can be very kind and generous.”

“Her village folk?” I enquired.

“Yes, the villagers on her estate. But now tell me of yourself, just what Mr. Edward Brandonleigh can possibly find of interest so far from his beloved London and when he intends returning there to his sumptuous ease?”

“Mr. Edward Brandonleigh has not the vaguest idea—at present. Also he finds himself surprisingly comfortable at his quarters in Truro, far more so than he dared hope.”

“And may one ask what keeps him?”

“The faint hope that a wilful young lady——”

“Oh, ridiculous!” she exclaimed.

“Possibly,” I answered, shaking my head at her, “but besides this exceedingly wilful young creature there is another, just as wilfully determined, called Will.”

“Oh—Will!” she exclaimed wearily. “He becomes a pest. Will is just a great, clumsy, well-meaning, blundering, officious, and most annoying booby!”

“And besides all this,” I added, “a fine, strong, cleanhearted man.”

“Who peeps and stares at me from behind trees and bushes and things!” said she indignantly. “He frightened Tamsin the other day and even startled me—peering at us over a blackberry bush. I wanted to tell him how perfectly silly he was, but the moment he saw me approach he waved his hat at me and rode off—at a gallop, like the great zany he is.”

“Nonetheless,” said I stoutly, “Will is a truly fine fellow; I am greatly interested in him and——”

“Will should feel himself duly honoured and vastly proud!” she murmured, bending to her sewing again.

“Miss Wrybrook,” quoth I sternly, “sarcasm sits very ill upon you. Indeed, I discover in you a cold cynicism at times that startles—shocks me.”

“Oh, Mr. Brandonleigh,” she sighed, “I grieve your serenity should be anyway disturbed by poor me—but,” cried she, and most suddenly, “if I am shrewish and armed with biting tongue, blame my experience of this cruel world and—men!”

“Men?” I repeated. “Do you mean . . . have you been so . . . harassed?”

“Harassed?” she cried, flashing her blue eyes at me. “ ‘Hunted’ would be truer word. A young girl, poor and friendless, always is and always will be—unless she is an odious fright. Why, oh, why do you suppose I shortened and wrenched back my poor hair, and dressed in such hideous style, and showed so awkward and graceless, and made myself so perfectly revolting that it nearly broke my heart? Men! Ah, but at night, locked in my little bedchamber, I used to have an orgy of dressing up and beautification—for Ma, bless her dear, gentle heart! She understood, she always does—though why I tell you all this—goodness only knows!”

“Because,” said I very sincerely, “we are friends at last—I hope.”

“Are we?” she demanded, leaning to look at me eye to eye. “Are you merely a great gentleman—a superb creation down-stooping from Olympus—or only a human male, or a man, or all these together? Can you tell me truly?”

Now gazing into these vivid blue eyes that seemed to hold deeps on deeps, sensing all the warm, vital allure of her shapely body, her quick intellect, and subtle mind, I shook my head and answered truly:

“No, I cannot.”

“Neither can I,” said she, sighing, “and this troubles me because I should be able to, as I usually am . . . and yet because I believe you will always be what you seem, I——” Here, with gesture frank and almost manlike, she reached out her hand to me; then, as I clasped it, said:

“And my name is Virginia.”

“And mine Edward,” I rejoined, “and sometimes, to my very few friends, ‘Ned.’ ”

“Then . . . Edward,” said she, with momentary pause, “poor Virginia has a man friend at last whom she may depend upon and trust!”

“Utterly!” I answered, and would have kissed her slim fingers as a sacrament, yet checked the impulse lest she misunderstood.

“Now,” said she, somehow making her eyes laugh at me, “you may come closer, Ned. Gracious me!” she exclaimed, the laugh now curving her ruddy lips, “this sounds shockingly familiar, almost sacrilegious to such stately personage as Edward Brandonleigh!”

“Virginia,” said I gravely, “the man Ned instantly retorts on you—don’t be trivial!”

“Then,” she answered, glancing up at the afternoon sun, “come and help your friend Virginia to build a fire, Ned, and brew tea.”

“Tea?” I exclaimed.

“Tea!” she nodded. “And in the dearest little cave down yonder in the dingle, with a little rill that laughs and chatters too softly to reach us here. . . . I’ve a kettle down yonder and a tinderbox and some of these dreadful new lucifer match things that I bought and am afraid of—they flame at one so! And a caddy of the best Soochong, or should I say ‘Bohea’?”

“Then,” said I, as we rose to descend into this leafy hollow, “you often come here?”

“I’ve only been four times as yet. But lately, on my free afternoons, I brew tea and eat bread and butter here quite ravenously and pretend I am an Indian or a Hottentot, or some nice savage creature, free, like them and the sweet air I breathe. Because in this dear solitude I am truly free, and oh, Ned, the joy of it! Now come and help me collect sticks, then you must build and light the fire while I fill the kettle at the brook. . . . Oh yes, bring your horse, there’s plenty of room for him, though it’s such a dear little bower—this way!”

So I followed her down into this leafy seclusion where high, ferny banks, crowned with dense boskages, shut us in, these walls of living green roofed by the outflung branches of great trees, beneath our feet a carpet of the greenest turf, and all fragrant with the spicy savour of bracken. Here then, by her direction, I began gathering sticks, and somewhat awkwardly,

for, in stooping, I discovered how confoundedly tight were my garments, while my spurs persisted in tangling themselves with trailing bramble shoots and the like so that once I tripped and nearly fell, dropping my bundle of firewood, and heard a laugh at my clumsiness, yet one so frankly joyous that I laughed, too, and set about building the fire, yet, it seemed, so ineptly that she, heaping scorn on my poor endeavours, showed me how it should be done.

So at last fire was lit, water boiled, and tea brewed; then, seated before the little cave, we drank together, she from cup and I from saucer, and ate of thin bread and butter she had brought.

"Listen . . . to the sweet peace of it all!" she murmured, looking up and around in a kind of ecstasy. "In this dear solitude we might hear fairy laughter amid the leaves or—the rustle of angel wings . . . and oh, dear me—we have no more bread and butter!"

"Because I ate too much!" said I remorsefully.

"You did indeed!" she sighed. "I'll bring butter and a whole loaf next time."

"When?" I enquired, and so instantly that she laughed.

"Today being Monday, our next tea party will be on Thursday, sir, to commence promptly at three o'clock, no earlier. Is this perfectly understood?"

"It is."

"Then now," said she, sighing again yet rising with a nimble ease, "we hide our kettle, our teapot, our tinderbox, and tea caddy in our cave, and then say farewell."

"But," I demurred, showing my watch, "it lacks three quarters of an hour to six!"

"But Tamsin will be watching for me! So, Ned, for the present, good-bye!"

"Until Thursday!" said I.

"At three o'clock!" she nodded. So saying, she took my hand, shook it heartily, as a man might have done, smiled, and went her way through this pleasant solitude, walking, as Enoch had described, "like a young Amazon"—and with not one backward glance for me.

Then I mounted and rode slowly, taking particular heed of all noticeable landmarks hereabout, that I might find this remoteness again.

CHAPTER XV

In Which I Begin an Experiment

Now as I rode Truro-wards in this golden late afternoon, of whom must I think but poor Will and his humble devotion—this cleanhearted young fellow, this fine, honest man whom love was making little better than an awe-struck, speechless clod, nay, was indeed transforming into a very pest, as she had said. Therefore I began to consider how I might better his condition in life, thereby giving him a loftier estimation of himself and thus improve his chances of success and happiness.

In all of which, though well-meaning to be sure, I was the veriest fool—as the sequel was to show.

Dismounting in the spacious stable yard of the Red Lion, I beheld Will in close confabulation with the head ostler, and both of them watching the action of a young horse that a groom was leading up and down the yard for their inspection, and both of them viewing and discussing the "points" of this handsome creature as only true horse lovers and masters possibly may.

Upon this animated scene I ventured to intrude and, taking Will by the arm, led him within doors and up to my sitting room for a glass of sherry.

"This afternoon," said I, leaning back in my chair when the glasses were filled, "I saw Miss Virginia."

"Eh? Oh! Did you . . . speak with her, sir?"

"Of course."

"And I," quoth he, in groaning voice, "I've seen her nearly every day . . . at a distance! Ah, every day I've seen her and spoken to her only once."

"And why, Will?"

"Because I know as she don't want to be bothered with . . . my sort o' talk."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed almost hotly. "Far better to talk to her like a man, if it be only to pass the time of day, than skulk and peep from behind trees, like a fool."

“You’re quite right, sir,” he answered, with a very woeful humility, “I know I’m a fool.”

“Then why persist in being one?”

“Because ’tis my nature.”

“No!” said I. “Nature never intended you for a fool, so if fool you are and will be, do not blame Nature.”

Here for a while he sat dumb, great shoulders hunched, powerful fists clenched upon his knees, and a frown darkening his face; and as I surveyed him thus in his too-respectable, badly cut, and worse-fitting garments, with his cropped hair and blunt features overcast, a very sullen, graceless fellow he seemed.

“I suppose,” said he at last, “you’ve never wanted for anything in all your life?”

“Only for such things as money cannot purchase.”

“I don’t mean those kinds o’ things,” he retorted. “I mean necessities, food and clothes, bodily needs—you’ve never wanted for them?”

“No, I have been denied that blessing in disguise.”

“What—dare you call want a blessing?”

“In disguise, Will. For Want is the greatest, I venture to think, the only source of inspiration. It is simply and solely through Want that Man, by his needs, physical and mental, has won from savagery and barbarism to—well, such civilization as we have attained so far.”

“True enough!” Will nodded, at his gruffest. “I’ve read summat o’ this along o’ my little cobbler and we’ve talked it over, him and me . . . yet all the same it must be mighty good to be above all want . . . to talk well, dress well, and feel the equal of any man—ay, or any woman!”

“Then, Will, why don’t you?”

“Don’t I what?”

“Make the very best of yourself instead of the worst? Why not school yourself to become the very attractive fellow you could be—if you will?”

“Who—me? Attractive? Lord love me—all the schooling and all the books in the world couldn’t do it!”

“Perhaps not,” I answered, “yet Love might!”

“Eh, lo——” He choked on the word, flushed, and grew the more sullen. “Gammon!” he exclaimed, and so very boorishly that he shook his head at himself and groaned: “There I go! Sir, you must forgive me, but, as I’ve told ye, I’m only myself and no better than I am—or ever shall be.”

“And this,” said I a little impatiently, “this is precisely the mental attitude that makes you so self-contemptible—and even more so to a woman.”

“A woman—ah!” he sighed. “If you mean Miss Virginia, you’re right again. She don’t trouble to even look my way; she never has and never will, and no wonder.”

“No wonder at all,” I retorted, “until you make it more worth her while. Though I believe the Essential Feminine, the True Woman—or the Eve in her—will always steal a furtive glance at any male who knows himself a true man and respects himself accordingly. And if that man be gently masterful instead of meekly abject, of pleasing address and not ill-looking, she will never be content with one glance; I dare to aver she will certainly find him worth a second and perhaps a third.”

“How,” he enquired heavily, “how might a man . . . make himself worth while . . . me, of course, for instance?”

“Quite easily if, I repeat ‘if,’ you will merely take the necessary trouble.”

“Trouble?” he repeated quite savagely. “Why, strike me blind—there’s no kind o’ trouble in this world, no pain I wouldn’t suffer to win . . . I . . . I mean if only she . . . if I . . . oh, you know!”

“Yes,” I answered, “you mean if she became your wife.”

“Eh—wi——” Again he choked, gulped, and exclaimed hoarsely: “Good God—no! I never meant—that!”

“But you wish to marry her, don’t you?”

At this, he bowed his head, answering in harsh whisper:

“Only the Lord knows how much!”

“Then why not set yourself to win her?”

“How? Tell me . . . tell me . . . how?” he stammered.

“By making the utmost of your natural advantages.”

“My oath!” he murmured dismally. “I never had any as I know of.”

“Oh yes, you have a powerful, splendid body merely requiring better and adequate garments to set it off to proper advantage. Your features, though somewhat blunted by fistic encounters, are regular and might be quite pleasing—if you could induce yourself to scowl less and smile more, and also wore your hair less painfully short.”

“Ay, but suppose I don’t feel like smiling?”

“Avoid frowning.”

“But how if I want to frown?”

“Smile! Mask your anger and your passions with a smile—though you be smitten to the very soul, hide your anguish beneath a gentle urbanity.”

“Ah,” he growled, “and be a hypocrite!”

“Oh no, a man, and one who can endure as a man should. As regards Woman in General, do—not—be meek! Woman despises a too-slavish humility and finds even shyness in a man very disconcerting and extremely awkward—naturally! As for Woman in Particular—next time you meet Miss Virginia refrain from cowering at sight of her, and if she looks at you, do—not—gulp!” Here, and at the mere suggestion, gulp he did, and instantly scowled on me, saying:

“So you think you could learn me just how to . . . to set about . . . winning her?”

“Yes, at least I venture to imagine you will have better chance if you act on my advice and take the trouble to begin a——”

“No!” cried he, starting to his feet. “Lord love me . . . how could I . . . how can I ever dare . . . a poor, journeyman blacksmith . . . so little money . . . no prospects . . . no home to offer her.”

“Wait!” said I, beckoning him to be seated. “I have a suggestion to make, a proposal to offer which may quite alter your present extremely gloomy outlook. I have decided—subject, of course, to your acceptance—to put you in charge of my—ah—stud farm . . . breeding establishment and so forth.”

Will sank into his chair, only to start out of it again, and, staring down on me, opened his mouth to speak, said nothing, and sat down again.

“Well?” I enquired, finding him thus mute.

“A stud farm . . . horses . . . and me in charge of it . . . me?” he demanded, stabbing his broad chest with in-pointing thumb. “You mean

me?”

“I do, and——”

“To be . . . in sole charge . . . me?”

“You, Will.”

“Where is your farm?”

“Most of my property is situate in Sussex, this particular part near a small village named Jevington.”

“Have you much stock, many animals?”

“Not one. Consequently your first duty will be to buy some.”

“Buy ’em? Why, then . . . if you haven’t got any breeding stock how can you own a stud farm or——”

“Will,” said I, “cease boggling! Having lately determined to breed horses, breed them I will. The question is—do you accept or must I seek elsewhere?”

“Yes . . . yes,” he stammered, “yes, of course I accept . . . most gratefully. . . . Only . . . when must I start?”

“Immediately! You had best commence acquiring animals at once.”

“But—where?”

“Here in Cornwall, of course. I saw some likely looking creatures here in the market.”

“But to breed a fine strain you must have the very best . . . bloodstock . . . pedigree.”

“Then buy them, get them where you will; this is entirely your concern—do not bother me with needless detail—I abhor unnecessary trouble.”

“Sir . . . Mr. Brandonleigh, are you . . . you aren’t doing all this . . . I mean, you——”

“Will,” said I, rising and pulling the bell, “I desire to breed fine horses, a perfect animal, yes, if it be only one! Is this understood?”

“Yes, sir, only——”

“Very well,” said I, turning as the door opened and Enoch appeared in answer to my summons.

“Enoch,” said I, “our friend Will has now entered my employ and I wish him to dress the part and hope he will be friend and man enough to avail himself of your aid and my guidance in matters of dress, deportment, and so forth. I mean, Will, that you may feel thus the more competent to do your best for the winning of . . . all you desire. Is this agreed?”

“Yes!” he replied and, as I thought, rather sullenly.

“Then I shall begin by paying you two hundred and fifty pounds per annum, one quarter of which shall be advanced for your present requirements.”

CHAPTER XVI

In Which I Play the Advocate

THURSDAY afternoon, the hour 2:30 P.M., and an impatient man is seated none too comfortably upon the bole of a fallen tree, which mouldering relic, as time passes, seems to be growing knobs and other most obtrusive excrescences that threaten to become painful; a man, this, who often frowns upon the dial of his watch, then listens and glances about him expectant, yet hears no more than the monotonous chirping of drowsy birds and sees only leaves that shut him in, brambles with thorns to clutch his garments or scratch his flesh; the sun is unpleasantly hot and no breath of wind to cool him. At last he espies the flutter of a petticoat and is instantly afoot to relieve its wearer of the large basket she carries.

"A glorious afternoon for our tea party, Ned!"

"Perfect, Virginia!"

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "Wait now and let me unhook you from these nasty thorns before they mar this very modish coat."

"Brambles!" quoth I, looking at her. "Oh, never mind them, they help to make the beauty of the place."

"Yes, it is beautiful!" she sighed, sinking gracefully upon the old tree bole. "I'm glad you enjoy it too. Oh, pray be seated, sir—though we are in no stately withdrawing room, thank heaven!"

"Amen!" said I. "Though this solitude is sacred to yourself, it seems to me yet a place of magic opened by the key of friendship."

"Goodness, Ned! If you talk in such lofty strain, I shall blush to gulp tea and munch bread and butter—a loaf this time, with plenty of butter!"

"If," said I, "my speech sounded a little high-flown, as I believe it did, pray know me perfectly sincere."

"I'm sure of it—now," she nodded. "It is your sincerity bridges the . . . gulf between us. . . . Oh dear, now I'm becoming high-flown too! But oh, Ned, when I remember our first meeting, Mr. Shrig so ponderous and blundering, you so coldly silent and sublimely remote, in such old slippers, and myself so shy—watching you both and presenting such example of a

‘young fee-male party’ and niminy-piminy miss—when I think of us then and look at you now, perched on this old dead tree and trying to look comfortable, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry or be amazed! Are you so altered, Ned, or is this the real ‘you’?”

“Upon my word,” I answered, pondering this, “Virginia, I hardly know; something of each perhaps.”

“Oh well—now I have to thank you for ridding me of poor, plaguey old Will; we, Tamsin and I, haven’t glimpsed his gloomy face all the week.”

“Do not thank me, Virginia; it was his own good taste.”

“But you must have said something to him.”

“A word or so. But had he desired, I never could have stayed him; he is a perfect young Hercules.”

“Are you so feeble, Ned?”

“My child, I am over forty and——”

“Then don’t address me as if you were eighty.”

“However,” said I, shaking my head, “youth will be served.”

“Yes,” she retorted, “and is usually served out and made a complete fool of because of its callow inexperience.”

“But,” said I, following the course I had set myself, “Will is no boy; he is a man if ever I saw one, and a man who has fronted death, a man to trust and have implicit faith in and as sincere as . . . as I am.”

“My word!” she murmured softly, but sweeping me with that keen, searching scrutiny of hers. “Will has a most fervent advocate! But why, Ned, why? What need for you, or anyone, to plead his cause to me who know him so well for the dear old blunderer he is? Truly, I’m quite fond of him—so why sing his praises to me who have known and liked him so much longer than you have—why?”

“Why, then——” said I, very conscious of her shrewd and watchful gaze and of the smile lurking at the corner of her mobile lips that I now saw were too wide for perfect beauty.

“You said ‘why, then,’ Ned—and if you are staring at my mouth because you think I’m going to laugh at you—I am, if you continue to look so extremely Neddy!”

“Pray,” I enquired a little stiffly, “what are you pleased to mean?”

“The exact opposite of that magnificently serene being Edward Brandonleigh, Esquire. I even suspected that you were at a loss, if such could possibly be!”

“I am,” said I. “I am indeed. I find you now, as ever, quite amazingly unexpected.” Now at this she laughed herself breathless, then gasped:

“And all . . . because of . . . poor old . . . Will!”

“Virginia,” said I gravely, “if you laugh at me, pray continue, for you do it very prettily, but if you mock my friend, I must beg to protest.”

“Your—friend?” she exclaimed. “Will? You are really making him your friend?” Gone now was her laughter; instead she was watching me keenly beneath knit brows.

“My friend, yes, Virginia!”

“For your own sake—or his?”

“Both! I esteem him so highly that I have asked him to undertake the management of a certain venture of mine, and I am happy to say he has accepted.”

“Then of course you will pay him far more than he could ever possibly earn as a blacksmith?”

“Naturally.”

“And consequently,” she continued, in the same hushed tone, “he will have to alter his habits of life, dress better, speak better, become more like—a gentleman?”

“So I believe, Virginia.”

“And yet,” she murmured, “were he the finest, truest gentleman in all the world, I could never marry poor old Will.”

Now here I must confess I found myself incapable of any adequate rejoinder, so I merely looked at her, and though she did not laugh, I saw her sensitive lips quiver and her eyes very bright as, rising, she shook and ordered her petticoats then reached me her hand.

“Come, let us go and have tea—and do not forget the precious basket.”

So I made a fire and, while the kettle boiled, watched her cutting bread and butter, and the play of her slender hands very quick and dexterous.

Tea brewed, we began our meal rather silently at first, but gradually the strangeness between us passed and we began to laugh and talk like the

friends I hoped we truly were, but—not another word of poor Will.

Now on this occasion, when came the time for me to help in secreting kettle, teapot, and so forth in the cave, I took this opportunity to examine the place more narrowly and, adventuring further within, found it made a sharp turn and, beyond a short close passageway, opened into a much larger cave, dry, airy, and full of a greenery light coming through a fissure in the rock all overgrown, and thus masked without, by bush and briar.

"Listen!" whispered Virginia suddenly. "Don't you hear something?" So there in this green twilight we stood very still and silent. "You hear it now?" she murmured. "Such . . . horrid sound . . . like someone . . . breathing great sighs . . . in pain. You hear it, Ned?"

"Yes!" I answered. "Where are we here—I mean what lies beyond the woods outside?"

"The sea, Ned, and a very solitary, rocky cove with a lovely name—Alwannack."

"Alwannack!" I repeated, and chilled unaccountably. "Is it far from your Pixey Dell?"

"Oh yes, three or four miles at least."

"However," said I, "this sound we hear is, I feel sure, the breakers in Alwannack Cove. Probably beyond this cavern is some cleft in the rock leading down to the seashore."

"What a marvellous—hiding place!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, but who should want to hide, Virginia, except smugglers, of course?"

"Who indeed!" she murmured. "Come, Ned, it is time I went back to Trelant."

"I wish," said I, as we stepped out into the honest sunlight again, "I wish with all my heart you were never going back there!"

"Oh, nonsense!" she laughed. "Give me your hand now, like a good Ned, and say good-bye."

"Until next Monday!" said I.

"At three o'clock!" she nodded, and so turned and left me to watch her go. But this time she did pause for a backward glance.

CHAPTER XVII

How I Came to Alwannack Cove and What Befell Me There

I SET out next morning to call upon Mr. Trevanion, that he might fulfil his promise and show me some of the neighbouring villages.

With this intent, I rode at my usual easy amble since I had no cause for undignified haste or dusty, perspiring speed. And yet I was to know the mortification of heat, dust, and loss of dignity before very long, and all because, so soon as I left the highroad for the lane I believed would bring me to the coast, I lost my way.

Here, in parenthesis and justice to myself, I halt my narrative for brief explanation as to why such person as myself, of ripe age, experience, and intelligence, with eyes and a tongue in his head, should lose himself so utterly and completely, and my answer is: Cornwall! This country of desolate moors, blind lanes, solitary, winding tracks; of scattered villages and lonely hamlets hiding beneath the beetling crags of rock-girt bays or sequestered, bosky valleys, with a wilderness of intricate lanes and pathways between. A country of wide solitudes where giants may have lived aforetime, a haunting, vaguely mysterious country like none other in all broad England. At least such was my estimation of Cornwall upon that golden summer morning.

Thus, then, astray I went and became involved in such maze of tortuous lanes awind between deep, ferny banks, such crooked, narrow ways that turned and twisted beyond all reason, such puzzling crossways and obscure tracks up hill and down, that at last, having climbed a precipitous slope, I checked my panting horse and sat to look about me.

But all at once my wandering glance beheld that which instantly smote all emotions from my mind save one of chilling, nauseous dread—for there, scowling on me above the green, rose that detested Tower of Trelant.

Now as I gazed up at this grisly thing, its vague greyness blotched with fungoid growths, dark with ivy, lichen, and sprouting fern, a thick strand of ivy, moved as by wind, disclosed a jagged, roundish cavity in the age-worn masonry, so that for the moment it seemed this vast, grim shape was winking down at me very horridly with a monstrous eye.

Moved by what I can only describe as instinctive loathing, I wheeled my horse and urged him blindly away, and so down a winding, bushy track so narrow and steep there was no possibility of turning, even if I would. Down and yet down, with slithering, floundering hoofs, until trees and bush gave place to jagged rock; then I glimpsed the sea and, turning sudden corner, beheld a small, pebbly beach shut in by towering cliffs, so that an extremely gloomy and repulsive place I thought it. However, after such perilous descent, here I dismounted, thankful for safety, and, leaving my good horse to crop such scant herbage as he might from the short grass, &c., that patched the rocks here and there, I began to look about for some place easier of ascent than the break-neck steep by which we had come, but found none.

Greatly chagrined, I perched myself on convenient boulder and, removing my hat, mopped perspiring brow and face, not a little disgusted to find myself so heated and, moreover, in such awkward situation. Now as I sat thus I chanced to espy a coil of stout rope tucked within a rocky crevice near by and, wondering at this, troubled myself to rise and, upon investigation, found, beside this rope, a battered horn lantern and inside it a small tinderbox and new candle. I now became aware that beyond this crevice, and hidden from chance view, was a narrow fissure or cleft in the face of the cliff which, upon nearer approach, proved wide enough to admit me; so in I went and thus, to my wonder, found myself in a spacious cave, but this I saw at once had been enlarged by human agency at some time or other. I now observed also, at the further extremity of this cavern, two dark and narrow openings to right and left; approaching the nearer one, I had stooped to peer therein when I was startled and profoundly outraged to feel myself seized by fierce, clutching hands that wrenched and dragged me violently backwards, back across the cave and out to the beach, where I contrived to turn and face my aggressor and thus found myself surrounded by four such ferocious-looking scoundrels as I hope never to see again. Mariners all, they appeared, and of desperate mien, tanned and hairy, belted with sheath knives, and in great sea boots so that I wondered how they had come on me so silently. And now it was I recognised my chief assailant for that sullen, Spanish-looking fellow with gold earrings whom I had spoken with in Trelant village.

“Oo be’s ’e?” demanded one, twirling in brown fist a hatchet of the kind I believe is called a boarding axe. “Wot be’s ’e a-doin’ yere-along?”

“Nay, I do knaw ’e,” quoth my assailant, whose name, I now remembered, was Pentreath. “ ’Tes same as did ax me questions over to village like I telled ee.”

“So then,” quoth a bearded fellow, spitting on his palms very odiously, “lemme scat un o’ the chacks!”

“Ay,” cried another, “scat un a larrups.”

“Belay!” quoth Pentreath. “Us’ll best bide orders, so us’ll haul un to tower.”

Now the mere mention of this place conjured to my imagination such nameless dread that I shrank, appalled, and felt my body all aquake with horror; nor was this sign of my distress lost upon these rogues, for they began to point and jeer at me as such wretches ever do. But this steadied me somewhat, and, summoning all my resolution, I took firmer grasp upon my heavy riding crop and, setting back to the rock, fronted them boldly as I might, saying:

“This whip is loaded . . . keep off or I’ll do my utmost to brain you!” They looked at my whip, at me, at each other, and grinned. What now might have ensued I dread to imagine even yet, for Trelant Tower was to me a synonym for all that was foul and evil—but at this moment I heard a distant hail, and, turning a wild, despairing glance seaward, beheld a boat with four men and cried their aid so suddenly and in such accents that my would-be assailants recoiled and, beholding this boat, which was now rapidly approaching, seemed quite confounded.

“ ’Tes that cursed Over!” snarled Pentreath.

“Ay, and ’Arold Nicholls and Will Crewes, wi’ Fred Chaffyn.”

“Well, let’s take a crack at ’em!”

“No! Orders be agin it, I tell ee!”

“Ows’ever,” growled the rascal with the axe, whirling this terrible missile, “this for ’em!” But before he could launch the murderous thing I smote it from his grasp with my whip, whereat one of his fellows fetched me such a buffet as staggered me and sent my hat flying. But the boatmen had seen, and one of them, a stalwart young fellow, was already ashore and running up the beach towards us, limping oddly in his stride, and I made instant haste to meet him.

“Be ee hurted any, sir?” he enquired.

“Very little, thanks to you,” I answered, stooping to recover my hat which I noticed had suffered in the fracas; but in the act of putting it on I was greatly relieved to see my late assailants had all vanished like an evil dream.

“Pray, whom have I to thank for my rescue?”

“My name be Over, sir, Charles. And yonder comes Harold Nicholls wi’ the boat hook, Bill Crewes wi’ the tiller, along o’ Freddy Chaffyn with a stretcher—and all on us a bit too late for they bloody-minded rogues, which d’grieve me to the very ’eart, for gone they be where it don’t do for to follow.”

“Who and what are they?”

“Thieves, sir, raskells, and—worse! They’m away, boys,” said he, as his companions joined us, armed and eager for strife. “ ’Twere that Pentreath and t’others o’ they Trelant villins.”

“ ’Tes great pity!” quoth Nicholls, a young man trim of person and handsome of face. “A pity, eh, Will?”

“Ay, so ’tes!” answered an older man, strongly built and with a pair of grey eyes too beautiful for a man. “And yet,” quoth he, “I dunno as tedn’t better so, con-sidering. Don’t ee think, Freddy?”

“Ay, mebbe so,” nodded the third, also a young and comely fellow much bronzed by sun and sea; and indeed these Cornishmen, all four, impressed me as remarkably personable fellows.

“Ee don’t seem to ha’ took much ’arm, sir,” quoth Will Crewes, viewing me with his grey eyes.

“No,” I answered, “and therefore I am truly grateful to you all and should like to shake your hands and perhaps become better acquainted.” So, shake hands we did, and with great heartiness, especially on my part, since the gratitude I felt for these my rescuers went beyond mere words.

“But, sir,” said Will, “us would never ha’ come in sight of ee but for the gen’leman as signalled to we from cliff.”

“What was this gentleman like?” I enquired, in no little wonderment.

“Stoutish, sir, blue coat and bright buttons; waved to us wi’ his ’at, ’e did.”

“Ay, and his stick too!” added Charles. “But,” he enquired, glancing away to my horse, “however did ee come down here, not a-horseback, surely?”

“Yes, I lost my way and somehow or other blundered down the track yonder.”

“Well, I never heered as any man ever rode down here into Alwannack afore.”

“Ah, so this,” said I, glancing towards a certain part of the cliff face, “this is Alwannack?”

“Ay, it be, sir, and not the best o’ places to get lost in—’specially furriners or strangers!”

“So it seems!” I said ruefully. “My problem now is how to get my horse up that cliff, for indeed I feel quite unequal to the attempt at present.”

“Sir,” said Chaffyn, touching his hat, “I knows horses, so dessay I can get un up for ee and ride un to Portscatha while you goes by boat, ef so be ee will?”

“Mr. Chaffyn, I shall be deeply grateful, and if you, Mr. Crewes, and your good fellows will take me so far——”

“Willingly, sir, only, if ye please, I be Will, and these here ’Arold and Charles; us don’t stand on cere-mony, not among friends.”

“Friends?” I repeated. “If you will all please accept me as your friend, I shall feel myself truly honoured.” Now at this they looked at me and then each other so much askance that I began to fear I had presumed too far on their shy good nature, when Charles suddenly reached me a brown, sinewy hand calloused from much oarwork, saying:

“Friend, I be Charles to ee!”

So I clasped hands in friendship with these Cornish fishermen and felt a solemn pleasure in the act, quite unknown ere now.

Then I clambered into the boat, waved my hand to Fred who was patting my horse, and we pushed off.

“I been hoping,” said Charles, swinging at stroke oar with the leisured ease of much practice, “ay, I been wishin’ this long time for a proper go at they fellers, ’specially Pentreath!”

“Give ee a black eye, Charles, last time ’e did,” chuckled Harold, plying bow oar.

“So ’e did,” answered Charles, “but when he went he had to be carried, don’t ee forget.”

“And looked like Moyle’s shop of a Saturday night,” added Will. “Moyle be our butcher, sir.”

“Who is this Pentreath?” I enquired.

“A . . . reg’lar bad un, sir!” replied Charles.

“Ay, ’e is that—and more!” Will added.

“But,” I persisted, “just how bad is he—what is the evil of him?”

“Well, sir,” answered Charles, keeping his honest eyes on the vague distance, “ ’tes just as he’m—bad!”

“Ay,” quoth Will, bending to his oar, “him and his likes!”

“You—said it!” murmured Harold.

“Do you mean,” I asked boldly, “that he is concerned with these murderous wrecking gangs?”

Now at this Charles continued to gaze on far horizons, Will seemed to watch the play of his oar blade, while Harold stared landwards, and all of them so profoundly abstracted and dumb that I perceived I had propounded a question unanswerable. Therefore I hastened to change the subject by saying to Harold:

“I believe I spoke with your brother none so long ago.”

“Where was he to, sir?”

“Ploughing a field on the right-hand side of the way to a place I believe is called Trewithian.”

“Ay, that would be my poor brother.”

“Why do you call him ‘poor’?”

“Well, sir, I’ll tell ee. Poor felly do ha’ been that crossed and disapp’inted like that I d’ know as his poor ’eart be nigh ready to break wi’ grief. Ye see, sir, ’twere him or me, and she—well, she ups and takes me.”

“Ay,” chuckled Charles, “that’s why I says ‘poor ’Arold’!”

“Why so, Charles?” I enquired.

“Because now, sir, poor ’Arold has to choke down his pint so hurried, ay, too hasty to taste it proper, and bear away home, all sails set, to his missus; y’see, he’s still noo at it.”

“And,” Harold retorted, “Charles ain’t even begun yet; the maids be too knowin’ for to be caught by the likes of ’e!”

“Ay,” Charles added, “and what’s more, Charles knows enough to keep clear o’ marriage—for the present anyway.”

So we beguiled the time and distance until, rounding a craggy headland, we entered the smoother waters of a little harbour or porth, crowned and set about by white-walled, thatched cottages, their small latticed windows twinkling in the afternoon sunlight; and a pleasant, homely place I thought it as, with my three companions, I climbed the cobbled boatway to a narrow street that became a steep, winding, and tree-shaded road leading up to the village of Gerrans whose grey church tower crowned the ascent.

CHAPTER XVIII

Concerning Bread and Cheese and Apparitions

So came I again to that white-walled, steep-roofed inn I have mentioned in another place, whose sign proclaimed it:

THE PLUME OF FEATHERS
BY V. PETERS

In we went forthwith to a cosy interior where all things showed trim and orderly, even to the straw-coloured hair of a somewhat silent being who, greeting us with cheery nod, went on polishing the rummer he was busied upon.

"Sir," said Charles, limping to corner of the window seat, "this is Vic, the landlord—Vic, this be a gentleman as went and got hisself lost over to Alwannack Cove."

"How there?" enquired Landlord Vic, opening his light-lashed eyes a little wider.

"On his 'oss."

"Ee don't say!"

"Ay, down old cliff road!"

"Lord!" exclaimed Vic. "Why on a hoss?"

"I lost my way," I explained, "and was down almost before I knew."

"Ar?" said Vic.

"Then I happened to find a coil of rope and a lantern hidden there."

"No?" quoth Vic.

"And then, in extremely odd sort of cavern, I was assaulted by four ruffians."

"They was Pentreath and some o' they lot!" Harold added.

"Oh—them!" exclaimed Vic, with look and tone I thought very eloquent.

“Then,” I continued, “these good friends came to my relief and now, I hope, will drink with me to our better acquaintance and friendship. All three.”

“Not three, sir.”

“Why, no,” said I, glancing round; “where is Will Crewes?”

“Ah, sir,” sighed Harold, shaking his handsome head, “poor Will, though good a man as ever paddled oar, have got one bad failin’—’e don’t ’preciate good ale.”

“Ay, but ’e do,” quoth Will himself, appearing at this moment; “he appreciates it so much that he keeps off it lest he appreciate it too much—like others of his family. And so, sir, for friendship’s sake I’ll drink with ee right hearty—a pint o’ cider, Vic.” Thus drink together we did, one and all, and in an ever-growing good fellowship. . . .

“Eh, a meal, sir?” said Vic, in answer to my enquiry. “Well, I’ve a prime cheese in cut.”

“Excellent!” said I.

“And p’raps a onion or so?”

“Onions!” I repeated, my soul recoiling.

“Growed by me!” quoth Harold. “I dunno as there be a finer vegetable than a onion—’cept it be peas, and beans or a tidy cabbage, not to mention taters.” And so presently, with my four friends, I ate of cheese nor shrank I from onions, and enjoyed this simple fare with a gusto quite surprising.

And now it was that I directed the conversation to that subject that had been in my mind all along, and in the following manner:

“Just before I made my rash descent into Alwannack Cove,” said I, slicing another crust from the loaf, “I noticed a gloomy tower, a ruin all overgrown with ivy and creeping plants.”

“Ay,” nodded Vic, “that’ll be Trelant Tower. Folk d’ tell as ’twere a castle years ago. But Charles an’ Harold can tell ee ’bout old Tower, eh, Charlie?” he chuckled; but Charles merely champed his bread and cheese. “Folk d’ say as it be haunted, eh, Harold?” he enquired, with another chuckle.

“Well,” answered Harold, bolting a mouthful, “I only d’ tell o’ what I seen there, ay, and—heerd. What do ee say, Charles?”

“Not a word!” quoth Charles, and took a draught of ale instead.

“Lookee now,” said Will Crewes, “ ’tes like this; as it do seem to me, Trelant Tower be a very ancient place and a ruin likewise, and, sich being so, it do seem natural to say as it be haunted. Us Cornish folk be overfond o’ such wild tales, same like about the giant Tregeagle as hove they rocks across Gerrans Bay over to Carne—but who’s a-going to believe such nowadays? And ’tes same wi’ ghosts and goblins. I’ve seen that old Trelant ruin all seasons and weathers sin’ I were a lad—and never no ghost yet.”

“Ay, but,” quoth Harold, “why shouldn’t there be ghosts thereabout? You don’t never go there, never nigh the place at dead o’ night.”

“No, I don’t!” Will rejoined. “No more should any other honest man.”

“Who ain’t an honest man?” demanded Charles, setting down his tankard with a bang.

“Now, now!” quoth Landlord Vic. “Nobody ain’t saying no such thing, Charles—but what I says is—as there be some as can see things and some as can’t.”

“Ay,” added Harold, “and hear things too!”

“I was told,” said I, seizing this opportunity, “that lights have often been noticed there and most dreadful sounds heard!”

“Sir,” said Will, rising, “if a man do drink hard enough and goes from light into dark, he can see or hear anything! And now, Mr. Edward, thanking you kindly for your hospitality, I ask ee to excuse me. I be doo to haul my lobster pots.” And, with grip of hand for me and nod to the company, away he went.

“Sir,” said Harold, as the door closed, “as I tells ee afore, Will Crewes be a right good fisherman and friend, but a bit queasy-like in his innards.”

“Indeed?” I enquired.

“Ar!” Harold nodded. “Say now—ef by accident ’e was to eat of a snared bird or poached rabbit, I do b’leeve ’twould choke ’e stone dead.”

“Sir,” enquired Charles, peering thoughtfully into his tankard, “I’d like for to know, please, who told ee o’ they lights and—sounds, over to Trelant?”

“Miss Evadne Trevanion.”

“Ay!” he nodded. “I guessed it might be her.”

“Well, but didn’t ee tell her o’ they your own self?”

“Ay, I did, ’Arold. I were that shook I ’ad to tell somebody.”

“So were I shook,” said Harold, “and no wonder, but I didn’t tell nobody.”

“Per’aps not then, ’Arold, but you would—now.”

“Oh? And oo should I tell?”

“Your noo wife, ay, and ef ee didn’t, her’d get it out of ee—that’s why I ain’t got a wife—yet.”

“No,” Harold retorted, “nor you ain’t like to ’ave.”

“Miss Trevanion,” said I, “mentioned a sound of struggling and an ‘awful, bubbling scream.’ ”

“Lord!” exclaimed Vic, “you never mentioned no scream, ’Arold, when you told me.”

“No, I called it a ‘shout,’ but a ‘scream’ it were, Vic, the most fearsome sound as I ever heerd.”

“Because,” I suggested, “it was the scream of—a man!”

Now here Harold looked askance at Charles, who now turned to me, saying:

“Sir, ef Miss Vadne told ee so much, I take it as ee be friends o’ they Trevanions, and ef so be, then you be proper friend of we, for they Trevanions be——”

“Proper folk!” quoth Vic.

“They be,” nodded Harold, “ay, true gentry though redooced in fortun’, but gentry still, like Cap’n Thomas over to Trewince; there ain’t so much of he, but what there be be all man. ’Tes the likes o’ they should ’ave the money and power of it ’stead o’ the likes of—us knows oo.”

“The Polgarths of Trelant?” said I.

“Well now,” Harold rejoined, opening his blue eyes at me, “ee do ha’ been and said it, sir.”

“And when was it,” I persisted, “that you heard those dreadful sounds at the old Tower?”

“Why, ’twould be about . . . Charles, how long do ee reckon?”

"Six months or thereabouts."

"Six months?" I repeated. "Somewhere about the time a ship called *Neptune* was wrecked off Killigerran?"

"Well, and what o' that?" Charles demanded.

"What some of us d' think!" quoth Vic.

"Ay, but what us do think don't bear the tellin'—sometimes!" muttered Harold.

"And yet," said I, lowering my voice, "it has occurred to me that Trelant Tower is haunted by worse things than poor ghosts, and that the sounds you heard were terribly real and may have been the death cry of some unhappy man who contrived to escape the cruel rocks that had destroyed his ship, the *Neptune*, only to meet a crueler death ashore."

Now at this bold suggestion my hearers were mute, but in their troubled faces I read that which I judged sufficient answer; yet nevertheless I persisted with my enquiry:

"Can either of you tell me anything about those caves on Alwannack Cove?"

"None o' we, sir!" Charles answered. "Us d' know as there be caves there, same as there be Tregeagle's Caves over to Carne . . . cliffs hereabouts be full o' suchlike."

"Yet," said I, "few of them like Alwannack, I venture to think?"

"True enough, sir," answered Vic, "for these caves lies above high water, and besides, I've always heard, long as I can remember, as tidn't nowise a healthy place yon!"

"That it ain't!" quoth Harold fervently. "Ah, there's many a poor sailorman's body come ashore there in Alwannack, all cut and scoured by the rocks, and 'tes my b'leef as their spirits d' haunt the place like my father, ah, and grandfather, used for to tell. For, Mr. Edward, a man don't 'ave to be drunk to see things yonder—no! My old dad, he sees things there of a night when fishing—and theer's others. So don't ee take no notice o' what Will Crewes d' say. Y' see, Will, being such a fam'ly man and pretty well to do, don't 'ave no call to be out of a night, says as the Lord give the day for work and night for rest—that be all right for Will, but some o' we has for to work o' nights, 'specially when fish be runnin', and 'tes only o' nights as ee can see things—eh, Charles? You've see things, same as me, eh?"

“I ’ave so!” Charles answered. “Sir, when as a lad I rowed my dad’s fish to Mevagissey, ’aving missed the Falmouth market, I always give Alwannack a wide berth and precious good offing—if ’twas anyways dark.”

“Did you see lights there?”

“Well, sir . . . I . . . have,” he answered reluctantly. “And these wasn’t honest lights neither—blue, they was—and not a honest blue at that!”

“Ah,” nodded Vic, “and Morley Billing do tell me, time ago, as he see a man all afire wi’ green flame a-dancing and waving of his arms—tormented—like!”

Here I took occasion to finish my ale, pondering, as I did so, how much of all this my informants themselves truly believed, remembering they were Cornishmen and I no more to them, perhaps, than officious, too-inquisitive stranger, that is to say—a mere foreigner. However, I persisted none the less.

“If I remember rightly, Trelant Tower stands just above Alwannack Cove?”

“Ay, pretty well, sir.”

“And how far from the Tower is Trelant House?”

“ ’Twill be just alow o’ the Tower in valley—’bout a mile.”

“Do you ever see Sir Wilfred Polgarth hereabouts, or . . . the old Lady Polgarth?”

“Never him, sir, and only her when there be any sickness or distress i’ the village. Wines and jellies, blankets and sea coals . . . like a old angel o’ light she be then.”

“An angel of light?” said I incredulously.

“Ar! When John Farley’s boat went adrift and was wrecked on the Gull Rock, she bought un another! When Charles and me lost our big seine, she hears on ’t and sends money for a new un that same week! There be none kinder to we than old Lady Polgarth, no—not even Cap’n Thomas o’ Trewince. Ef the rest o’ they Polgarths was like she, ’twould be a defferent tale.”

At this juncture was sound of ironshod hoofs upon the cobbles outside, and in to us came Fred Chaffyn to say my horse awaited me.

And so presently, bidding good-bye to these kindly fellows, I rode out of Portscatha village very deeply thoughtful.

My homeward course took me near Trevanion's cottage, and I was greatly minded to pause there until, bethinking me of the onions I had devoured with such strange gusto, I decided not to inflict myself upon them.

Scarcely had I found my way to the highroad than I heard a voice hailing me and, turning, in surprise, beheld an extremely high curricle drawn by a speedy-looking animal and driven by the very person of whom I had been thinking, Jasper Shrig of Bow Street.

CHAPTER XIX

In Which I Am Shocked and Jasper Shrig Aggrieved

"TALKING o' hats, Mr. B., sir," said he, pulling up beside me, "I suppose that dicer o' yours must ha' cost you a tidyish sum?"

"But we were not talking of hats, Shrig."

"Hows'ever, we are now, sir, and sich being so, I'm glad to notice as your aforesaid dicer—not being built nor yet reinforced agin Windictiveness same as mine—don't seem to have took so much harm as expected—from them wicious coves down there in that cove with a name or monniker as don't sound English, like this here Cornwall with its acks and isseys and pols and trees and pens and the rest on 'em—reg'lar tongue twisters."

"Then you actually—saw me attacked?"

"And a werry good thing as I did, sir."

"How so, Shrig?"

"Sir, that there cove, them caves, and they secret passages up to yon ruinated old Tower ain't flowery gardins nor yet beds o' blooming roses for any stranger, 'specially London strangers, and most especially you and me. So, happening to see you ride down that cliff so desperate, I kept a friendly peeper on ye."

"So, then," said I, instantly apprehending the truth, "it was you signalled to those men in the boat, Jasper!"

"Eggs-ackly, sir!"

"But how did you chance there so fortunately?"

"Sir, it were not hardly vot I'd call 'chance.' I've been so wenturesome o' late as to take werry partickler notice o' that old ruination, and if not me—Dan'l."

"Meaning, of course, Trelant Tower."

"That werry same. And, Mr. B., today it pretty near got me."

"Good heavens—how do you mean?"

"B' means of a narrer."

“A—what?” I exclaimed.

“An A.R.R.O.W.—arrer, sir. Feathers at vun end and werry sharp p’int at t’other—used to shoot ’em out o’ bows in the Merry Old Times, and b’ goles, they’re a-shooting of ’em still.”

“Shrig, are you jesting?”

“To-tally the rewerse, sir.”

“But—an arrow? It sounds preposterous!”

“Pree-posteerious is the vord and——”

“Are you perfectly sure?”

“Ar!” he answered and, stooping suddenly, took from beneath himself a long arrow, sure enough, a truly formidable missile which he twiddled between sinewy fingers and shook his head at with an air of wistful reproach.

“Bludgeons,” he sighed, “brickbats, knives, bullets, and a occasional chimbley pot I have met and endoored in the name of The Law and upholding thereof, but to start on me vith arrers, and at my time o’ life, is coming it a bit low! And this here arrer vistled past my listener so werry close that you can call it a narrer squeak!”

“An abominable pun, Jasper! But do you really mean this murderous thing was actually shot at you from—that Tower?”

“That i-dentical! Sir, you may take your oath as there’s been plenty of arrers shot from that Tower in them olden days as natural expression o’ windictiveness o’ the times and took according—but in these here advanced days of enlightenment and saw-handled hair triggers and civilization, a bow and arrer seems a bit old-fashioned, ay, and as on-expected as—Murder . . . by . . . Nail!”

“Shrig, this is an extremely ugly business, so very strangely evil!”

“Sir,” he murmured, in a kind of ecstasy, “this case goes beyond all my hopes and expectations! I don’t know as I’ve ever been more att-tracted by a case as promised so much, ay—or better.”

“Better?” I exclaimed, shocked by his callousness. “Worse, Shrig, infinitely worse, for over and beyond that murder of long ago, I begin to grow more horribly certain of other horrible crimes”—and here I leaned to whisper the awful indictment—“the brutal slaying of poor, shipwrecked folk, Jasper!”

“Lord!” he exclaimed, making his round eyes yet rounder, “think o’ that now!”

“I do think of it, Shrig, and hope that you or O’Dowd may soon put an end to such fiendish cruelty! By the way, O’Dowd bade me tell you—I think his actual words were ‘to mind your eye because he had this case in his hand and would soon have enough proof for five or six hangings!’ ”

“Michael O’Dowd—ah!” Shrig murmured, and looked at me with such very odd expression that I added, wondering:

“He seems a very capable fellow and is, I understand, a law officer, like yourself.”

“A limb o’ The Law, sir, though—not like me! Yet a werry promising young officer too—a bit overmuch so, pr’aps, and cursed vith a relation in form of a aunt—as died!”

“Aunt?” I repeated, perfectly mystified.

“As died,” he repeated, “leaving the poor lad so much money that he took to sport more serious than to The Law, lifted his elber too frequent, on vich oc-casions he gets too gay and free with his chaffer or, as you might say, his tongue, Mr. B. Now a nofficer as drinks—can—but a nofficer as drinks and talks—can’t! Such officer The Law cannot abide, sir—and don’t! A loose tongue may mean escape o’ criminal and for the inwestigator a knife, a bullet, or, here in Cornwall, pr’aps—a narrer!”

“A grim suggestion, Shrig!”

“Grim?” he repeated, as if pondering the adjective. “Sir, I dunno as I could find a better vord for it unless us makes it—grimmest! Have you seen O’Dowd anywhere about lately?”

“Well . . . no,” I answered, chilled by sudden apprehension, “not for . . . a day or so, indeed . . . not for . . . several days.”

“How long since?”

“Several days . . . a week . . . more. Why do you look at me so? Good God, man . . . you can’t mean——”

“Anything or nothing, sir, only—take another peep at this here!” And, producing the arrow again, he thrust it into my reluctant grasp. “Look at it close, sir—look at it werry powerful hard and tell me eggs-ackly all as you see. First, how o’ the shaft?”

“An odd colour—it can’t be mahogany, of course?”

“No, sir, ’tis ash. How o’ the feathers?”

“I cannot say—except—they show strangely mottled.”

“How o’ the p’int, sir?”

“Small though sharp and formidably heavy.”

“How o’ the string as binds it—so werry neat?”

“Covered with a kind of . . . glaze.”

“Sir, ha’ the goodness to spit on your finger—no, I’ll use mine.” So saying, he took the arrow, moistened the tip of his blunt finger very copiously, and therewith rubbed the shaft, point, and feathers, then, suddenly reaching out his hand to me, showed that finger stained a horrible red.

“Shrig——” I gasped, recoiling.

“Ar!” he murmured, gazing down at this dreadful evidence beneath faintly puckered brows. “Blood! Huming gore, sir, though if you ax me ‘whose’—ekker alone can reply.”

“How—where did you find the ghastly thing?”

“Sticking through the bark of a tree in my rear, sir, nice and loose too. So I nabs me the ewidence and bolts, ah—like any rabbit afore I gets another of ’em sticking through Jarsper.”

“Shrig,” said I, glancing askance on the horrid thing he seemed to be fondling, “what do you suspect?”

“Sir,” he answered, still intent on the arrow, “such a on-common powerful lot as goes beyond ex-pression!”

“Since you will not inform me, pray be good enough to put that extremely obnoxious thing out of sight and let us get on to Truro.”

“Mr. B., sir, ’twould be a j’y, but dooty forbids. Also I’ve to go back for Dan’l.”

“Back where?” I enquired.

“To eggs-ackly the spot, sir, on vich said Dan’l should ought to be standing so soon as I gets me there.”

“Shrig, you become very annoyingly secretive!”

“See-cretive, sir, describes it to a C! For a still tongue don’t break no bones nor yet set arrers a-flying with felonious intent agin the peace of Our

Sovereign Lord the King and the lives of his liege subjex—no! There's a lot to be said for a still tongue, vich, sir, nobody can't deny."

"Fiddlesticks!" I exclaimed almost pettishly. "Since you can be so confoundedly verbose yet say nothing at all, I bid you good afternoon!"

"Wer-bose!" he repeated, shaking his head thoughtfully at the arrow. "I dunno as I vas ever called that afore. Wer-bose is a noo un as shall be dooly wrote down in my little reader and vith a capital Wee. So vot may it mean prezackly, sir?"

" 'Wordy,' " I answered, "and comes from the Latin——"

"Ah—and talking o' Latin, sir, should you have noos of O'Dowd I'll thankee to let me know—at The Vheel, a smallish house about three mile this side o' Truro, The Vheel, if you please, Mr. Brandon-leigh."

Then he touched his hat to me, turned his vehicle with all the skill of a practised "whip," and drove rapidly away, leaving me to jog on and now more thoughtful than ever.

CHAPTER XX

In Which I Receive, and Accept, an Invitation to Tea

NOTWITHSTANDING my own patient efforts and the unremitting enquiries of both Enoch and Will in Truro and the vicinity, the whereabouts of Michael O'Dowd remained a darkly profound and ever-growing mystery. Thus the evening of the fifth day of our fruitless search found us in my private room, a somewhat gloomy trio.

And here I would record how, thanks to the judgment and good taste of Enoch and his own quick intelligence and aptness to learn, Will now presented a very different appearance from the half-sullen, ill-dressed, awkward fellow he had seemed formerly; for now he wore garments that, displaying his lithe strength and splendid shape, endowed him with a new dignity, wherefore, and I think very naturally, he bore himself with greater confidence and also a native grace that made him an unusually attractive fellow, or so I thought. Here, chancing to meet my look, he seemed to sense something of my thought, for he flushed and spoke in that simple, downright manner of his:

"Governor, what with my anxiety for Mike and all, I've had no chance to . . . try and thank you for all as you've done and are doing for me. I ain't overgood at expressing myself—yet, but Enoch knows how truly grateful I am, and if I can't put it in words, I mean to show it by acts."

"I believe you will!" said I. "And now, referring to O'Dowd, let us consider what are the positive facts discovered. We know that eight days ago he ordered a gig at the Coach and Horses here in Truro and drove to The Crown at St. Austell where, from information received, we learn he duly arrived and engaged a room for the night. Then, having refreshed himself ____"

"Brandy and water!" growled Will. "And precious little water—for I questioned the waiter pretty sharp."

"You certainly did," murmured Enoch, "and elicited the fact that 'the gentleman appeared in the highest spirits.' "

"Ah!" groaned Will. "And all b' reason of spirits and plenty of 'em, I'll lay my oath!"

“And,” continued Enoch, “that Mr. O’Dowd ordered supper for one, himself, at half-past nine.”

“With a bottle o’ wine!” growled Will. “And ’spite the oath as I made him swear so solemn! That damnable oath!”

“After which,” pursued Enoch, “according to the waiter, ‘the gentleman went a-walking to take the air.’ ”

“Ah!” groaned Will again, “and none too steady on his pins, I’ll lay, and feeling ‘a friend to all the world,’ as he used to say.”

“But,” I demurred, “why use the past tense, Will, and why look so mournful?”

“Oh, because I can’t forget that oath! And ’twas me made him swear: ‘God strike him dead!’ And he broke it! So if anything’s happened to him I shall feel I’m sort of responsible.”

“Nonsense!” said I sharply. “O’Dowd was no child.”

“But, sir, he was an Irishman,” sighed Will, “and some o’ them never seem to grow up. And he was my friend . . . and I should never ha’ made him swear such oath.”

“He was also a Bow Street officer, it seems.”

“Ay, he was!” nodded Will. “Did Mr. Shrig tell you, sir?”

“No, it was O’Dowd himself.”

“Yes, Mike was a Bow Street Special, and a rare plucked un too—afraid o’ nothing and nobody! Tackled an armed murderer none so long ago and got his arm ripped up from wrist to elbow, but got his man all the same.”

“Well,” I said, “he may be safe back in London now—he told me the case was good as complete—that he had it in his hand.”

“Then, sir, you may be sure he was on to something important! The question is—what, ah—and who?”

“As to that,” I responded, “as Shrig might say—‘Echo alone answers!’ All we know for certain is that eight days ago, towards evening, O’Dowd walked out of the Crown Inn at St. Austell, since when no one, so far as we can learn, has seen or heard anything of him. But from the few known facts we deduce certain possible inferences. First that, being an officer engaged upon a case, he may be keeping out of the way designedly to further the work engaging him.”

“Then why did he order supper and bedroom?”

“Probably as a blind. However, as I say, he may even now be back in London——”

“Or lying dead,” Will groaned, “somewhere here in Cornwall. Ay, somewhere, pr’aps, near the Polgarths’ place in Trelant—that old Tower ——”

“No!” said I vehemently and with inward shudder. “Our facts give no least right for such horrid suggestion or mention of any person or place.”

“Anyway,” sighed Will, shaking his head dismally, “I believe he’s dead, I feel it! Drink and a loose tongue!”

“Or his money!” Enoch suggested.

“Yes,” said I, “this is a possibility. He had been a fairly heavy winner, and if news of this was abroad it may certainly have inspired some predatory attack——” At this juncture we were interrupted by a knock and a waiter entered with a letter directed to me in spidery handwriting upon crested, perfumed paper and sealed with a great blob of wax.

“An answer awaited if you please, sir—a messenger below, sir.”

“I will ring,” said I. And when the waiter had departed I broke the seal and, unfolding this missive, and with murmured apology, scanned it through with no little surprise; then handed it to Enoch, bidding him read it aloud, the which he did, and in surprise great as my own, for this was what he read:

> “Lady Polgarth presents her compliments to Mr. Edward Brandonleigh and asks the favour of his company to drink tea, or what he will, with her at four o’clock today. His answer is awaited.”

“Her!” exclaimed Will, upstarting from the table in very unrestrained, extremely excited manner.

“Lady Polgarth,” said I. “Pray be seated, Will.”

“But she . . . she’s Death-in-Life!” he continued, in rather odd, breathless manner. “She’s a damned witch! Have you seen her—the brimstone, hell-fire look of her?”

“Oh yes, I have remarked her—at a distance. Now do pray sit down.”

“But not, no—not like I saw her, I’ll lay my oath!” said he, subsiding into his chair to lean at me across the table so violently that he sent the toast

rack flying. “No, I’ll swear you didn’t.”

“Dear me, Will!” I murmured. “You pique one’s curiosity.”

“It—sir, it was the last time as I rode over to Trelant hoping to . . . Oh well, I happened to be riding past a wall, Trelant way, and heard a screech and a man’s cry—so it didn’t take me long to get a look at what was going on—and there was this old bezom, a frightful old hag, laying into a sailor kind o’ chap with a dog whip, ah—and propping herself on her stick as she did it! So she thrashes this fellow and screeches till the little girl comes running and takes a blow not meant for her and screams and then . . . she came . . . Miss Virginia.”

“Well?” I enquired, for he had paused.

“Well, then old Death-in-Life hugs and kisses the child and says: ‘There, there, my lovey, don’t cry! Jan Pentreath’s been naughty and must be whipped like horses and dogs must when they’re naughty. Here’s a half guinea to buy you lollipops, my ducky.’ ”

“Pentreath?” said I.

“Ay, that was the name she used—tallish, dark cove wi’ rings in his ears. And when Miss Virginia has taken the child away, the old hag tosses her whip aside and nods at this man and says she: ‘There, Jan, my lad, you’ll get far worse next time you bungle and miss such a chance!’ And so she goes hobbling away bent on her stick, like the cursed witch she is!”

“One naturally wonders,” said I thoughtfully, “precisely what was the chance this murderous fellow Pentreath missed,” but even as I formulated the question my mind was busied with two likely possibilities.

“What I am wondering,” said Enoch, stooping for the toast rack, “is whether or no, sir, you intend to accept Her Ladyship’s invitation?”

“Certainly!” I answered.

“Then I beg you will let me ride with you, sir, so far as the house at least. I should greatly like to see the place.”

“And I,” said Will, “can show it to you from every blessed angle. So I’ll go too.”

But this I would not permit, forbidding them with the utmost finality. Then, at my request, Will tugged the bell rope and very sullen of look by reason of my peremptory refusal.

Thus presently was ushered in my Lady Polgarth's messenger, a squatly powerful man in groom's livery who viewed us bold-eyed and myself with a stare that seemed to take in my whole person from head to foot and thereafter my every feature and garment as if getting them by memory.

"You are Lady Polgarth's servant?"

"Iss, sir, I be."

"And I am sure you will know me again." The man's bold eyes flickered aside, steadied on me again, and he nodded slowly twice.

"Do you want to know me again?" I demanded. "If so—why?"

The man's wide gaze crept slowly down to my slippered feet and there remained.

"I be yere-along for your answer, sir," he mumbled.

"Then you may tell Lady Polgarth I accept her invitation and shall take pleasure to wait upon her this afternoon at the hour mentioned."

"Meaning as you'll come?"

"Yes."

The man nodded, made a clumsy gesture of farewell, and shambled from the room, leaving the door ajar.

"Governor," said Will in hushed tone, as Enoch made haste to the door, glancing suspiciously without ere he closed it, "damme, sir, but if you won't let me ride *with* you I shall ride *after* you."

"And I also, sir, by your leave," said Enoch.

"Anyway," growled Will, "you don't go alone!"

"How?" I demanded somewhat indignantly, though more amused. "Can this be mutiny?"

"Sir, you've said it!" Will nodded. "I don't like the way that fellow eyed you. So mutiny it is, though never were two mutineers more faithful and devoted!"

"Exactly true, sir!" murmured Enoch.

"Why, then," said I, "such devotion cannot be withstood, ride with me you shall—to kick your heels in the landscape while I sip Lady Polgarth's tea."

And thus it was that, later in the day, I rode for Trelant with these two devoted friends whose courage and resource were to prove my ultimate salvation.

CHAPTER XXI

Gives Some Description of Lady Polgarth—and a Doll

A SPACIOUS chamber sad with the faded splendours of a bygone age and still haunted by the wistful ghosts of long-vanished joys—or so it seemed to me as I stood sensing the atmosphere of this place and awaiting the advent of its lady.

Now upon the walls hung many portraits of past generations, but of them all I saw only one and this a woman's portrait that held and drew me with its evil witchery. Red-haired she was, yet with night-black, low-arching brows above glorious eyes, long, heavy-lashed, and sleepily wanton; a languorous beauty voluptuously reclined and draped in a veil whose transparency revealed a form that matched all the boldly sensual beauty of this too-bewitching face. Venus incarnate—and yet Venus surely never radiated such subtle mockery, such suggestion of merciless will, such sly, latent evil as did this so marvellously pictured face.

So profoundly engrossed was I by this truly amazing portrait that I started violently at sound of a giggling laugh behind me and, turning hastily from this picture of Beauty in Youth, I beheld the living reality of Beauty in Age posed in the open doorway—a tall, stately figure gowned in black silk that rustled with her least movement.

As I say, she was tall and held herself so rigidly upright that her face seemed on a level with my own or very nearly, this face of the picture seen now, as it were, through a vista of years, smoothly placid, crowned by the silvery sheen of her abundant hair, and framed in white ringlets—and yet a face so dreadfully expressionless it might have been dead but for the long, heavy-lidded eyes that were so bright and quick with a passionate life.

Then—she smiled on me, and the deathlike placidity of her face was split and seamed by a myriad cruel wrinkles, ageing it instantly and quite terribly, while from the lips that, turning in upon themselves, became a widening slit, issued again that hideous youthful giggling.

"Oh, men . . . men!" she tittered. "My portrait as Venus—men always stare and stare their wicked eyes out—even you, Mr. Brandonleigh! Ah well, 'twas famous once, as I was, and called The Waking Aphrodite, and said to be a speaking likeness at the time." Here she turned from me to the portrait

and giggled again. “A little revealing perhaps, eh, sir? Well, yes—perhaps. And yet if Beauty be one o’ the many expressions o’ Truth, to show forth such truth, naked and unashamed as Truth ever should be, is surely most virtuous act and a blessing for humanity—especially the mannish half! Nay, but you are very dumb, sir; do I shock you beyond speech, eh, sir, eh?”

“No, madam, you amaze me.”

At this she uttered a shrill cackle of laughter and, sinking all at once from her stately height, came shambling towards me bowed upon her ebony staff, the veriest figure of old age and pitiful decrepitude, but with no sound save the harsh rustle of her voluminous silks and tapping of her stick, so that I guessed she must be shod in felt slippers or some such; I noticed also that, despite her awkward hobbling gait, she moved with a surprising and quite unexpected celerity.

Reaching the wide hearth where massive logs smouldered, she sank down into a deeply padded, high-backed armchair and, instantly becoming her most stately and dignified self, wafted me imperiously with her ebony staff to a chair near by.

“Well, here we are!” said she, in cooing voice and with languishing air I thought very horrible. “Now can you be content to drink tea with me or, like other naughty men, must you have something stronger—rum, brandy, gin, ale——”

“Thank you, tea!” I answered.

“Oh, then first,” said she, leaning near to ogle and simper at me quite dreadfully, “first I must ask and beseech you’ll tell—which of my maids is so fortunate to have won your kind notice? Anne is a pretty little thing; Becky is tall and might be judged a handsome piece; then there’s Mary and Esther and Rose—these are the prettiest and most likely. So tell me which of them is the lure, the attraction, sir, the magnet draws you or your servant hereabouts o’ late?”

“Lady Polgarth,” I answered, looking into the keen old eyes that watched me so narrowly, “I grieve to appear dull, yet I must confess your meaning is utterly beyond my comprehension.”

“Oh, fie!” she exclaimed, shaking talonlike finger at me in arch reproof that had something extremely grisly about it. “When a gentleman haunts a place so persistently, or sends his servant to haunt it for him, the cause is Woman, of course; it ever was and ever will be. So I ask—which? And do

pray believe me a warm friend to all fond lovers, so—whisper me—which is she?"

"Madam," said I, recoiling from the outthrust, salacious old face so near my own, "I protest you astound me again. May I——" But she tugged the bell rope with a petulant violence, whereat, and very suddenly, the door swung open to admit a herculean footman bearing a heavy-laden tray and followed by a trim, extremely pretty maid.

"The tray, Benjamin, here—so! Nay, I'll pour out, child, ye may go. . . . There!" quoth Her Ladyship so soon as we were alone. "That was Anne, Mr. Brandonleigh, a warm armful o' sweet rusticity, you must admit—eh, now, eh?"

"Indeed," I answered gravely, "she is so much as you describe her that I am wondering if Becky, Rose, and the others will prove your judgment equally infallible; am I to survey all your maids, pray?"

In the act of filling dainty handleless cups of exquisite china, Lady Polgarth set down the silver teapot with a bang and regarded me beneath thick brows that seemed welded into a black bar across an arching nose whose nostrils worked and palpitated.

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "You change your note, my gentleman! What kind o' house d'ye think I keep?"

"My Lady Polgarth," I retorted, meeting her look with one as keenly direct, "you leave me in doubt."

"Do I, by God!" she whispered fiercely.

"You do indeed, madam," I answered, bowing. "You amaze me by mention of your maids, you go on to inform me you are a 'warm friend to lovers,' you——"

"Suppose," cried she harshly, checking me with clawing gesture of crooked fingers, "suppose I summon—Cecily Dare, how then?"

"Then, madam, one may always admire beauty and goodness—though humbly and from a distance."

"A distance—ha!" she exclaimed, and, screeching laughter at me, took up the teapot, saying, and in quite altered tone, "Are you pleased to take milk and sugar, sir?"

"Thank you, madam."

“Though,” said she, passing my cup, “I should never call Cecily beautiful—no! You are well acquainted with her, of course.”

“I have that honour.”

“Why, then, this emboldens me to ask if you are the Mr. Brandonleigh reputed so fabulously rich, once something of a dandy-buck and friend of Royalty? Ah, indeed, sir, I was not . . . unknown to Royalty myself long ago, afore you were born, and still keep informed with news o’ the Court and bon ton. Are you—the Mr. Brandonleigh?”

“I am aware of no other, madam.”

“Oh, dearie me, then. Oh dear!” she exclaimed with another dreadful, simpering giggle. “Such wealthy gentleman and poor young governess—hoity-toity! Oh fie! ’Tis the old, old tale o’ lordly wickedness and lowly Innocence, eh, sir—eh? You would dazzle the sweet creature with your opulence, win her to your naughtiness with golden lure? Oh, men—men!”

Now at this I merely sipped my tea and, doing so, thought of other tea I had drunk lately, looking into eyes that gazed so frankly into mine . . . and I yearned mightily to be out and away again in the clean, sweet intimacy of Pixey Dell.

“Now, sir, now!” cried my imperious hostess, thumping her staff on the floor at me. “Are ye so guiltily dumb? Ha’ ye nothing to say?”

“Only one word, madam, and this with all due respect for your age—nonsense!”

At this she instantly screeched at me again, and I noticed also that, when the least excited, her diction and gestures betrayed a certain lack of breeding.

“Ha, my fine gentleman, nonsense, is it? Nonsense, d’ye say? Then why are you or your servants forever about the place? Oh, ye’ve been noticed frequently o’ late! My grandson Jason saw ye—ay, caught ye in furtive talk with his child’s governess! And what d’ye say to this, now?”

“Merely that your grandson surprised me in casual talk with this lady who, as I have told you, is my truly honoured friend.”

“Oh my! But you’ve a smooth tongue, Mr. Brandonleigh!”

“And you, madam, a kindly, sympathetic ear—I hope! And, being so reverent with years, you should know truth when it speaks, for Age is wise—or should be.”

“Age?” she repeated. “Ah, were I to tell ye how very, very old I am, ’twould ’maze ye past believing, so I’ll be mum. Ha, but—’spite my age I can hear and see as well as some and better than most; my faculties are still young, sir, and serve me so well I’m not to be gammoned——”

“Ooh, Granny!” piped a shrill voice at this moment. “Oh, Granny, is my Ciss-ly there? I’ve hurted my poor little finger.”

The heavy door swung open, and in to us, with a great doll in her arms, ran the child Tamsin, a woeful little maid who, beholding me, halted to stare, tearful-eyed. Now as I looked at this pretty child, whose small finger was indeed somewhat bloody, I heard a voice so wonderfully gentle, so soft and richly sweet that I was amazed, for in itself this voice was such revelation of yearning love and tender pity:

“Come thy ways, my Flower-o’-Joy! Come to thy old Grannam!”

So the child went, to be kissed and soothed and fondled by those bony hands that seemed now anything but clawlike.

“ ’Twas my new dolly hurted me, Granny. See how big an’ fine he is!”

And truly a most remarkable doll this appeared, being dressed like a gentleman of the last generation from three-cornered hat and periwig to buckled shoes.

“He scratched my poor, dear little finger, Granny. But isn’t he fine? Take him an’ look!”

“Oh my—yes!” murmured Lady Polgarth, taking the doll obediently. “ ’Tis indeed a strange, taking dolly, my precious, and all dressed, I declare, like the fine gentlemen were used to be when I was young and beauti——” The word ended suddenly. I heard a hissing intake of breath, and the doll fell so violently that it came rolling to my feet. So I stooped and took it up, but in so doing scratched my own finger, and, looking for the cause, saw this fine doll’s modish wig had been secured by tacks and one of these only half-driven. I was looking at this and about to speak of it when the doll was snatched from me, hurled upon the fire, and was being beaten and thrust down into the embers by Lady Polgarth’s ebony staff the while she glared on the shrinking child with great, terrible eyes.

“Who . . . where . . . did you get it . . . that thing?” she demanded in broken voice dreadful as her look; then she laughed shrilly and thereafter spoke in her honey-sweet tones:

“There, there, my lovey-dove, my precious lamb! Did the wicked dolly hurt thee? Well now, Granny’s punished him and sent him away. Come, my sweet precious, to thy dear great-grandma and tell her how ye came by such nasty, wicked dolly—how?”

“I buyed him from a peddler, Grandma, such—— Oh, such a very hairy, funny man what wouldn’t let me buy him at first.”

“And where is he, this peddler, where is he now, my Flower-o’-Love?”

“Gone all away, Grandma, in a little cart. But I do wish you hadn’t burned my dolly; his name was Sir Jonas and——”

“What?” The word was a dreadful strangled cry. “Who . . . who . . . told ye that . . . that name?”

“Only the peddler, Granny. Ooh, are you poorly now?”

“Yes . . . no! No, my precious, Grannam’s only a little . . . tired. Yes . . . tired . . . and very old. So, dearie, leave me, go now . . . you too, Mr. Brandonleigh, for I . . . age has its limits, you see. You shall call again, but . . . go now.” So away sped the child and myself after her; but as I paused at the door to make my final bow I saw Lady Polgarth crouched in her chair, so pale, so haggard and bowed with weight of years, that my last look was one of sudden pity.

CHAPTER XXII

In Which Jasper Shrig Makes a Preposterous Suggestion

I HAD supped alone, and now, seated in cushioned chair, was musing in the gentle warmth of a crackling fire when Shrig was announced, and in he strode, a trim, sturdy figure in his tops, cords, and neat blue, brass-buttoned coat.

"Aha—a fire!" quoth he, beaming. "Mr. B., sir, vun o' the blessings o' this here climate of our blessed Old England is that, vinter or summer, a fire is allus grateful and comforting, 'specially o' nights."

"Then sit down, Jasper," said I. "There is wine yonder; pray fill your glass, then tell me—have you any news of O'Dowd?"

"No, sir, not me—nor you neether, it seems."

"Not a word, Shrig, and no least sign of him beyond St. Austell, where he vanished, and so completely that I begin to fear the worst. Vokes and Enoch are away pursuing their enquiries for him at this moment."

"Ah!" quoth Shrig, sitting to the fire and shaking head at his brimming wineglass. "And talking o' poor Mike, how did you get along today at Trelant—old Lady P.?"

"Fairly well—but how in the world do you——"

"Observation, sir!" He sighed and sipped his wine. "Did she have much to say con-sarning our young fee-male party, Miss Wee?"

" 'Female party' is an odious expression, Shrig!"

"Oh?" he murmured, rolling his bright eyes at me. "Then, sir, let's drop the 'party' part and come down to just 'our young fee——' "

"That is equally objectionable! Why not call her Miss Wrybrook or Miss Virginia?"

"Sir," he murmured between sips of wine, "in my line o' business it comes nat'ral to me not never to mention no names—at times!"

"What times?" I demanded.

"Most times, sir," he answered.

“Nonsense!” quoth I.

“Ar!” said he. “And all this time my two listeners is a-harking werry patient for your answer re old Lady P.”

“Well,” I began unwillingly, “she is a truly remarkable old personage.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“She also did her best to affront me.”

“Ass-tonishing, sir!”

“It was indeed, Shrig, for upon my word, she actually and positively accused me of haunting the neighbourhood for the sake of one—or more—of her serving maids—me, Shrig—me! And, not even content with this, of—well—pursuing . . . Miss Wrybrook! Which, needless to say, is all so absolutely and utterly preposterous that——” Here I paused, for, to my justly indignant surprise, Shrig began to chuckle, and indeed so violently that he was compelled to set down his glass lest he spill it.

“Shrig,” said I coldly as possible, “may one be permitted to know the reason for your unusual mirth?”

“Sir, you may,” he nodded, with a grin of which I endeavoured not to seem aware, “and Mr. B., sir, I answer—yourself.”

“Indeed?” I enquired.

“Ar!” he nodded. “The werry idea o’ you, Mr. B., pursooing, or, as you might say, chasing of a young, country, fee-male serving maid . . . tickles me no end.”

“And why should it?” I demanded frigidly, for his broad person yet quivered with ill-suppressed merriment. “I might were I so inclined and the young woman sufficiently attractive. Age has not yet chilled or raised me entirely above the allure of feminine charms be they never so humble and lowly.”

With visible effort Shrig controlled his emotion and, lifting his glass to me, bowed and said:

“Sir, here’s to them as shall, and sooner the better!”

“Shall what, pray?”

“At-tract you, though I fancy them as do ain’t so werry humble nor yet lowly—oh no!”

“Shrig, what are you suggesting?”

“Charms femmy-nine, sir.”

“Then I suggest we change the subject.”

“Werry good, sir. And talking o’ subjex, how about the little gell?”

“Whom do you mean this time?”

“Little Miss Tamsin—vich is a queerish name to use on such a sweet, innercent, small party, I think.”

“But how . . . what do you know of the child?”

“Well,” he answered, pausing to sip his wine with an air of great relish, “enough to be werry sure as she’s fond o’ dollies, like every nice little gell should ought to be.”

“ ‘Dollies’?” I repeated.

“Ar—dolls for short, sir, children’s playthings.”

“Why, now,” said I, sitting up, “this reminds me.”

“Ay!” he nodded. “I thought it might, pr’aps.”

“Might what, may I ask?”

“Re-mind you, sir, of summat as you’ve forgot and as I’m ex-pecting.”

“Oh, drink your wine!” said I.

“J’yfully, sir!” he answered, and did so, smacking his lips with an extreme blatancy. “And werry fine O—port—O it vas!” Here, of course, I recharged his glass and we sat for a while both gazing into the fire and both in silent meditation.

“Talking o’ dollies,” said he at last, and with unpleasant suddenness.

“We are not,” I retorted, “yet we will, for a rather peculiar incident happened.”

“Ex-cuse me, sir,” quoth Shrig, fumbling awkwardly in one of his many pockets, “but afore you continny, might I take a puff at my steamer?”

“Steamer?” I enquired.

“This here!” he answered, and held up for my inspection a remarkably repulsive, stubby clay pipe.

“Oh, certainly!” I answered, but recoiling instinctively from the menacing, unsavoury object. “Though port and tobacco do not mix.”

“Never, sir,” he answered, “except wi’ me. So since you’re so kind I’ll puff and heark while you talk.” So saying, he crammed his pipe with a dark and very threatening tobacco, lit it with a glowing ember from the fire, emitted a cloud of blue and, as I had feared, acrid smoke, leaned back in his chair, and murmured: “Now, Mr. B., sir, my listeners is at your sarvice, the subjeck being—dollies!”

So now, keeping as clear of his smoke as possible, I described this odd incident of the doll, little Tamsin’s scratched finger, and the conduct of Lady Polgarth, while my hearer smoked in a rapt silence until I had ended.

“So she throwed poor dolly on the fire, furious-like, did she, sir?”

“Yes, as I tell you, it had made the child’s finger bleed.”

“Seemed a bit shook, eh, sir, or, as you might say, agi-tated, old Lady P.?”

“Decidedly!”

“Then she axes the child: ‘Who told you that name?’ And the child answers and says: ‘Only the peddler’?”

“Yes, as I’ve described, Shrig.”

“Ah!” he murmured, taking pipe from lips grown suddenly grim. “Domino me!”

“Just what do you mean by that?” I enquired.

“So much, sir, as goes beyond telling. But—’twill go werry hard indeed wi’ that same peddler—if he’s ever found! And you tell me as this here dolly went and scratted the child’s finger, eh, sir?”

“Yes, as it did mine, I remember.”

“Yours, how so, if you please?”

“Because this doll’s wig, instead of properly glued, had been fixed so clumsily that I scratched my hand slightly on a half-driven tack.”

“You mean a nail, sir.”

“No, Shrig, this was much too small for nail.”

“Sir, it had to be small—yet old Lady P. took it for a nail, same as I meant she should and hoped as she might!”

“But what on earth had you to do with it?”

“Everything, sir! Though Dan’l made the clothes, being werry handy vith his daddles. But ’twas my hand as drove that little nail into dolly’s napper—same as another hand drove a larger nail through a poor man’s skull seventy year ago!”

At this, and quite heedless now of his smoke, I leaned forward to peer speechless into Shrig’s placid, rubicund face and for a long moment so remained, being shocked and horrified beyond all words.

“Shrig,” said I at last, “then you are sure at last that . . . Lady Polgarth ——?”

“Sir,” said he, and very gravely, answering the question I had left half uttered, “she ob-serves said nail and, knowing all it means, throws dolly on the fire! She axes the child: ‘Who told you that name?’ said name, spoke full, being: Sir Jonas Wrybrook, barrownet, who departed this life suddenly June ten, seventeen hundred and forty-eight, being exactly seventy year ago!”

“But then, Jasper, you have merely proved your own suspicions—no more.”

“Ay, sir, I’m sarten-sure as Marianny, Lady Polgarth, vidow of Sir Jonas Wrybrook, murdered same by means o’ hammer and nail, being then a beautiful young creetur o’ twenty summers!”

“A terrible indictment!” said I, with involuntary shudder. “This was such a very hideous crime, especially for a young woman to commit.”

“Ar!” he exclaimed, in a sort of ecstasy. “But—such a voman! I never see a more typical capital covess, sich a reg’lar out-and-outer, no—not in all my puff.”

“For heaven’s sake, speak plain, man!”

“Then, sir, you’ve seen her pretty close, you’ve talked with her and must ha’ noticed summat about her just as hijious as this here hijious crime, come now?”

“And yet,” said I, pondering this, “she is a remarkably handsome, extremely well-preserved old lady, at first sight.”

“Ar!” he murmured. “At first sight!”

“And besides, she . . . my word, Jasper—she must be amazingly old?”

“Sir, by fax dee-dooced and con-cloosions drawed from dockiments available, I make her to be . . . ninety . . . years . . . of age!”

“Good heavens!” I ejaculated. “Then she is certainly the most astounding person alive.”

“She’s all o’ that, sir, and then a lot more. Ar—she’s vun o’ these here rare individuals as goes beyond natur’! Beauty o’ body and plenty of intellects! Lovesome as Wenus, wicious as a she-tiger, and a witality enough for a dozen or more. Ay, a werry on-common old party indeed is Lady P.! And, talking o’ tigers, sir, she come precious near knocking out my left ogle, or, as you might say, ‘blinker,’ along o’ that stick of hers.”

“Do you mean blinding you? But where and when?”

“The last time as I tried to sell her a belt buckle made in Bruminagem.” Here, meeting my look, Shrig nodded, and from his lips issued a harsh, lisping drawl: “Vill ye buy even a pair o’ garterth for your thweetheart?”

“So!” I exclaimed.

“Ar!” he sighed. “I vas yon peddler, vig and plenty o’ viskers! And I ain’t peddled in wain—though I shan’t peddle no longer, or I’ll be a werry dead peddler indeed, by reasons o’ prowling wiciousness! And talking o’ viskers, sir, you tell me as there’s still never a trace or sign of Michael O’Dowd, eh?”

“No, not one. He has vanished completely. Do you suppose he has returned to London?”

“No, sir, I don’t. Oh no, I suppose as he’ll remain wanished, unless they’ve used the sea, as is pretty likely, being so werry handy. There’s jest a chance as he may turn up in some eddy. But even then it ain’t likely as there’ll be much left to i-dentify.”

“A ghastly suggestion!” said I, shuddering.

“Ghastly, sir, is the only vord for it. ’Tis a ghastly case—and ’specially as regards—old Lady P.!”

“And you are convinced she is guilty, Jasper?”

“Ar!” he replied, in voice like a groan. “But this don’t do me no manner o’ good.”

“Good? Of course not,” said I, “how should it?”

“Proof!” he exclaimed, in a sort of snapping fury. “Proof’s what I must have—evidence as shall conwince judge and jury beyond all manner o’ reasonable doubt! And proof’s the werry thing as I can’t get, and if I don’t get, this here case ain’t and poor Jarsper is conflummerated most com-plete.

Yet, proof or no, I am sarten-sure as Sir Jonas got hissilf murdered seventy year ago by the pretty daddles of his beautiful young spouse, Marianny Wrybrook."

"And she," I exclaimed, rising in sudden, strange agitation, "she is . . . Virginia Wrybrook's great-grandmother!"

"Ar!" quoth Shrig, glancing at me with his sharp, bright eyes. "But—only by vedlock! Stepgrandma, no more. Miss Wirginia descends through Sir Jonas Wrybrook's first spouse Lucinda, and a werry pretty name too. And this fact," quoth he, knocking out his pipe very tenderly upon the broad palm of his remarkably powerful hand, "should ought to be a comfort to you, Mr. Brandonleigh—if ever you should."

"Should—what?" I enquired.

"Marry her, sir."

"Marry?" I repeated, falling back a step.

"Ar!" he nodded. "Miss Wee!"

At this I could but look my indignant astonishment, while he proceeded to blow down and stow away his pipe.

"Really, Shrig," said I, finding words at last, "you are the most fantastical person."

"Fan-tastical?" he repeated. "This is another new un to me, and I hope it ain't as bad as it sounds. Hows'ever, you now ob-serves poor Jarsper a werry low-sperrited cove this night, all along o' lack o' proof. Sir, proof is the cursed plague and ruin o' my profession! There's many a murderer dodging the gallers and kicking up his wicious heels at this i-dentical moment by reason o' Proof—as ain't! So, here's me, having found the guilty party, shall never get same conwicted—unless summat happens in the shape of a merricle, and sich don't take place in these here Godless days. And now, sir, by your leave, I'll trip up the dancers and try for a hour or so o' the downy."

So saying, he sighed deeply, shook his head mournfully, and departed heavily.

And after some while, the bottle being empty and the fire low, I also got me to bed. But now my thoughts, oddly enough, were not of this very shocking news concerning Lady Polgarth, nor of Michael O'Dowd's possible fate, but of Shrig's preposterous suggestion touching Virginia and myself. This, for one reason or another, troubled me so much that I could not

compose myself to slumber until I had determined that, tomorrow afternoon being Thursday, Will should take my place at the tea-drinking in Pixey Dell —and so, at last, I fell to an uneasy sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

How I Drank Tea and Wrote a Letter

"ADMIRABLE!" I exclaimed, leaning back in my chair to survey the tall and splendid shape of young manhood before me. "Admirable, Will."

"Sir, d'ye really think so?" he enquired anxiously, stooping to glance down at his new, well-fitting boots and buckskins. "I've never worn civilian riding kit before and I feel a bit strange."

"But show remarkably well," said I.

"Then you don't think . . . she'll laugh at me?"

"Certainly not! Why imagine she would?"

"Because, in spite of these fine feathers, she knows I'm only——"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed almost peevishly. "Esteem yourself for what you now appear—a well-dressed, manly, and therefore attractive young fellow. The world usually accepts a man at his own valuation, so believe the very best of yourself and have confidence in your manhood."

"However," said he rather sullenly, "I shan't be easy in this fine toggery—no, nor in my mind—'til I've earned 'em and all the money you've advanced me, ay, every penny."

"Perfectly right and proper!" said I, glancing at my watch. "But now I suggest you had better order your horse if——"

"I've done so already, sir."

"You are sure of your direction after leaving the highroad?"

"Yes, sir. And . . . when we meet, am I to tell her anything about Mr. Shrig's suspicions of old Lady Death-in-Life? Though 'tis no more than we've suspected all along."

"And yet," I demurred, "these are no more than mere unconfirmed suspicions even now. However, if you think it may have any effect upon Miss Virginia, tell her by all means. Say also that we, you and I, are more convinced than ever that she should quit Trelant. If you, Will, could induce her to go with you today, so much the better, for——"

“Eh? With me?” he demanded, scowling but shaking his head mournfully. “Lord, if I only could! If she only would! But no—not she! The likes o’ me could never get her away—short o’ force, and I can’t carry her off like a sack o’ coals,” he growled, and with quick fierce nod strode from the room, a very grim young man indeed. Scarcely was he gone than I began to entertain some slight misgiving as to how this extremely original Virginia might regard my defection and to wish I had troubled myself to write her some brief note of greeting and explanation; however, the thing, being done, must now be left to settle itself and, it was to be hoped, entirely to Will’s advantage.

So now, being thus alone and a prey to my thoughts, I rang for hat and cane and went out for a leisured stroll—to be met by a chill, extremely blusterous wind that flapped my coattails ridiculously with a rude violence and twice forced me to clutch my hat lest it be whisked from my head. Consequently, walking abroad proved such very undignified discomfort that I was about to retire from such needless buffeting back to the warmth and shelter of my inn when a voice, pleasingly familiar, called my name and I beheld Miss Trevanion saluting me from the lofty driving seat of a curricle.

“Oh, Mr. Brandonleigh!” cried she, smiling down with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks shaded coquettishly by her small, close bonnet. “What a glory of wind—for shore folk, of course!”

Before I might answer, this “glorious” wind smote me a staggering buffet, ruffled my hair wildly, whipped the hat from my grasp and sent it leaping and spinning so far beyond hope of recovery that I merely glanced after it and turned away.

“Get up beside me and we’ll chase it!” she cried joyously, beckoning me to the seat beside her.

“Impossible!” I answered, smiling. “Let the thing go and pray return with me to the Red Lion to drink tea with a very lonely man.”

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed gaily. “I was on my way there for that very purpose, meaning only tea, of course. So get up and I’ll drive you—no, wait, your errant hat is coming back to you.”

Glancing round, I beheld a rough-clad fellow approaching who, touching his shabby hat, proffered me my own, now also somewhat battered owing to its late wild gambols; however, I rammed it upon my tousled head and tossed a shilling to the man, who caught it dexterously, saying:

“Gawd love yer, guv’nor!”

“Ah,” said I, “you are a Londoner!”

“Eh?” he exclaimed, and stared for a moment almost as if discomfited; then he nodded, grinned, and touched his hat again.

“Right y’are, guv’nor! Good old Bow Bells, that’s me! Ay, and a long tramp it’s been.”

“Then take this other shilling,” said I, “and good luck to you.” Then I ascended into the high vehicle beside Miss Trevanion and away we went along the High Street to swing into the Red Lion’s stable yard, there to rein up with a practised ease.

“I perceive you are an accomplished whip,” said I.

“Because I have to be,” she answered, beckoning to three ostlers who lounged in shady corner. “Sam will never ride when he can possibly walk.” While she spoke I glanced impatiently towards these three heedless idlers and thus saw one was none other than Shrig’s man Daniel who, perched upon upturned bucket, seemed to be murmuring confidentially to these lounging ostlers, both of whom chewed straws and stared on vacancy. Thus I was about to summon them peremptorily when to us hurried Robert, the head stableman.

“Robert,” said I indignantly, “your men yonder are extremely inattentive.”

“Ax your pardon, sir,” he answered, knuckling an eye-brow to me, “but they’m noo to the job and ain’t properly on to it yet, sir. Arternoon, Miss Vadne, ma’m; Mister Sam well as usual, I hope?”

“Yes, thank you, Bob,” she answered, descending from her lofty seat with gracious ease and scarcely touching the hand I proffered.

So presently we were facing each other at a dainty tea table in remote corner of the spacious coffeeroom which, at this early hour, was empty save for ourselves.

“Did you leave your brother hard at work with his spade,” I enquired, “or brush and colour box?”

“Neither, sir. I left him staring at the rising sea, his poor dear face quite haggard and anxious because the wind is northeast and blowing hard; he says it will blow a gale tonight.”

“The east wind is always horrible!” said I, smoothing my ruffled hair.

“But particularly on our coast!” she answered, shaking her head. “A southeaster raises the sea to a smother of foaming fury beyond the Gull Rock and Pen Nair and drives—all kinds of drift ashore by Killigerran and is so terrible for . . . ships . . . in the dark.”

“Ah yes,” said I, lowering my voice, “you mean perhaps . . . false lights?”

“Hush!” she murmured. “Let us talk of nicer things. Tell me,” said she, untying her bonnet strings and tossing them back with a gesture that had in it something delightfully intimate, “whatever do you find to do here in sleepy old Truro?”

Now at this so direct and sudden question I hesitated; but, meeting the clear gaze of these grey, black-fringed eyes and impressed anew by her air of gentle strength and feminine capability, I determined to enlist her sympathy and possible aid for one who might need such, hereafter—and therefore made answer:

“I am helping to avert possible danger from an extremely self-willed and venturesome young lady.”

The grey eyes opened a fraction wider and, leaning rounded elbows on the table and shapely chin in her two hands, Miss Evadne murmured:

“I’m listening.”

So I told her the whole terrible story, beginning in St. Sepulchre’s churchyard, to the latest events, dilating particularly upon my strange horror of Trelant Tower, with my pitying detestation for Lady Polgarth with her direly suspicious reactions to Shrig’s doll and his consequent belief in her guilt. I described also Virginia’s reckless venture and Will’s and my own natural anxiety for her safety.

My narration ended, Miss Evadne remained silent and motionless, staring before her beneath puckered brows as if mentally visualizing the ghastly scene I had so briefly suggested; then, glancing swiftly about us, she leaned nearer and spoke beneath her breath:

“Awful! A . . . hammer and nail! Oh, it sounds too horrible for belief, too dreadful for any—except that one terrible old creature! But she is quite inhuman. . . . I knew it the first time I ever saw her years ago, and I know it whenever we meet now. She is Sin personified and radiates evil! I always feel it when she’s near. I have always suspected, yes, and so does Sam in his heart, that she is the chief—the wicked unseen power behind these wrecking gangs—and perhaps uses that lovely ruined Tower to dispose of the poor,

half-drowned victims—hush! Here comes Rose Pascoe with the tea at last! Well, Rose, my dear, how is your sister Mary and the new baby?"

"Oh, lovely, Miss Vadne, ma'm," answered the smiling maid, setting down her laden tray, "and my, oh my, but don't he squeal and kick, the little 'andsome! You belong to go and see him, Miss Vadne."

"I will, my dear, tell Mary, and with a pot of my medlar jelly." Rose curtseyed and departed smiling, while Miss Evadne, busied with the teapot, surprised me greatly by saying, and in the most offhand manner:

"And you are in love with her, of course. I mean your adventurous heroine—Miss Wrybrook."

"Most—certainly—not!" I replied. "Oh dear—no! I am too old. No, it is my young friend William Vokes who loves her—and almost too devotedly, poor fellow."

"So then she does not return his passion?"

"Well—not as yet, it seems." And here, as we sipped our tea, I went on to speak of my interest in Will and the efforts I was making for his welfare and future success and happiness.

"But," said Miss Evadne, shaking her head, "if she does not love him?"

"She may," I answered. "Indeed, I believe she will, sooner or later."

"Yet, Mr. Brandonleigh, she is evidently of a resolute will and one who knows her own mind."

"Extremely so!" I admitted. "But then she is also very young and—well, I cannot believe my efforts will prove vain."

"Then," said Miss Evadne, with ghost of a smile, "pray let me refill your cup and at the same time venture to suggest that it is sometimes a very thankless task to play providence to anyone, especially this young lady who sounds—interesting."

"She is indeed," I rejoined, "and this emboldens me to beg your aid on her behalf; will you help her, Miss Trevanion?"

"Willingly—if you will tell me how."

"By convincing her of the needless risk she persists in taking, and talking her out of such folly."

"But, Mr. Brandonleigh—do you really suppose she will heed me, a stranger?"

“I am sure of it.”

Miss Evadne pursed her shapely lips, shook stately head dubiously, but said kindly:

“Well then, bring her to the cottage some afternoon whenever you will.”

And now we talked with an ever-growing and, to me at least, delightful intimacy until the clocks, chiming six, surprised us with the flight of time. Then, having tied her bonnet strings beneath her smooth, dimpled chin and drawn on her thick driving gloves, Miss Evadne rose and together we descended to the stable yard.

And now, as we waited for Bob to bring the curricle, I did my best to express something of my gratitude for her kind readiness to help one she had never seen.

“Oh, but,” smiled Miss Evadne, “this young lady is a friend of yours and you are a friend of—ours, and Sam says we are in this troublesome old world to help one another, and I think so too, of course.”

“Then,” said I impulsively, “since I am thus honoured by your friendship, may I be permitted to call you ‘Miss Evadne’?”

“Mr. Brandonleigh,” she answered, with laughing curtsey, “I shall be flattered. Though to be sure mine is a very odd name, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I answered, “oddly musical, a strange, beautiful name, and excellently——” But my words were muted in the harsh clatter of hoofs and wheels as came Bob with the curricle into which she mounted, with fleeting vision of shapely feet and ankles, to settle herself gracefully and take reins and whip into those very capable hands of hers.

“Miss Evadne, I shall avail myself of your kindness at the very first opportunity,” said I.

“Do!” she answered, smiling down on me. “The sooner the better. So for the present, good-bye!”

It was in a particularly serene and happy state of mind that I re-entered the inn and had opened my sitting-room door when I was arrested by the hurried stamp and jingle of spurred boots upon the stair behind me and, glancing back, was surprised to see the person who mounted in such furious haste was none other than Will.

“You are back early,” said I, entering the room and beckoning him to follow.

"Yes," he growled, halting on the threshold. "I'm back precious early—thankee, I know it."

"Then," quoth I, somewhat nettled by his look and tone, "be good enough to come in and close the door." He did so, and I saw he was his most sullen and graceless self.

"You may be seated," said I. But now, instead of complying, he folded his arms and so remained, scowling down on me dumbly until at last, almost losing my temper, I said:

"Either sit down and explain your extremely unpleasing behaviour or oblige me by departing to vent your evil humours elsewhere."

"Ha!" he exclaimed, and rather wildly. "A nice cursed fool you've made o' me betwixt ye—you and Enoch. He rigs me out in these fine duds—and you tell me I must bow! Well, I did, and she . . . laughed at me! You likewise told me it was right and proper to . . . kiss a lady's hand! So I did, and she . . . nigh slapped my fool's face! She laughed at me, I tell ye, laughed till I felt shamed beyond speech! She mocked me till I . . . wish I . . . could drop dead." Here he turned away to hide his twitching face. Now, seeing him so profoundly distressed, almost indeed to tears, I rose to lay a comforting hand on his bowed shoulder.

"Will," said I, "oh, my dear fellow, I grieve for this most truly and very deeply."

"Ah . . . but, guvernor," he gasped, and rather terribly, keeping his face averted, "she was . . . right. She made me know what a . . . great fool I am to try and be what I can't be. She made me a shame to myself! These clothes seemed to burn me! Ha, sir, I'm done with play-acting . . . I'll be no more than what I was and what I am . . . Private Brown o' the Heavies and Will Vokes, blacksmith's labourer. Hows'ever, I'll never be able to face her again dressed out o' my class like this, these cursed——"

"Ah, but you must!" said I. "Will, you must indeed, or it will be like . . . throwing up the sponge in the first round! You must meet her again and yet again, until——"

"No, sir!" sighed he, shaking his mournful head. "You mean me well, I know, but—it can't be done. She made me know just precisely what I am. She's always laughed at me, but in a kind sort of way. . . . She never . . . mocked me afore. Lord! I can hear her yet."

"Then, by heaven," I exclaimed, seized all at once of a furious indignation very unwonted in me, "I protest it was basely wrong of her, very

wicked and cruel; it was spitefully unjust."

"No, sir, she was right!" he broke in. "Yes, she was so right that I'll go now and get me back into my proper clothes."

"Will," said I angrily, "if you commit such folly, such pitiful weakness, you will greatly mortify and disappoint me."

"Oh . . . well," he muttered, and went heavily from the room, leaving me to deplore most bitterly that any thoughtless young woman should possess such power for evil—to reduce this fine, good fellow thus to bitter shame and grovelling self-abasement; which thought naturally led me on to the detested memory of another woman who had blasted my happiness and ruined my own life twenty-odd years ago—though to be sure this is another story and has no place in this narration of crime and the actions of other people and of Jasper Shrig in particular. These melancholy reflections of my own past unhappiness were dispelled by the sudden reappearance of Will.

"This note, sir," said he, shaking his head at a folded paper in his hand, "I forgot it. She scribbled it to you on her knee . . . said I could read it if I liked. . . . I didn't, of course. If 'tis anything about me I don't wish to know . . . she said quite enough, thankee!" So saying, he gave me the missive, which I saw was a page torn from a notebook folded and skewered together by a pin. So when Will had departed again I withdrew this pin, unfolded the paper, and read these words scrawled in pencil:

> Dear Ned, or perhaps it should be—Mr. Brandonleigh! Thank you for nothing. I prefer him as he was before you began to spoil him by debasing Nature's simple creation into a Thing of Art and consequently ridiculous and artificial. However, he builds a much better fire than you do or ever will, though he wouldn't stay until the kettle boiled. I suppose because I laughed at his too-fine airs and graces. Oh, what a comicality you have made of him already, the poor, silly creature. I wonder if next Thursday I am fated to see him and laugh again, or be awed by the stately Mr. Brandonleigh, or just drink tea cosily with my friend Ned? Yes, I wonder!
>
> N.B. Since your visit to the House, Lady Polgarth, who is never ill, has been and is very, very strange.
>
> V.

Having perused this effusion and pondered it, I sat down to write an answer, but in such indignant state of mind that it was not until I had spoiled

several sheets of paper I finally achieved this:

> Poor, thoughtless child! By your random, heedless levity, and cruel feminine caprice you have hurt and injured my friend. You have shamed Will to the soul and reduced a fine man—eager to make the best of himself—to a miserable wretch content with the worst. Are you proud of your handiwork, miss? I had great hopes of Will because deep hidden in his grand, strong body is a nature extremely quick and sensitive and therefore easy to wound. This you have indeed wounded, maimed, and lacerated with your youthful, feline claws, inflicting such grievous hurt as will, I fear, require some time to heal, if ever. Are you so very proud of and insensible to your thoughtless cruelty? That it is merely thoughtless and not innately vicious I am persuaded. Therefore you may expect me on Thursday next in the dell at three o'clock precisely. Meanwhile pray know me for
>
> Your troubled though sincere well-wisher and friend
> Edward Brandonleigh

This letter I folded, sealed, and directed to:

Miss C. Dare,
In care of Lady Polgarth,
At Trelant House.

Then I rang my bell and dispatched this letter at once and by special mounted messenger.

CHAPTER XXIV

The "Luck of the O'Dowd"

"WILL," said I next morning, "go and order our horses; we are riding to pay a visit."

"Not to—her?" he enquired, scowling down at those same boots and buckskins that he must needs wear since, by my secret orders, his own unlovely habiliments had been done away with. "No, not to Virginia. I . . . couldn't bear to meet her again—yet."

"My poor, wretched fellow," I answered rather impatiently, "your fearful assumption is entirely wrong and your agitation therefore quite needless. We are going nowhere near the lady you mention, so calm yourself and go order the horses like the man you truly are instead of the poor, cringing meekness you would seem."

At this, he turned as if to retort angrily, but checked the impulse and obeyed, though with a bad grace, while Enoch proceeded to get me into my riding boots.

"Our experiment, Enoch," said I, stamping my right boot into place, "I say our efforts for Will's betterment and future happiness would almost seem to be a failure—so far."

"Our experiment, sir?"

"Certainly, yours and mine. You chose his tailor and turned him out with your usual efficiency and hence to my complete satisfaction. I congratulate you."

"Thank you, sir!" he murmured, assuming his most wooden expression.

"And," said I, "when you have inducted me into my other boot, favour me by becoming human."

"Human, sir?" he enquired.

"Yes," I answered, "merge my impeccable valet in your own true self and become, for a moment or two, the clear-headed, well-educated man you really are, a person whose advice I may ask and perhaps act upon."

“Very well, Mr. Brandonleigh,” he answered gravely. And so when both my boots were on he took the chair I indicated and, leaning back, watched me with his deep-set, thoughtful eyes as I proceeded.

“I am glad to observe, Enoch, that you and Will have become such warm friends. This being so, he has probably informed you of his deep regard for Miss Wrybrook and his hopes——”

“No, sir, quite the contrary! He assures me that he would never have entertained the least hope but for you.”

“Indeed?” I enquired, somewhat taken aback. “Yet if he loves her——”

“Sir, there is no ‘if’—he does, but with a devotion, like himself, big and generous, a devotion perfectly selfless that, giving all, asks and expects nothing in return, because he is a man and also, as old Dan Chaucer has it, ‘a very, perfect, gentle Knight.’ ”

“Admirably true, Enoch!”

“Well, sir, being indeed his friend, I would beg you to spare him any further pain and humiliation at the hands of the young lady who, I venture to suggest, may be entirely unsuited to—— But I hear him returning! Pray excuse me!” said Enoch, rising.

“We will speak of this at another time,” quoth I, rising also, as Will entered to say the horses waited. So down we went and together we rode forth, Will so gloomily mumchance and I so pensive that we were clear of the town ere we had exchanged a word; then he enquired:

“Sir, may I know where we are going?”

“We visit two friends of mine, a brother and sister named Trevanion.”

“Ha—a woman!” he exclaimed. “Then, thankee, I’d rayther not.”

“A lady and a gentleman,” I continued patiently, “who will neither mock nor laugh when we bow.”

“Not me!” he said almost savagely. “No more bowing and scraping for Will!”

“Then,” said I, with the same exemplary forbearance, “you shall watch me.”

“No!” he growled, in his most grimly dogged manner. “I’m going back! ’Stead o’ ladies’ drawing rooms it shall be Bob and the stable yard for me, or Enoch and his pantry! I’m off!”

“William,” said I, becoming dogged also, “turn back now, like a poor craven, and I’m done with you from this moment! Ride on and conduct yourself like a man, and you retain my esteem and friendship!”

For answer he reined to sudden stop and I rode on alone, but so hurt and indignant, so bitterly mortified, that I spurred my animal to a fast canter the sooner to be quite rid of the fellow. However, I had not progressed very far when I heard him coming after me at headlong gallop, and thus he was soon beside me again.

“Well?” I demanded.

“Yes,” he replied bitterly, “it’s precious well, I suppose, to be so rich you can compel a man to your will, for, damme, I can’t go with your clothes on my back, your dam’ money in my pockets, and all unearned.”

“Curse the money!” I exclaimed, exasperated to such fury as astonished and yet made me the more passionate. “Devil take the money if you can leave me so!”

“Ay, but I . . . just can’t leave ye so, and that’s the curse of it!” he retorted with an odd vehemence. “I can’t and I . . . wouldn’t if I could!”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“Mean?” he cried. “Why, I mean, as in spite o’ you being such a high and mighty gentleman and p’raps knowing a lot in your own way, you’re a great fool in others—ah, as blind as a drowned kitten and innocent as any kid-babby!”

For a moment, scarcely crediting my ears, I was positively shocked beyond speech, then, words thus failing me, I raised my whip against this audacious impertinent; but in this moment, by the mercy of heaven, my horse shied so violently that I dropped the whip to save myself being thrown. Scarcely had I regained control of my nervous animal than Will, by some feat of horsemanship or trick of riding school, swung down sideways from his saddle and, catching up my fallen whip, tendered it to me, saying:

“Here y’are! Take it and strike if ye think I’ve earned it; ‘fool,’ ‘kitten,’ and ‘kid-babby’ were the words! Go on—I shan’t hit back, I might kill ye if I did. So if it’ll do ye any manner o’ good—take a crack at me, if you will and—can.”

“No, William! I prefer to ask your forgiveness for such attempted violence. It was extremely reprehensible and, which is worse, it was ridiculous. I crave your pardon.”

“Lord!” he exclaimed, with one of his rare smiles. “I suppose this is what comes of being a gentleman—you can beg my pardon twice—and mean it.”

“Certainly I mean it.”

“Then, sir, I beg yours, and ’stead o’ those same offending words I’ll say ‘heedless’ and ‘venturesome.’ For that’s what you are, and this is why I can’t and won’t leave you, no—you couldn’t drive me away, because—well, if things get as bad as I expect—I’m pretty sure you’ll need me yet.”

“So you imagine some danger threatens me?”

“Ay, I—do—so! The same-like danger as threatened poor old Mike—and got him.”

“Nonsense! He may be alive and well, for all we know to the contrary.”

“And, sir, for all we know, he’s dead—and buried!”

“You are a gloomy fellow, always believing the worst.”

“Maybe so. Yet Enoch tells me as Jasper Shrig believes the worst too!”

“None the less, I prefer to hope and to think O’Dowd is alive and well.”

“Ay, sir, but only because to so think is more comfortable and you love your comforts!”

“I certainly refuse to meet trouble halfway. But now I am curious to know your reasons for thinking any danger can threaten me, William. Who would ever dare to harm me . . . and if so—why?”

“Then, sir, afore answering I suggest you drop the ‘William’ and make it ‘Bill,’ or, if you can’t come down to that, ‘Will’ shall serve—just to prove there’s no more hard feelings.”

“Be it so, Will.”

“Thankee, sir! And my answer to your question is Old blood-and-bones Death-in-Life! Ah, yon old Trelant witch, she’s your danger, I’ll swear!”

“Ridiculous!” I exclaimed. “And shame on you, Will! Please remember Lady Trelant is a woman extremely old and reverent with years—or should be.”

“Only—she ain’t!” he retorted. “There’s nothing reverent about her! No, she’s a brimstone witch!”

“Even so,” said I, as we rode on again, “how could she ever possibly harm me?”

“My oath!” he exclaimed, turning to stare at me. “Haven’t you been attacked once already?”

“Yes, by smugglers, as I told you, Will. But this was largely my own fault, I suppose. I invited trouble by stumbling inadvertently upon one of their hiding places.”

“Smugglers, says you? No, sir—her, says I.”

“Nonsense, Will! Why on earth should she dare such enormous risk as to attack me? For I am one who is not to be harmed with impunity.”

“Lord love us, sir! She wouldn’t chance any risk to be rid o’ you—not she! There’d be no shooting or stabbing; you’d fall from some cliff and break your neck, or be caught by the tide and drowned, quite accidental-like!”

“But why—why should I be made away with?”

“Ah, sir, if poor old Mike was made lushy and talkative he’d open his mouth pretty wide, and they’d know as you knew a sight too much. Well, if they’ve got poor Mike and shut his mouth for good and all, I reckon they’ll have a go at shutting yours if you give ’em half a chance. And by ‘them’ I mean, of course——”

“If!” quoth I. “If this—if that! All your fears for my safety, Will, and all Shrig’s suspicions depend upon this one small word ‘if.’ There is no least shred of evidence to support them. If yonder tree falls and crushes me, if the solid earth opens and swallows me, that will be my end—if, Will, if! So instead of dwelling on horrors that may never eventuate let us converse of saner matters—and, better still, empty a tankard at The Wheel yonder.”

So before this cosy tavern we alighted to be welcomed by a plump, rosy, smiling man who speedily set before us two tankards topped by creamy foam, which we took in the sunny air.

“Will,” said I, after we had duly pledged each other, “do you recall how last time we drank here together we were pestered by a Jew peddler?”

“Ay, I do, sir; tried to sell me a pair o’ garters, he did.”

“Yes!” said I, smiling at the recollection. “That same Jew merchant was —Jasper Shrig.”

Will's look of openmouthed, dumb astonishment was so comical that I laughed aloud.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. "Sir, are ye sure?"

"Certain! He told me so himself; he also lisped at me in the peddler's voice."

"Love my eyes!" quoth Will. "Howsoever, I mind telling you he was a precious, downy bird, the downiest in Bow Street. No wonder he's brought gallows and gibbet to so many o' the——" The words ended in a gentle hiss, and, rising suddenly, he turned to peer in through the open casement behind us, and as he did so out came the plump landlord's rosy, smiling face.

"Gen'lemen," he enquired, beaming, "can I serve ee with anything more?"

"Yes," growled Will, "you can shut that window and then bring more ale!"

It was now that I became aware of a horseman at no great distance who sat turned in his saddle, looking into the stable yard whence he must have just emerged, a tall, handsome person of dignified bearing, very well-dressed and mounted upon a splendid animal.

"Oh, George," he called to someone beyond my sight, "on Wednesday at sunset, don't forget!"

"Not me, S'Wilfred, not me, y'r honour; I'll be there for sure," answered the unseen spokesman, whereupon this horseman, with a quick glance at me, urged his animal to a graceful canter that bore him rapidly away.

"Well—damme!" muttered Will, staring after him. "I wonder if he heard us too . . . and if so, just how much?" At this juncture and before I could speak came the rosy landlord with our ale and whom Will abruptly questioned:

"Who was the horseman, landlord?"

"Eh? Horseman, sir?"

"Yes, yes—the elderly cove on the grey Arab—who was he?"

"Oh—him, sir?" beamed the landlord. "Ecod, sir, you must be strangers herealong as don't know him!"

"Well," demanded Will, becoming grim, "suppose you tell us!"

“For sure, sir. Yon gentleman be the ’andsomest, best, and noblest sportsman as ever set foot into stirrup or breeches across a bit o’ blood—Sir Wilfred, Squire o’ Trelant, that’s who—if you don’t mind, sir. Anything else, gen’lemen, please?”

“Yes,” answered Will, tossing certain coins upon the table, “take your money and march—at the double!”

Smiling still, the landlord obeyed.

And when we were mounted and on the road again I enquired:

“Why be so gruff with the man?” and Will answered gloomily:

“Oh well, he smiles too much, for one thing, and I don’t like plump, pink men, for another thing, and besides—he was listening!”

“Dear me!” I murmured, somewhat aghast. “Will, are you certain?”

“Yes. And, what’s worse, you mentioned Jasper Shrig and I spoke o’ Bow Street. . . . Lord love me! And here’s me blaming poor old Mike for p’raps opening his mouth too wide! And now—what of us?”

“But,” I demanded, my dismay growing, “are you absolutely sure that fellow can have overheard?”

“Well, no, sir, I can’t swear to it, but he may have.”

“Let us hope not,” said I, “yet the possibility troubles me because it is at that very inn, The Wheel, that Shrig is staying, or was—under an assumed name, however.”

“Sir, we must warn him o’ this!”

“Decidedly, Will. But where to find him? He is such a ubiquitous fellow, everywhere and nowhere, a perfect will-o’-the-wisp. Still, I’m hoping your fears are groundless.”

“Ah, but what was Sir Wilfred Polgarth doing there, I’d like to know?”

This unanswerable question troubled me also, and not a little, though I kept the worry of it to myself.

Hence it was in no very cheerful frame of mind that we reined up before the Trevanions’ trim cottage with its bowery garden where the tall erstwhile cleric was hard at work with a spade while his sister, this stately creature, was as busy trimming a hedge with a pair of large clumsy shears which her capable hands managed, I thought, very deftly.

Brother and sister welcomed us with a gracious and unaffected cordiality, and as I spoke the introductions I was deeply gratified to note that Will's bow was admirably performed. And indeed, with these kind, warmhearted gentlefolk he was soon completely at his ease, and, to my surprise, more especially with Miss Evadne.

Thus, after some while, I found myself at one end of the garden listening to Mr. Trevanion hold forth upon potatoes, their tilth, varieties, and many virtues, what time I watched his stately sister pacing the smooth lawn beside Will, who, his usual awkward shyness quite forgotten, was talking with the greatest animation and looking remarkably handsome about it.

Now as I stood thus at gaze I heard my companion sigh and, glancing round, saw he also was watching these promenaders.

"They make a noble pair!" said I impulsively.

"True!" he answered, and sighed again. "Yes," he murmured, as if in self-communion, "it is but right and, I suppose—inevitable—someday."

"You mean——?" I prompted.

"Evadne and . . . marriage! Being a very selfish man, I dread the thought of losing her companionship."

"And no wonder," said I, as we strolled on together. It was now that I noticed he limped in his walk, also that his right hand was bandaged, and, upon my remarking on this, he glanced at me in his wistful, half-furtive manner.

"Only my knuckles," he sighed, "but Vadne insisted on a bandage. . . . Indeed, Amos Tregaskis has an extremely hard skull."

"Not—surely not a—fight?" I enquired.

"Oh yes, and a very good one—while it lasted. Let us sit down and I will tell you about it, yes—and of something that is my surprise and trouble."

We had reached the arbour, and in this fragrant bower we sat down forthwith.

"You may remember," he began, "how it blew hard from the southeast some days ago?"

"Extremely unpleasant!" quoth I.

"Well, Brandonleigh, at such times it is my custom to . . . patrol the cliffs with certain trusty fellows."

“Ah, you mean to guard against—wreckers?” I enquired. But as I spoke came the pleasant, homely sound of crockery, and then Miss Evadne’s clear voice calling us to tea. So up we rose, and great was my surprise to see Will emerge from the cottage bearing a large, well-laden tray which, by Miss Evadne’s direction, he set upon a rustic table in shady corner of the lawn.

Now as this happy meal progressed I marvelled at the change in Will, who comported himself with such unexpected ease of manner, though he took small part in the conversation, until:

“Sam,” said Miss Evadne, as she recharged my cup, “Mr. Vokes was one of our national defenders, a soldier of the Peninsular and—Waterloo!”

“Then, sir,” quoth Trevanion heartily, “we are truly honoured to know you.”

“But,” said Will, “I am only a ranker, just a common soldier, sir. Your sister is such kind and gentle listener that I found myself talking of myself . . . how I was a private in the Heavies, First Dragoons, sir.”

“But, Sam, he also told me he has actually boxed with your hero, Jessamy Todd.”

“Eh?” exclaimed Trevanion, with such excited gesture that the dainty cake upon his plate shot away to lie on the turf all unheeded. “With Todd?” he enquired. “With Jessamy Todd! Have you indeed, sir?”

“Often, sir! ’Twas Jessamy learned me all I know o’ the Game.”

“Wonderful!” cried Trevanion, with surprising animation. “In my youth I won some small fame in the Ring—as an amateur. And—I saw some of the great ones of their day, but none, no, not one quite like Jessamy Todd. I watched him fight three battles, out of his weight too—and win, like the master he is.”

And now I sat mute and unregarded as the fallen and forgotten cake, all the talk being concerned merely with this brutal sport of fisticuffs; and great indeed my wonder to see how this scholarly, gentle ex-cleric and his gracious sister hung, as it were enthralled, upon Will’s descriptions of past ring battles and bouts, while I watched and listened with, I must confess, a faint disgust.

“Mr. Vokes . . . my dear fellow,” said Trevanion, cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling, “there is an old fighting man lives near by, Jem Purvis, and very worthy person, who won several notable encounters as ‘The Battling Tar.’ Come, you must meet him—if you would care to?”

“Sir, I should!” answered Will.

“Why, then,” said Trevanion, rising with an almost boyish eagerness, “let us go.”

“But, Sam—not in that dreadful old coat!”

“Nay, Evadne, it is well enough.”

“And your hat, Sam?”

“Ah, to be sure. I suspended it in the apple tree, I fancy.”

“No, you threw it into the wheelbarrow, and there it may remain. Today you will wear your second best.”

“But, my dear, why trouble?”

“To honour your guests, Samuel! So come indoors and be made more presentable.”

The tall brother sighed, looked mildly rebellious, then followed his imperious sister with a meek obedience.

“And there,” murmured Will, looking after them, “there goes a splendid woman—yes, a grand and noble lady!”

“Quite so!” said I.

“She’s one, sir, as looks a man square in the eye and not an atom o’ mockery to make him feel as he wants to crawl away and hide!”

“Perhaps because you are more worth looking at than you were.”

“Ay,” he mourned, “you mean these fine feathers——”

“Certainly not!” I retorted. “Clothes are but an adjunct; it is how they are worn that matters, the creature inside them, his looks, speech, and bearing. A prince in rags might still be princely, a crawling beggar—never!”

“Sir,” said he, in his quickly contrite manner, “please don’t think as I’m not grateful for what you’ve done and are . . . trying to do for me—Lord love you, I am! Only, every now and again I feel as these clothes are . . . too good for the likes o’ me, and I can’t act up to ’em.”

“Will,” said I peevishly, “do not be such a weak ass! If you are truly grateful prove it by making the best of yourself. And the only way is to forget yourself in whatever you are doing or the company you are with—think of them rather than yourself—give so much of your attention to the things and people about you that you have scant time to think of or worry

about yourself or——" I paused as forth of the cottage strode Trevanion, pulling on his coat as he came and followed by Miss Evadne, bearing his hat and cane.

"Wait, Sam, wait!" cried she, hurrying after him. " 'Twill never do!"

"Eh, my dear, what now?"

"Your coat, shrugged on anyhow! What a great clumsy child you are! Take your hat and stick. So—stand still and let me settle you."

Now as I watched her smoothing this somewhat tight-fitting garment upon her brother's tall, powerful form, patting him here, tugging at him there, I had a sudden wistful awareness of loss in that I myself had never been such subject for a woman's gentle care and tender solicitude. And when she had smoothed from his coat its every wrinkle and corrected the angle of his hat, standing on dainty tiptoes to do so, she nodded and dismissed us with a smile, saying:

"Gentlemen, adieu—for the present! Do not stay too long at The Plume, Sam!"

"Now, my dear," he expostulated, "as if I should!"

"However, Sam, a pint of Vic's home-brew will do you all good. Oh, and say to old Jem I hope the lotion soothed his rheumatism."

Thus presently, with my two companions, who were still talking "fisticuffs," I found myself walking down the lane, and very unwillingly, for I had no least desire to visit this or any old "bruiser," no matter how famous, and hearken to reminiscences of his brutal "ring" performances. Indeed the prospect so revolted me that I was about to make my excuses and turn back when, from somewhere below us, rose a man's voice singing "Barbara Allen," a deep bass voice clear as a bell, richly sweet as the notes of an organ, and of such unusual quality that, the verse ending, I could not but remark upon the beauty of this singing to Trevanion, who nodded, saying wistfully:

"Yes, that is Morley Billing. He used to sing in my choir, a good lad and fine boatman. Come and meet him."

So saying, he led us down a narrow and somewhat precipitous cliff path towards a small beach shut in by jagged rocks and great boulders from beyond which the unseen chorister began to sing again:

"*Then slowly, slowly she drew near,*
And slowly she came nigh him,
But all she said when she came there:
'*Young man, I think you're dy——*' "

Words and song ended very suddenly, indeed with such startling abruptness that I halted instinctively, and Trevanion cried out:

"Morley! O, Morley Billing, are you there?"

Ensued a moment's silence, then above a seaward rock a face stared back at us, a young face stark with horror, its pallor lit by wide, dark eyes; then came a sea-wet hand out-spread against us as if to bar our approach, and then he spoke:

"Sirs, don't ee come no nigher . . . there be summat foul o' my spiller, and comin' ashore, as ain't none good to look on."

"Ah, but look we must!" cried Will hoarsely; and presently look we did . . . at an awful nakedness bleached white by long immersion and made yet more horrible by sharp rocks and the voracity of fish.

"Poor wretch!" sighed Trevanion, baring his head. "Poor, poor fellow!" And I heard him whispering a prayer; then he turned away, saying:

"Make it fast, Morley. I'll send you help from the village. Come, gentlemen." I was in the act of turning when Will stooped suddenly, crouched above this fearsome shape of death, then said, in hushed, groaning whisper:

"By God . . . it's Mike! Look—look at this arm . . . the scar . . . there above the left wrist! I've seen it many a time! Yes, it's poor old Mike! It's . . . oh, sir, sir, it's that . . . that cursed oath!"

"No," said I, drawing him away. "No, it is the 'luck of the O'Dowd.' "

CHAPTER XXV

Tells How I Decide to Leave Truro, and Wherefore

It was early in that day fixed for the Inquest upon poor O'Dowd when Enoch brought me a letter heavily waxed and sealed and superscribed:

To Ed. B. Esqr. from J. S. per D.

Unfolding this characteristic missive, I read:

> Hond. sir, Re Inquest on M. O. D. If called as witnesses this to warn yourself and W. Vokes to say little as possible and nothing of deceased being a Limb of the Law. This is asked most express in furtherance of Justice by
>
> Yours resptfly. J. S.
>
> P.S. Destroy this immediate.

Nor, when the dismal hour arrived, was there any difficulty in complying with Shrig's request, for the enquiry proved to be a hasty, perfunctory business that ended in the Jury finding: "That whereas Michael O'Dowd, of London, had been found drowned, he, the said Michael O'Dowd, of London, had died by misadventure."

So in due season all that was mortal of this most unfortunate fellow was borne to his last resting place in the shadow of hoary church tower high above the sea, with the faithful Will and Enoch for his mourners.

As for myself, having a natural horror of funerals and more especially this one, I sat alone and, the better to distract my thoughts, began to set down a record of this case for future reference, and was actually writing Jasper Shrig's name when I was interrupted by a tap on the door which, opening to my call, disclosed the man himself.

"Come in, Shrig!" said I, laying down my quill. "Come in, for I have questions to ask and a confession to make." Closing the door with his usual care, he laid aside hat and stick, took the chair I indicated, and, nodding solemnly, said:

"Werry handsome indeed, Mr. B., and does you proud, sir!"

"What does, pray?"

"A warnished oak coffin wi' silver plate and handles! A four-hoss, bang-up hearse wi' plumes! A mourning coach and pair wi' ditto! Sir, on behalf of O'Dowd, him being now forever dumb, I begs to express doo gratitood and —at the same time ax your reason for such a pro-digious expensive turnout?"

"This was the least I could do, Jasper—for the dreadful affair has shocked me, has grieved me very sensibly . . . the more so when I remember how at times my conduct towards the poor fellow approached downright unkindness . . . and merely because he was so boisterous with life and high spirits . . . and now . . . so horribly dead!"

"Ar!" nodded Shrig. "Nobody was ever deader. And a werry disapp'inting corpse I found him!"

"Disappointing?" I enquired.

"Sir, I looked over all as remained of his remains inch by inch, werry careful, and my disapp'intment should be wrote in Capital letters, for—evidence had wanished."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, shuddering. "Then how . . . how was it?"

"Evidence of who, when, where, and how—knife, ball, strangilation, bludgeon, or arrer—has wanished com-plete; what wi' rocks, time, and fishes, there's never a sign left; he might ha' been shot full of arrers, ay, and stabbed, bludgeoned, and strangled into the bargain for all as Mike could tell me; he's werry dumb, werry speechless at last, poor lad!"

"Surely all corpses are!" said I.

"Oh no, sir, quite the rewerse, or precious few Capital Coves could ever be took and dooly topped and jibbeted. No, a dead body, or, as you might say, ca-daver, if not too old, may give tongue werry eloquent and help the Law no end. But, as I say, though I goes over Mike werry careful, though I questioned him here and ditto there, he's told me—nothing. And him in life such partickler talkative cove too—in death not so much as a visper . . . dumb, sir, dumb as a noyster, and my sperrits is low in consequence."

"Yet you are convinced he was murdered."

" 'Conwinced,' sir, is the vord!"

"You know, perhaps, that he had recently won a considerable sum of money?"

"Ay, I do."

"You don't think this may have been the cause for his——"

"No, sir, I don't. I believe he got took off because he knowed a precious sight too much."

"About what and whom? Go on, Shrig, go on!" said I impatiently, for he had paused in his aggravating fashion. "Continue, and do not mention 'echo'!"

"Lord, and I should have!" he murmured, a twinkle in his keen eyes. "Ay, 'twas on the tip o' my chaffer. But, since you ax me, I'll say, as I told you afore, that O'Dowd, except for his solitary veakness as lost him his sitiwation, was a remarkable good officer and sharp as any needle, so, learning from Miss W. about this here murder, down he comes along o' you to clear up this case, afore I can, and get hisself reinstated. And, sir, clear it up I do believe he did, though how I dunno—yet."

"But you hope to?"

"Sir, hope, wrote werry small indeed, is the companion o' my dewoted days and nights."

"You have discovered some facts, then?"

"Fax a-plenty, sir, but proof—nary a natom! But, Mr. B., you says to me summat about a 'confession,' and, sir, my listeners is both at your sarvice."

"Yes, yes, to be sure," said I, meeting his sharp scrutiny serenely as I might; "it is my duty to warn you, Jasper, that by my perhaps too-incautious mention of your name I have possibly involved you in some little difficulty, or even . . . danger, which God forbid!"

And forthwith I described, and fully as possible, the late incident at the Wheel Inn.

"Consequently," I ended, "my present anxiety is to know if, should the man have overheard, it will place you in any least danger, Shrig?"

I had expected some look or expression of annoyance upon Shrig's part, but instead he merely glanced at me, sighed deeply, shook his head, and answered, in most lugubrious tone:

"Sir, this here case, as looked so amazing full o' promise, now promises O.U.G.H.T.—nothing except a flam, a holler mockery, and a reg'lar apple o' Sodom as is ashes in pore Jarsper's gam, or, as you might say, mouth, and dust in his peepers. 'Am I threatened and in danger?' you axes me, and I

responds, ‘Sir, I am!’ By whose Windictiveness and reasons for same I leaves you to de-dooce. Result on pore Jarsper being a lowness o’ sperrits as is sinking lower constant to such deeps as might as-tonish you. For Proof, as aforesaid, ain’t and Sorrer therefore is, and Hope has flew and this here case floored me complete for the present!”

“Though only for the present, surely?” I enquired.

Once again he shook his head, sighing mournfully, and then was a rap on the door and a waiter appeared, to say:

“Sirs, if you please, a person below begs to inform those concerned that he is at your service.”

“Ar!” quoth Shrig, consulting a very large silver watch. “And to the werry minute. Vaiter, you can say ‘immegit!’ ”

The waiter blinked, bowed, and departed, whereupon Jasper Shrig arose, saying:

“Dan’l! So, Mr. B., sir, for the time being, adoo! Your werry humble servant.”

Then, mournfully refusing my proffers of refreshment, he saluted me gloomily and strode dejectedly from the room.

Left thus, I also became gloomy, and so depressed that I lost all heart for my writing; and so, this being Thursday and the hour precisely a quarter to three, I decided upon a visit to Pixey Dell that I might inform Virginia of poor O’Dowd’s tragic demise and of our dreadful suspicions, hoping to impress upon her thereby the urgent necessity of her instant removal from Trelant. With this intent, I set about preparing for the saddle, but, lacking the able assistance of Enoch, an extremely troublesome business I made of it. Thus I was in the act of struggling into my boots when a letter was brought to me from the Post which I saw at once, oddly enough, was superscribed in Virginia’s bold handwriting.

So, not staying to achieve my boots, I unfolded this letter and read:

> Miss Cecily Dare, having perused the epistle of Ed. B. Esqr., presents her compliments and ventures to advise him not to approach Pixey Dell lest Miss C. D. “flesh her youthful, feline claws” upon his so precious person. Miss Dare dares also to suggest he would do much better to convey himself back to London and his leisured ease, leaving her to meet her destiny as she desires—alone.

Now when I had deliberated upon this effusion I tossed my riding boots into a corner, resumed my shoes, and, taking hat and cane, went forth into the pleasant afternoon sunshine.

And it was during this stroll that the fancy took me to leave Truro, and soon as possible.

“Away?” I repeated. “But where? Did you see or speak with him?”

CHAPTER XXVI

Tells How the Storm Watch Set Out

"ENOCH," said I next morning, as I sat to breakfast, "Will is late, it seems."

"Your pardon, sir, no—he was early. I am given to understand he was mounted and away before seven o'clock."

"Neither, sir. Ham and eggs, sir?"

"Did he leave any word, any message for me?"

"No, sir. Did you say 'ham,' sir, or——"

"However," quoth I, in no little annoyance, "I can guess his whereabouts!"

"Sausages and bacon, sir, or——"

"He will be haunting Trelant again, and once more bringing odium upon me."

"Impossible—surely, sir."

"Quite impossible," said I, "or so one would naturally suppose. But no, Enoch, quite the contrary, I assure you. For that astounding old person, Lady Polgarth, has actually and positively accused me—me, Enoch—of using William as my agent, my go-between in my amours with . . . her maid-servants!" Now here I troubled to turn and glance up at Enoch, who merely bowed, murmuring:

"Toast, sir?"

"Admirable!" I exclaimed. "Enoch, you are certainly a—no, the absolute paragon! And now if you feel the least inclination to laugh you may do so upon your way to the stable yard, where you will order the man Robert to have a horse ready for me, the sorrel gelding, in half an hour."

Thus after a solitary and somewhat joyless breakfast, instead of sitting down comfortably to the continuation of this narration, I set off to visit the Trevanions, my usual amiable serenity somewhat ruffled by Will's random thoughtlessness. And presently, to add to my annoyance, the wind began to blow and bluster, toppling my hat and fluttering my cloak and coattails

absurdly; it also piled up great masses of cloud that, quenching the sun, cast a chill shadow upon my way.

It was with this chilly gloom all about me that I alighted before Trevanion's cottage and, tethering my horse, entered the sunless garden and there came upon the woeful Henry Cragg mournfully busied with a hoe.

"Good mornin', sir," he sighed, "though it ain't good, for if this 'ere wind shifts east'ard, as it b'longs to, 'twill blow a gale this night."

"I hope not!" said I, drawing my cloak about me.

"Ay," he groaned, drooping dejectedly upon his hoe, "but what be use o' hoping? If blow it do, blow it will! And, sir, if you be going to ax about me tooth, 'tis out and a fine job it were and a rare mess o' me jaw; couldn't take nought but slops for a week. But if you've come 'oping for to see Miss Vadne, she's like me tooth—out too, along wi' tea and jellies in a basket for old gammer Trevarne as d'be too old to 'preciate ought except baccy, 'aving one leg in the grave and t'other a-slipping. And if ye wants to see Mister Sam, he's went indoors, him and me 'aving 'ad words along o' they slugs. 'Sut and salt!' sez 'e to me. 'Sir,' I sez to 'e, 'sut I 'ave gave 'em frequent and they wallers in it! Salt I 'ave laid and they swallers it! Your slugs,' I sez, 'ain't like other slugs as I've met; they thrives on salt and likewise sut'—and yonder 'e comes!" Turning from the mournful Cragg, I beheld Sam Trevanion, this gentle-faced, scholarly giant, approaching, his noble features bright with a welcome so much better than words that it lifted my gloom and I hastened to meet him.

"Sam," said I, as we shook hands, "this Brandonleigh person and lonely fellow begs you will call him 'Ned,' for he has few friends nowadays and to know you indeed his friend would honour and gladden—me!"

"And myself also," he replied, "for I too, Ned, have few friends—of my own sort. . . . Let us go in out of this wind. Come to my study; I've some books may interest you. . . . No," said he, glancing up at the cloudy sky, "I do not like this wind!"

"Nor I, especially when it is east," quoth I fervently.

He brought me to a small, somewhat untidy chamber lined with books of every sort, rare and otherwise, old and new, ranging from theology and the classics to narratives of early sea voyagers and the Newgate Calendar.

And after we had pored over and talked books awhile I told him of my intention to leave Truro, asking if he knew of a furnished house to rent in the neighbourhood.

“For I weary of inns,” said I, “and desire some place of my own, even a cottage. My man Enoch is an excellent chef. Can you tell me of any such that might suit me, and not too far from here?”

“I know a Mrs. Oliver has a furnished cottage to let in Portscatha . . . though perhaps it would be too small for you, Ned.”

“However,” said I, “if not troubling you too much, I should like to see it.”

“Willingly,” he answered, reaching hat and stick from adjacent corner; “you will at least find the Olivers most kind and considerate folk.”

So forth we went, into a wind more boisterous than ever, that rioted in swinging treetops and so buffeted us that walking was no pleasure and conversation difficult.

We found Portscatha village a wind-swept bleakness where none seemed abroad until we reached the sea wall, where leaned divers fishermen watching and shouting to others in the cove below who were busied hauling their boats beyond reach of the mounting seas. As we drew near it pleased me to see what warm though respectful greeting was given to my tall companion, and in lesser degree to myself.

“Wind be shifting, sir,” said Charles Over, making room for us beside him; “ ’twill blow a proper gale afore night’s out. Might ha’ knowed as you, Mr. Trevanion, would be down herealong an’ the weather so threatening-like.”

“Threatening indeed, Charles!” he answered, peering anxiously seaward. “Yes, I’m here to pray God’s mercy on all storm-beaten mariners and to wonder how many of you are willing to keep watch with me tonight?”

“Well, here be I for one, sir,” answered Will Crewes.

“And me for another!” said Harold Nicholls. “And brother John here, and poor Tom, says the same.”

“Ay, and here be me, sir,” nodded Charles. “Us’ll all be along of ee, sir, as many as ee do want.”

“Then, my lads,” cried Trevanion, lifting his great arms in benediction, “God love you all! We shall be too strong for any deviltry this night. I’ll meet you all in The Plume at nine o’clock.”

“Ay ay, sir!” they chorused cheerily.

“Sam,” I enquired, as we went on together, battling against the ever-rising wind, “by ‘deviltry’ I suppose you mean—wrecking?”

“Ay, I do, Ned, alas I do! Should there be any gangs out tonight, I and yonder honest fellows shall smite ’em hip and thigh, for the good of their own souls and the possible salvation of sailormen.”

“Then I beg to offer myself as another volunteer,” said I, speaking on impulse and instantly regretting it—until my tall companion, this veritable son of Anak, turned to smile down upon me, shake my hand, and then draw it close within his powerful arm. Thus we went closer together yet seldom speaking because of the blustering fury about us, until, in sheltered corner, Trevanion knocked upon a door which, after some delay, was opened by a witch who peered at us through straggling locks of dark hair but who, evidently recognising Sam, smoothed back her hair, smiled, and instantly transformed herself into a handsome woman.

“Oh, but,” said she, when Sam had spoken the introductions and business that brought us, “I’m afraid the cottage is very shabby; still I’ll show you over it with pleasure.”

“Nay, Mrs. Oliver, spare yourself the trouble. If you will give me the key, ma’m . . .”

At the extreme end of the village, where the street narrowed to a lane that, making a right-angled turn, dwindled to a cliff path high above the sea, was the cottage we sought. A small white structure, evidently builded against stress of time and weather, pleasantly situate in a little green garth throned upon a jag of storm-lashed rocks; a square, homely place with a central door balanced by windows that, like friendly eyes, seemed to twinkle a welcome despite this gloomy day. Within I found the rooms to be few and cramped, the furniture extremely jaded, the stair narrow and precipitous. Yet the place appealed to me, set as it was upon the verge of ocean with a prospect, across tumultuous seas, of Pen Nair, the conical Gull Rock, with beyond a hazy, far shadow that was the mighty Dodman.

Thus, relying upon Enoch’s genius for orderliness and comfort, I resolved to take the place on a month’s trial.

This business I duly settled with Mrs. Oliver, now an exceeding gracious person, who insisted upon dispensing tea for us, though plaintively mournful regarding her poor, ill-used furniture and the carelessness of tenants in general, with promises to make all comfortable as possible for me.

Taking leave of my landlady, I buttoned coat, rammed on my hat tightly, and followed Sam out into an evening of tempest. But we had not gone far when it was our good fortune to meet Miss Evadne, who laughed us a greeting as she struggled against the increasing gale, her backward-fluttering draperies betraying all the lovely, splendid shape of her. And now, with her between us and arms locked, we struggled on together.

"Oh, this glorious wind!" she cried in joyous exhilaration—as for me, I grasped toppling hat with my free hand, cursing this boisterous element silently though with great fervour.

"Vadne!" shouted her brother, above this raving tumult. "Ho—Vadne!"

"Yes, Sam?" she cried back.

"Ned . . . going to be our neighbour . . . taken Mrs. Oliver's cottage."

"Oh, indeed, Sam?"

"Yes . . . and, my dear, he goes with me on . . . the watch tonight!"

"Splendid!" she exclaimed, and the rounded arm I held seemed to tighten in mine.

"Consequently, Evadne, he will sleep at the cottage."

"Of course, Sam dear. And . . . salmon peel for supper, Sam! Have you . . . ever tasted . . . salmon peel, Mr. Ned?"

"Never!" I answered, only to have the word blown from my lips, so I shouted it.

"Look!" cried Sam, halting us suddenly. "Look back at the sea!"

And a truly awesome spectacle it now presented—a smother of foam-crested billows rushing to hurl themselves against rocky foreshore with thunderous shock and ceaseless roar plain to hear above the piping wind.

By the time we came in sight of Trevanion's cottage it was blowing so hard that twice it halted us, and I for one found some difficulty in breathing, yet therewith felt a strange exhilaration so that when at last we were out of this raging fury and in the blessed shelter of roof and walls, we were breathless but laughing, all three.

And this glad spirit abode with us: it was in the merry crackle of Sam's new-lighted fire; it came to me in Evadne's step when she bustled to and fro, laying the table for supper; it was indeed all about us, for this cosy habitation, I realized yet again, was truly and in every sense a home.

“My gracious!” exclaimed Evadne, as a howling gust smote the house a buffet that seemed to shake the stout walls. “Oh, Sam, it will be a terrible night for your watch!”

“The more reason for it, my dear,” he sighed.

“But,” said I, drawing nearer the fire’s comfort, “why not leave it to the Coastguard, my dear fellow? And what of the Preventive men?”

“They will be busy enough, Ned. And besides they are too few for such a coast.”

“Also,” Evadne added, “they are Cornishmen, and most of them related more or less closely to the wretches Sam watches and waits for, and if not related they are all—Cornishmen!”

“No, no, Evadne, the Coastguard at least do their best and are faithful to their duty.”

“And,” said Evadne, rising, “ ’tis time I cooked supper.”

“I thought,” said Sam, though I was listening to the murmur of his sister’s voice where she was now busied with her maid in the kitchen near by, “yes, I thought I knew every man of the Coastguard and Preventive, Ned, and yet the other day, between here and St. Anthony, I passed four men in uniform of the Coastguard and all complete strangers!”

“A new draft, perhaps,” I suggested.

“Maybe . . . and yet I should have known. I always know of such changes. . . .” After this we sat gazing at the fire, Sam apparently deep in anxious thought and I in a drowsy content, until, supper being ready, down we sat, and for the first time I tasted of this most delectable fish, a salmon peel, than which no fish that ever swam can be more delicious, at least as Miss Evadne cooked it.

Our meal done and the table cleared, we drew to the fire, its ruddy comfort the more grateful by contrast with the storm that raged in the gathering darkness outside, hooting beneath the eaves, rattling at the casements, bellowing in the chimney, while I listened in a deep content and watched the flash of Miss Evadne’s steel knitting pins where she sat between her brother and me.

“Oh,” she exclaimed at last, “the sea will be terrible tonight! Pray God be kind to all poor ships!”

“Amen!” murmured Sam reverently.

“It must be fearful to drown at night,” she whispered. “The dreadful darkness . . . the merciless waves . . . the cruel rocks! This reminds me of your recent loss, Mr. Ned, your poor friend. Sam told me about it, of course.”

“Only that Vokes was able to identify him, Ned. Is anything known as to how the accident befell?”

“No!” I answered, sighing at memory of this most unfortunate fellow. “No, it remains still a profound mystery, Sam.”

“Why, then,” said Evadne, quick to heed my trouble, “to change the subject, I like your Mr. Vokes; he is such a—a man, clean and honest as the day.”

“He is indeed,” said I.

“And a toughish customer!” murmured Sam. “Yes, I judge him a very redoubtable fellow with such legs and shoulders—speed and power! And a pupil of Jessamy Todd—my word! Vokes promised to box me a round or so, with muffles, of course; it is a joy soon to be, I hope.”

“A joy?” I repeated.

“Ay, truly, Ned—ah, but forgive me, I am forgetting you take no pleasure in boxing as a sport.”

“None!” I answered. “To be perfectly frank, Sam, I reprehend strongly all bodily violence and the infliction of needless pain.”

“So do I!” said Miss Evadne, bowing stately head but knitting so fiercely that her steel pins clicked and glittered. “Though to be sure I am—only a mere, poor, weak woman!”

“And,” quoth I, wishing I might see her face, “I hope I am no less a man because I detest all such needless violence, Miss Evadne!”

“Of course,” she answered, “and yet if you go with Sam tonight, he will lead you into an elemental violence, and—yes, perhaps even into the violence of personal combat! For my brother, though a gentle saint in many ways—yes, you are, Sam, too saintly sometimes—can be an excessively violent person on occasion, Mr. Ned; so extremely human and of the earth earthy that he glories in personal encounters—vulgar bangs and buffets. Oh yes, you do, Sam! So, Mr. Ned, I fear there may be some knocking and banging tonight if the wrecking wretches are about.”

“Then,” said I, “pray believe that I shall do my best to bang and buffet heartily as any. Though as a rule I fight only when compelled and then with something more—effective than fist or bludgeon.”

“And there,” quoth Sam, “there lies the difference betwixt us, Ned! You actually fight with lethal weapon and hatred for your opponent, seeking to maim or kill, while the sportsman fights with no least animosity; nay, he may even love and admire the man he smites, and more especially if that man smites him back.”

“And now,” said Evadne, rolling up her knitting, “considering the terrible weather, I prescribe for you both a jorum of something hot—with rum in it, sugar, lemon peel, and a clove or so. And while I’m brewing it, Mr. Ned, pray tell us if you have seen or heard anything more lately of that ancient, fearsome witch-creature, Lady Polgarth? Oh yes, and also why you have not given me the pleasure of meeting your most interesting young lady.”

“No, no!” I exclaimed. “Pray understand that Miss Wrybrook is very certainly not—my young lady!”

“Oh?” queried Miss Evadne, intent on the lemon she was peeling.

“Decidedly not!” quoth I.

“Ah,” murmured Miss Evadne, “then perhaps poor Mr. Vokes will not hope in vain. He told me all about her and himself, of course, and of your generosity, and begged my advice, and was so sincere and humble that I liked him all the better. But now tell us of that Aged Evil, Lady—— Oh, my goodness—what’s that?” she cried, as came a thunderous knocking upon the outer door. Up leapt Sam, and with remarkable agility for one of his size, and opened to a rush of wind and three figures in gleaming oilskins who, the storm shut out again, revealed themselves as Charles Over, Harold Nicholls, and Morley Billing.

“Come in, lads,” said Trevanion heartily, “come and be welcome.”

“Yes,” cried Evadne from the inner room, “bring them in, Sam, in to the fire and something they will like even better.” So in they tramped with their long, heavy sea boots, to the glow of fire and candles where now breathed a fragrance spicily delicious, for the “jorum” was brewed and steaming in a deep bowl upon the table.

And now with what admirable tact brother and sister set these good fellows at their ease while our generous rummers were being filled with this liquid fragrance.

“Lads,” quoth Sam, lifting his brimming glass, “let us drink a safe harbour and stout ship to all sailormen in this night of tempest.” And when this toast had been drunk with hearty acclaim he enquired, nodding at their boots and oilskins:

“It isn’t raining, I hope?”

“Not yet, sir,” answered Over, “though it b’longs to. And a big sea runnin’. But what d’bring us is to tell ee as they Trelant rogues be at their tricks again like us expected.”

“Ay, sir,” quoth Harold. “I seen a light over to Killigerran, and Morley see another.”

“Which seen it I did, sir,” nodded Morley, “a lanthorn down along Towan way!”

“Ah!” sighed Trevanion, and though his voice was gentle, his fine countenance showed dark and very threatening as he rose, dwarfing us all by his splendid height which, with his serenely resolute bearing, made him truly the natural leader for desperate ventures and forlornest of hopes, or so thought I, and the others also, it seemed, for they rose all three like men eager to follow, then as instantly sat down again at word and gesture of his no less resolute sister.

“Well then,” said she, refilling the glasses, “while you finish the punch I’ll rummage out your oilskins, Sam, and a suit for Mr. Ned.” And away she went.

“The moon is full tonight!” said Sam.

“True enough, sir,” replied Charles Over, sipping at his new-charged glass with relish, “so there be, but yet ’tes black, dirty night, foul wi’ clouds. And I always says as how nobody but Miss Vadne can mix grog like this here.”

“No!” exclaimed Harold. “ ’Twere me as first said they very words a-sitting in this here very room, last time we was out.”

“So you might ’ave said ’em, ’Arold, but after me—like a hecho!”

“Now lookee here, Charlie, I ain’t no man’s echo.”

“Tell me,” demanded Trevanion, setting down his empty glass, “since we must expect some opposition, how are you armed?” Now at this question I felt my first qualm of apprehension that was only increased when I saw the

formidable, not to say murderous, bludgeon that Charles now brandished in powerful fist, saying:

"I fancied as this might come in a bit 'andy-like, sir, to make up for my game leg."

"And me, sir," said Harold, "I shall borrer the tiller o' brother Tom's boat."

"Why not the tiller of your own boat, Harold?"

"Because Tom's borrered it already, sir, and unbeknownst to me at the time."

"And what of you, Morley?"

"Well, sir, I got the best half o' Dad's boat 'ook waiting at The Plume."

"Freddy Chaffyn be bringing his granddad's old cutlass," said Charles.

"Good heavens—no!" exclaimed Trevanion. "There must be no murderous steel, my lads."

"But, sir," Harold demurred, "some o' they'll have knives and p'raps a axe or so, same as last time."

"We must risk that," answered Trevanion, and with so little concern that I chilled anew. "However," he continued, "as last time, I'll have no stabbing or shooting on our part." At this moment Evadne called, and away he strode, leaving one very unhappy person, to wit—myself. I was about to question my three companions as to the likelihood of being assailed by such horrible weapons as sheath knives and axes, when back came brother and sister with oilskins for himself and me; but these proved so much too large for my lesser person that Evadne took scissors to cut them down, yet this I would not permit, so, in the end, I did without, though she shook her head, saying my clothes would be ruined by the spray. Only upon my head I suffered her to tie a flapping hat called "souwester," while into my unwilling grasp Sam thrust a heavy oaken stick.

Now, as thus armed and equipped we turned to go, Miss Evadne looked at me with troubled eyes then glanced anxiously at her brother, saying:

"Sam, I beg you won't be too venturesome, and whatever happens, don't lose each other, you and Mr. Ned—keep together, promise me."

"I'll do my best," he answered, kissing her; then he opened the door and we stepped from warmth and light and sweet sanity—out into a raving blackness wild as a madman's nightmare.

CHAPTER XXVII

Tells of the Affray on Towan

"No!" quoth Fred Chenoweth, shaking his head. "No, I don't nowise like it. I bean't a sooperstitious man as a rule, but this here don't make sense!"

We were in the Plume of Feathers, a stalwart company, each and every armed for strife and therefore, being Englishmen, very cheerful and eager for action, all except two, namely myself and Fred Chenoweth, who, finishing his pint, sighed and shook his head again.

"Fred, what's your trouble?" enquired Trevanion.

"Sir," answered Chenoweth, "I'd be as willing for to take a crack at they wrecking raskells as any man on us, but I don't like doing it as the thirteenth man on us!"

"Eh? Thirteen?" repeated Chaffyn. "No, Fred, we'm but twelve, same as the 'postles—do ee count us over and see for your own self now."

"We'm thirteen, I tell ee!"

"Ay, he's right!" cried Charles. "Mr. Ned here be 'long of us, and 'e do make us thirteen."

"No—fourteen!" cried Vic the landlord, taking off his snowy apron. "For I be going with ee, lads. So 'tis fourteen us be."

"Fifteen!" said another voice. "For I'll along—if ye'll have me," and upon the threshold stood the speaker, looming gigantic, tall as Trevanion himself or very nearly, a man of soldierly bearing, whose towering form seemed to fill the doorway and whose clean-shaven, comely face radiated good fellowship with a gentleness of speech and manner that sometimes go with great size and strength of body. He greeted the men's vociferous welcome jovially; he saluted Trevanion respectfully, who thereafter shook hands, saying to me:

"Ned, I want you to know ex-Sergeant-Major Phillips, of the Life Guards, a particular friend of mine and once my commanding officer, for he it was who drilled us to repel Buonaparte's threatened invasion. Now, Simey, call the lads to order for a few words from me." And the ex-

Sergeant-Major, gentle-seeming no longer, roared in voice of thunderous command:

"Shun!" A very short word, yet of such magical potency that it straightway transformed these lounging fishermen into ranks of grim warriors, smartly upright as any veteran soldiers of the Guard; and, standing before these stern-faced fighting men, Trevanion spoke them forthwith:

"My lads, good fellows all, I want no murderous steel or pistol work! Trust to honest sticks, our own strength, and the justice of our cause. For this night, as we have done before, we go out to prevent evil, and this is to serve God. So, because of this"—here he bowed stately head and clasped his powerful hands reverently—"I now pray God to strengthen us, to bless our efforts, and to have us in His loving care now and evermore, amen!" And "Amen" said we all. Then all was cheery stir and bustle.

"First," cried Sam, "to Towan Beach. Simey, do you lead; my friend Mr. Ned is stranger and will need guiding, so he will follow you, with myself next. Now give the word."

"Fall in!" roared the Sergeant-Major. "Single file, quick march!"

And march we did—out into a blinding darkness full of the rush of furious, rioting wind, with the ceaseless roar and hiss of breaking seas that deafened me to all else as I stumbled miserably through this howling blackness; but presently, my eyes growing accustomed to the dark, I could make out the vague loom of the Sergeant's tall figure striding on before.

But now, for me at least, ensued a very nightmare of discomfort and actual peril that began with dim stone steps up which I stumbled and, beyond these, a narrow, treacherous cliff path, with a boisterous darkness to the right of me and, to the left, a deep and dreadful void made more terrible by a pallid glimmer where, far below me, thunderous billows were breaking in foam and flying spindrift.

Thus on I stumbled, guiding myself by the Sergeant's dim shape before me and steadied now and then by Trevanion's clutching hand from behind me; and being dazed, half blinded, and quite deafened by this merciless, buffeting wind, I most bitterly repented adventuring myself, and so needlessly, upon this dreadful business—until the Sergeant passed word to halt suddenly, for away before us and down, as I supposed, upon sea level was a twinkling light.

"Yonder is Towan Beach!" said Trevanion.

“Ay, sir, and the rogues are at their devil’s work!” answered the Sergeant.

“Ah, God forgive them!” groaned Trevanion. “We must break their lanthorns, Simey, and——”

“A ship!” cried a voice, plain to hear above the raging elements, and to us through the dimness came Morley Billing.

“A ship, sir,” he repeated, “standing in from the sou’east!”

“Are you certain, Morley? I see no ship.”

“Ah, but I did—just for a moment, sir, and so will you if ee do look where I looked . . . clouds be a-breaking, thank God.”

“Morley be right, sir!” cried another voice. “I seen her too, ’twixt us and the Gull Rock!”

“Who is speaking?”

“Me, Will Crewes, sir. Charles see her too, ay, and Tom likewise, a ship bearing up for Falmouth Harbour, most like, and off her course.”

“Ah!” cried Morley fiercely, “and why wouldn’t she be off her course and that cursed lanthorn down yonder showin’ like a ship’s ridin’ light to lead her astray?”

“Ay—the lanthorn!” cried Sam. “We must put it out and soon as possible. . . . Pass the word, Morley—forward all!”

So on we went again, but now with a ghastly greyness all about us as a feeble moonbeam pierced the storm-rent clouds—forward and down, and myself now heedless of raving wind, perilous track, and bodily fatigue, my only thought and fierce resolve that somehow and at whatever cost that ship must be warned from the destruction towards which she was being lured by yonder treacherous light. Down a narrow path, steep and winding, that I descended now with no least sense of fear, until my feet were treading level sand; upon this wide, dim beach we halted, the shadowy cliffs behind us, the ravening sea before, and between us and the glimmering foam of thunderous breakers vague shapes clustered about those murder lights, white, green, and red.

And here, with a calm deliberation, the big Sergeant mustered us into a skirmishing line.

“Steady all!” quoth he, striding along our silent rank. “Wait for my order, and when I give it—charge for the lanthorns and—hit your best. Now, Mr.

Trevanion, sir, all's correct and ready for your word."

"Then give it, Simey, and let us get at 'em!"

"Com-panee!" roared the Sergeant-Major. "Forward—charge!" And, with our two herculean leaders in our fore-front, charge we did, my companions keeping form and rank like the trained fighting men they were.

Thus, upon that storm-smitten beach, between scowling cliff and roaring ocean, began a close and truly desperate affray; for, rogues though they were, these murderous wreckers, resolute in their evil, and goaded also by fear of prison or worse, fought most furiously. So for a time the battle raged, a wild hurly-burly of random blows, of dim figures locked in fierce grapple . . . then out came the moon in sudden glory to show me our line broken . . . men writhing upon the sand. . . . I glimpsed one, hard smitten, who went down beside me. . . . I saw Trevanion and the Sergeant fighting shoulder to shoulder like the giants they seemed, until our adversaries, such as remained upon their feet, scattered and began to run. It was now that, as I paused for breath, I beheld a great ship looming phantom-like through whirling spray far out beyond the white peril of thunderous surf and yet drawing nearer, it seemed. But as I gazed, horrified and fearful, rose Morley Billing's powerful voice:

"Glory be . . . she's hauling off . . . she's going about!"

"Ay . . . thank God!" panted Crewes, beside me. "She's heard us . . . or seen in time."

Sudden and loud above raging wind and sea rose the Sergeant's stentorian bellow:

"Rally, my lads, rally! We're beset! Form up here . . . back to back, my boys, and cheerily! Front and rear, now—steady all and meet 'em!"

I found myself between Chenoweth and Trevanion, with all about us a furious mob of new assailants who shouted and cursed and smote us from all sides. Now, though surrounded, our double rank rocked and swayed but held —for the mighty Sergeant fought in one front, and upon the other, beside me, Trevanion battled with flailing stick and more terrible fist, smiting down all who ventured within his reach—and yet found time to pluck me up to my feet when an unseen blow struck me down. . . . Breathless and half stunned, I have but vague recollection of wild confusion and painful effort . . . the earsplitting report of musket or pistol, a scream of pain. Then the reeling press about me seemed to melt away . . . a voice incredibly hoarse, yet reminiscent of London, hailed our scattered assailants:

“Stand, ye rogues, or next time ’tis fire to kill!”

And so came rescue and relief, and by men of the Coastguard, it seemed. . . . I had vision of our late assailants handcuffed and dejected. . . . Then, feeling myself faint to sickness, I crept aside to a huddle of rocks and sank down thereby full length to be out of this torment of howling wind. Presently, my faintness passing somewhat, I sat up and was not a little concerned to find myself bleeding from the head, though where or how serious was my injury I did not trouble to discover. As I sat thus, propped against a boulder, I heard Sam calling my name, and would have cried in answer yet could not because of the pain of my smitten head. Then to me limped Chaffyn, shaking blood from torn knuckles yet laughing with Harold Nicholls, who limped also. And after these came Sam, followed by the rest of our battered company, many of them bloody yet all so cheerful that I felt ashamed of my weakness and made to rise, but Trevanion stayed me with a gesture, bidding me rest.

“Ay, but,” enquired Charles Over, cherishing a bruised arm, “who was they Coastguard chaps? Did any o’ we know any one o’ they?”

“Not me!” came the answers. “No, nor me! Never a one of us did. They was furriners all. Ay, and so damn speechless, never a word for we.”

“Ay, I thought ’twas queer!” said the Sergeant-Major. “Handcuffs too—smart work that!”

“Ah,” quoth Vic, “and Tom Polvarne from Tregissy shot down! I thought he was killed.”

“No,” said the Sergeant, “a dying man don’t squeal so loud as he did, Vic; he was no more than winged. Well, ’twas a pretty tidy set-to while it lasted, and now I’m for home and bed.”

“Then, my grateful thanks and good night to you all,” said Trevanion. “My friend and I will come along at our leisure. God bless you, my boys!” So with hearty “Good nights” away they went, a limping, hobbling company and the more cheerful by reason of their hurts, or so it seemed to me.

Thus when Sam, manifesting a kindly anxiety as to my welfare, was for bathing my head and face in sea water, I laughed and vowed myself very well—though indeed my aching head still rang dizzily—and put him off by asking how he felt after his prodigious exploits.

“Well enough, Ned, except for a scratch or so . . . but I am greatly mystified and troubled. For those Coastguard fellows were indeed strangers every one, and I am mortally anxious for the poor lads they captured; it will

mean prison for them all, a court of law, and God only knows what their end will be! Yes, I tremble to imagine their possible fate!"

"But, my dear Sam," I remonstrated, "these same men, being wreckers, are murderous villains and have earned—yes, and richly deserve—their fate. Why then must you grieve for such?"

"Ah, Ned, Ned," he groaned, "most of these poor, wicked, so misguided fellows were once my choirboys. I can see them yet . . . in their white surplices . . . innocent children singing praise to God . . . pure and bright-faced as choiring angels! This is my grief, Ned! This is why I can hammer them with my fists yet would give my life to win them out of sin and shame and prison, back to honest manhood and the love of their Heavenly Father."

"At least," said I, after a lengthy pause during which it seemed my companion was praying silently, "at least, Sam, there should be fewer wrecks hereabouts in future and fewer innocents to die among the cruel rocks of this horrible coast." Having ventured this remonstrance, I rose; and almost at once we were out again in the rushing wind, but now with a great moon to show me the way. . . . Yet, what with fatigue, the pain in my head, and the raving tumult around me, a weary tramp I found it.

But when at last we reached Trevanion's cottage it was to find a welcome that was ample reward for all past dangers and discomforts—peace, warmth, and, late though the hour, Miss Evadne there to greet us, though, seeing my plight, all she said was:

"My gracious!" Then, shaking head at her meekly apologetic brother, away she sped to return with hot water, sponge, towels, &c., and so, despite my own feeble protests, proceeded to rid me of coat, waistcoat, jabot, and stock, to wash the blood from my face and anoint the cut which it seemed was in my brow just below the hair; and while thus employed she said again, though in different manner:

"My gracious!"

"Is it so bad a wound?" I enquired, fearing disfigurement.

"Wound?" she repeated. "Oh dear, no! It is quite a nice little cut, so clean and neat!"

"Then pray why did you exclaim?"

"Did I, Mr. Ned?"

"Yes, you remarked 'my gracious.' "

“Oh, that was just because of your hair, so thick and silky and with a natural wave in it—unless you have it curled with hot tongs.”

“Tongs?” I repeated. “Good heavens—no!”

“Very well!” she laughed. “You needn’t glare on me so fiercely—and your face all dripping! Come, let me dry it.”

“But—tongs!” I exclaimed. “I hope you do not deem me such affected jack-dandy, such mincing macaroni? Tongs indeed!” At this she laughed again and so did Sam, yes, for the first time in my recollection he laughed aloud, and so joyously that I caught the infection, laughing with them, and felt all the better thereafter, for surely few tonics are better than honest, deep-chested laughter.

My hurt duly cared for and aching head bound up, we drew to the fire, talking in a sweet intimacy until, the clocks chiming midnight, Evadne rose to light our chamber candles and bid us to bed with that kindly, old-world, good-night wish: “Happy dreams!”

Then Sam ushered me up to a small, cosy room, its dainty appointments, from belaced curtains and pillows to fragrant, snowy sheets, eloquent of Miss Evadne’s care. And when the candle was out and my weary aches and pains outstretched in luxurious ease, my last thought was of Evadne and of what she had said concerning my hair.

CHAPTER XXVIII

And of Thereafter

I AWOKE next morning to three right pleasant things—to a glory of warm sunshine flooding in through the open casement, to Sam smiling down on me, and to the faint clatter of cups and saucers heralding breakfast.

"A cup of tea!" said Sam, setting it upon the small bedside table. "How are you this morning?"

"Old fellow," I answered, sitting up to greet him, "never better!"

"But your head——?"

"Sound as a bell, Sam! And, though a trifle bruised and stiff, my spirit is cock-a-hoop and blithe as the blackbird singing out yonder—or is it a thrush?"

"A thrush, Ned; the garden's alive with them, and they're in full song after last night's storm, bless them!"

"Ah yes," said I, "the frightful wind has gone, thank heaven."

"Yes, a flat calm, Ned, with promise of a hot day. Oh, and Evadne reminded me you might be needing razors and so forth; here are mine, Ned."

"Then bless you both!" said I gratefully.

"Breakfast in half an hour, Ned, unless you prefer to take it here in bed."

"Not I! No, no, I'll up and join you so soon as I have swallowed this tea."

"Then you'll find me in the garden."

And presently forth of bed leapt I, to find myself so much more painfully stiff than I had expected that I yearned for Enoch to shave and dress me, then was shocked and disgusted to see how my garments had suffered by last night's violence, until, remembering this was in good cause and doughty fight, disgust gave place to a certain pride. So I performed my toilette and, though lacking Enoch's deft skill, found that Sam's razor served me well enough.

So down to the sunny parlour where all things showed bright and glad; where I found Miss Evadne laying the breakfast table and clad in gown of some light texture I thought extremely becoming, as I ventured to inform her, whereat she dropped me a laughing curtsey, saying:

"And yourself so much the worse for wear, Mr. Ned, especially your clothes!"

"Bangs and buffets!" said I.

"And you!" she laughed. "You that so detest all personal violence too! 'Reprobate' was your word, I think?"

"It was! And I do most heartily, Miss Evadne."

"Yet played your part as well as any man there, Sam tells me."

"Does he, indeed?" said I impulsively, and conscious of an absurdly youthful glow of pleasure.

"Yes, Sam says you broke your stick on one or other of those wrecking wretches! And so," said Evadne, showing me a clothes brush, "Sam's sister would do all she may for her brother's friend by cherishing his poor, ill-used clothes for him." Then she led me forth into the sunshine and, having brushed my garments very thoroughly, began to pull at them, to pat and smooth them, as I had once watched her do to her brother.

"Ah," she murmured, "my poor Sam's clothes never fit him like this—yours seem moulded upon you. Oh, wonderful London!"

"Do you know it well, Miss Evadne?"

"I have been there—twice! Only twice!" she sighed. "My dream is to live there until I weary for the country—if I ever should. And to have enough money to shop! To buy! And buy—until that wearies me too—which it never would or could, of course! . . . There!" she exclaimed, standing off, the better to survey me. "That must do until they can be properly cleaned and pressed."

"Meanwhile, Miss Evadne, I desire to thank you, humbly and gratefully, for your . . . tender care of me." Now here, perhaps because of the fervour of my tone or look, she flushed suddenly and, fumbling with the brush, dropped it, then laughed and sped away indoors, leaving me amazed by the sudden realization of her beauty and wondering why I had never been aware of it until this moment.

This wonder at my persistent blindness to such obvious fact remained with me during breakfast as I watched the animation of this beauteous, sensitive face; it was with me later in the day as I rode back to Truro, there to find my efficient Enoch who, discreetly oblivious of my neatly plastered brow, rid me of my boots and tendered me a note, saying:

"From Mr. William, sir."

"What," I enquired, "is he away again, Enoch?" Then I unfolded this note and read:

> DEAR SIR, after what happened to Mike I am sure something must be done about her. So be ready to ride with me to the dell at 2 P.M. next Thursday—sharp.
>
> Yours truly and anxiously,
> WM. VOKES

CHAPTER XXIX

In Which, after Being Confounded by Enoch, I Am Visited by the Lady Polgarth

Upon glancing over these last few chapters, I am surprised and somewhat dismayed to perceive how this narrative that should deal chiefly with Jasper Shrig and the Polgarth Case is becoming little more than my own autobiography. To be sure I have penned it hurriedly and, I fear, in somewhat haphazard fashion, owing to not a few troublous distractions; let this plead my excuse if I have obtruded my own personality and small concerns too persistently—with the added fact that I find myself increasingly involved in the ramifications of this extremely odious and horrid case and can but describe events from my own particular viewpoint.

The day before my leaving to take up residence in the Portscatha cottage, which Enoch assured me was now fit and ready for my occupation, there befell two incidents that grieved and troubled me to no small degree.

The first happened thus: I was busied with my writing when the door of my sitting room burst open and Will strode in with such alarming violence that I dropped my quill, blotting my manuscript disastrously, and this exasperated me.

"Sir . . . sir," cried he, trampling to and fro like some caged wild beast, "this is Thursday! I thought you'd remember and be ready—however, I've ordered the horses, so where are your boots?"

Now these words and their manner of utterance offended me, while his haggard look and general appearance shocked me.

"William," said I, "you present a very ill-favoured, not to say sordid, appearance! Your jowl's unshaven, your hair unkempt, your garments—dear me—show as if they had been slept in."

"So they have—when I could sleep!" he growled. "But don't waste time on me; get into your boots, for God's sake."

"On the contrary," said I, "suppose you explain your absence and what you have been doing with yourself of late."

"You can guess, I reckon! I've been at Trelant . . . doing sentry go . . . outpost duty . . . watching over her, day and night . . . cursing the fool daring of her—ay, and praying for her too, yes—praying—me! But a poor devil must do something to pass the time."

"At Trelant!" I repeated. "And you have been observed, of course."

"She . . . Virginia only spoke to me once."

"By others, William, by others of the household! Your furtive lurking has been noticed, as it was before, we may be very sure. You are behaving like a fool, my poor fellow."

"Maybe! But this is her free afternoon—so get ready and let's go."

"Certainly not!" said I, with the utmost decision.

"But . . . she'll be there . . . in Pixey Dell . . . unless they've got her shut up . . . prisoned, or . . . dead, like poor old Mike."

"Nonsense, William; you talk very wildly!"

"Because I am wild! Yes, damme—wild with fear and anxiety, for I know she's in danger day and night! When I think of poor Mike . . . and of her in that cursed house . . . alone and beyond my help . . . oh, it nigh drives me frantic!"

"Calm yourself!" said I. "Miss Wrybrook, I am well assured, is extremely able to take every care of herself."

"What?" cried he, turning as if to strike me. "Ah, what damfool thing to say! O'Dowd was a fighting cove, a strong and fearless man—could he take care of himself—could he? Poor Mike that we know was murdered."

"But we do not know anything of the kind!" I retorted. "There is no evidence whatsoever to show how he died, poor fellow! Be reasonable! Pray restrain your emotions and explain exactly how you propose to aid one who consistently mocks our anxiety and absolutely refuses all our proffers—how, William, how?"

"By force!" he answered, between grinding teeth. "Ay, we'll carry her off, if need be. So jump into your boots and let's ride."

"Absurd and utterly preposterous!" I exclaimed.

"Neither one nor t'other!" he growled. "I'll manage her easy as kiss my hand! If she squeals or struggles, I'll roll her up in my new cloak, as I ain't paid you for—yet! Ah, I'll stifle her, choke her to silence, if I must—

anything to save her going the same road as Mike . . . ah, no—no—never that."

"Of course not!" quoth I. "Good heavens—there is no cause—no least reason for such very horrid suggestion. No, the trouble is in yourself, Will; you are allowing anxiety to haunt and completely dominate your reason, to distort and magnify your fears until they seem actual and really imminent. Your present needs are a bath, a shave, and bed."

"Ha—damnation!" he burst forth wildly. "Are you going with me—yes or no?"

"Most decidedly not!"

"So then you . . . you won't help me to . . . help her . . . to save her."

"By forcible abduction, no! Instead, I protest most strongly against such outrageous, such criminal folly."

"Ah—because ye haven't the spunk to run a trifle o' risk for her—eh?"

"Enough!" I exclaimed, curbing the anger that now surged within me. "Say no more, William; you are beside yourself! Indeed, you comport yourself like any hysterical miss!"

"And you," he snarled, "like the empty, heartless, fine gentleman you are—all words and wind! Ay, spit and polish, that's you! Cold-blooded as a fish and the guts of a louse! Well, now I'm done with ye, and be demned for a do-nothing coward!"

For a moment I sat bereft of speech or power of movement, then with an effort I arose and pointed to the door.

"Now you may leave my presence!" said I. "And do not trouble me with yourself again, for I shall refuse to see or speak with you—go!"

For a moment he seemed about to retort, yet was dumb; then, with vulgar gesture of contempt, strode from me, slamming the door with reverberating bang.

This scene, ridiculous though it may seem in the writing and reading, grieved and distressed me so profoundly that, being now quite unable to continue with this narration, I summoned Enoch, who had been occupied in my bed chamber near by and who therefore must have overheard much of this unpleasantness, as I told him.

"Yes, sir," he answered, "every word, I regret to say; it was unavoidable."

“Well?” I demanded.

“No, sir, exceedingly deplorable!”

“Enoch, it was indeed, for I lost my temper!”

“Though he, I fear, loses much more, sir.”

“The affront, Enoch, the insult, was so . . . so——”

“Gross, sir!”

“Precisely! Gross and vulgar in the extreme. My anger, though highly regrettable, was altogether warranted.”

“Oh, quite, sir—quite!”

“Enoch,” said I, frowning at his extremely wooden expression, “oblige me by ridding yourself of that brush and my coat! Oh, sit down and be human. Let us converse like the social equals I am convinced we were born.”

With murmur of thanks he obeyed, then, leaning back in his chair, crossed his long legs, set the tips of his slender fingers together, and, looking on me with his deep-set eyes, spoke a word that for the moment stopped my breath, such memories did it awaken—this nickname bestowed upon a small, adoring boy by the hero of his worship:

“Tedned!” murmured Enoch; and then, while I leaned forward, staring and speechless, he smiled very wistfully and continued: “Yes, since you ask me again, speak I will, and not like man to master but as major to minor, prefect to fag, though not quite so vigorously as I frequently did when you were actually my somewhat inky young imp of a fag at——”

“Your—fag?” I exclaimed, finding speech at last and rising in sheer, half-incredulous astonishment. “Your fag? Then you . . . you must be . . . George Drake . . . Drake of Shaw’s. I cannot believe it, and yet I must, for it was George Drake who invented that name for me. So you . . . yes, you must indeed be George Drake!”

“I—was!” he answered. “Incredible as it seems now, but . . . yes, I was George Drake.”

“Drake of Shaw’s House!” I repeated. “Captain of the school . . . you fought and licked Pringle major of Trent’s because he kicked me!”

“Yes,” he nodded, “and I kicked you myself afterwards, in the seclusion of my study, for burning my toast, or was it for upsetting the jam?”

“The toast!” cried I breathlessly. “Great heavens above—it was the toast! To think and remember it after all these years! Yes, you are George . . . and I never guessed, never had the faintest suspicion!”

“I took mighty good care you shouldn’t, Ned, old fellow, not even in that expansive hour when I told you some of my history! And then, besides, prison and the chain gang are warranted to change a man far more than all the weary years.”

Then I went and grasped those sensitive, capable hands of his and, striving to speak words of grateful welcome, said nothing, nor did he. So instead I myself brought wine and glasses from the sideboard and, having filled, gave this toast:

“To Friendship and the Future!” And after we had touched glasses and drunk, “George,” said I, “you come back to me—like the good friend you were—when most needed, for, as you know, I am, or was, a very lonely man. From this moment you are my confidant, adviser, man of business, private secretary—one and all.”

“No!” said he.

“Yes!” quoth I, with the utmost decision.

“Wait, Ned, wait! When I induced my dear old friend Shrig to recommend me for your service I told him my identity must never be disclosed.”

“Nor shall it, George,” said I; “though to me you are my old friend George Drake, to the generality you may remain whom you will. However, you are now, as I say, my confidential secretary, and as to remuneration—I suggest——”

“Oh Lord!” he exclaimed. “Good Gad, Ned, how little the years have altered you! At school you were impetuous, high-strung, oversensitive—and the boy was father to the man, for all this you remain.”

“Impetuous?” I demurred. “Nay, surely not? Ridiculously sensitive, I grant you, but impetuous? On the contrary, George, I have always believed myself of a calmly reasoned and extremely deliberate judgment.” He laughed, and so gleefully as quite to transform and rejuvenate his careworn features, so that for the moment he became again Drake, my school captain, and I his humbly admiring though supremely incompetent young fag.

“Oh, Tedned!” he exclaimed. “Old Hothead, where was your calm reason and so forth when you plunged headlong into this Polgarth affair that

was no business of yours—where? Ah," quoth he, becoming suddenly grave, "this very sinister affair that grows even more so."

"You believe it really is more threatening, George?"

"Decidedly, Ned! If Shrig's suspicions are true, there is a dominating evil abroad, a merciless, inflexible will! And this reminds me of another and much better Will . . . young Vokes! He is a fine fellow of sterling worth, this protégé of yours—and mine, Ned."

"Well, what of him?"

"Ah, this is the question, Tedned! Knowing you as I do, I cannot believe you will cast him off and for merely a few hot words spoken under great mental stress. The poor fellow was half crazed with anxiety and lack of sleep."

"And," said I, "like a crazed fellow he comported himself. However, no more of him for the present, George; we have so much to discuss, the Polgarth Case, ourselves, and the future. Though, upon my life, I can hardly credit you and my good fortune even yet. I am still confounded, George! Yes, and not a little mortified that I should not have recognised you long ere this. I find myself far less perspicacious than I deemed."

"But, my dear fellow," he remonstrated, "it is nearly thirty years since last I called you 'Tedned'—years that have altered and aged me beyond all possibility of recognition! Now as to our poor Will——"

"Pray no, George. Let us confer upon this Polgarth affair; give me your opinion upon it."

"Briefly, Ned, I feel that from the moment of our finding that gruesome skull the whole ugly business has become more grim."

"Ah, you mean as regards poor O'Dowd? You are, of course, aware that Shrig believed, at first, that he had been murdered, and—by an arrow, of all unlikely things! But, upon further investigation, no evidence whatever was found to justify such dreadful suspicion, and Shrig admitted and confessed to me that he was entirely at a loss."

"And yet I am conscious of a lurking menace, Ned, a merciless human evil that, having struck once and twice, may do so again!"

"Then what do you imagine this menace can be . . . or . . . who, George, who?"

"Well, we know whom Shrig suspects!"

“But suspects only, George, for here again is no direct evidence, not an iota of proof. And in the light of cold reason such suspicion, the mere possibility, seems too fantastic for credence! A person of such great age, and a cripple besides!”

“Yet this aged cripple, Ned, can be active and even violent, I understand.”

Now it was at this, of all moments, that the second incident befell, for there came a knocking upon the door, and the name we had neither of us uttered was spoken by a trim waiting maid who, bobbing us a curtsey, said:

“The Lady Polgarth to see you, sir!”

I rose hastily with some instinctive, half-formed impulse of flight which struck me as so perfectly ridiculous that I smiled at myself.

“Now, George,” said I, “you shall see and hear and draw your own conclusions of——” My breath caught and I stood listening and staring towards the open doorway as upon the drowsy afternoon stillness came the tap-tapping of a stick with the harsh rustle of silken petticoats, growing slowly louder and nearer.

So we waited, George and I, both gazing in the one direction and both hearkening to this rustle and tap with no sound of footstep: sounds that chilled me most unpleasantly.

Tap and rustle, rustle and tap—slow, deliberate, on they came, near, nearer yet—stopped, and, framed in the doorway, stood that majestic figure of Beauty in Age, propped graciously upon ebony staff, white head proudly erect, surveying us and the spacious room with great, bright eyes quick with such passionate life in the dreadfully still placidity of this wondrous face; then, the full, shapely lips upcurving to smile, she spoke—and Beauty was transformed to wrinkled Age; the smiling mouth became a leering slit.

“Good-day t’ye, gentlemen both, specially you, Mr. Brandonleigh. Am I welcome? Ha, but welcome or no, I’ll sit me! All those dratted stairs, I hate ’em—so many of ’em for an ancient person’s old legs, though they’re none so bad as legs go—to look at! Yes, I’ll sit me by your leave, or without. I’ll sit and rest my poor old bones!”

Speaking, down she sank from her stately height and came shambling and tapping her way to the chair I hastened to set for her, into which she sank with a quivering sigh, yet as instantly drew herself up, facing us in dignified manner like the indomitable old creature she was.

“Well, my gentleman,” she demanded, fixing me with her large, bright eyes, “well, my naughty gentleman, so you’re at it again, are ye?”

“May I enquire——” I began, but she cut me short.

“Your spies are on the prowl again for your lovely prey, watching their chance to snatch fond Innocence and bear her to your wicked, your wanton arms. Oho! I know all the tricks and ways on’t! I know how ’tis done, for I was kidnapped once—a luscious, struggling victim—and borne away to a royal love nest—but mum!”

Here, while she paused for breath, I seized the chance to speak:

“Lady Polgarth, I protest that, once again, you mystify me! You must pray be more explicit.”

“Will ye hark now?” cried she, turning upon George. “Will ye hear the sly, sly, naughty wag pretending ignorance? Oh, men—you men! I know your wicked, wanton tricks too well, ah me, too well!”

“Madam,” said I, “if you will have the goodness to explain precisely the object of this most unexpected visit and exactly what——”

“She’s afraid o’ ye—that’s what! She’s frighted by that great, skulking bully o’ yours forever a-peeping and prying, day and night—watching and waiting! This morning he actually spoke to her—I saw ’em, I tell ye! My eyes be old, very old, yet they serve me well; so do my ears! There she stands like poor bird afore a snake, and he a-whispering his naughtiness—then his great, wicked arms are round her—egad, I do believe he would ha’ snatched and away with her but that she spied me ’mid the bushes and breaks from him suddenly and comes a-running to me, crying on me to save and protect her, while your bully scowls and slinks off, for I blew my whistle—this!”

Here Lady Polgarth showed a silver whistle hung about her neck by a thin gold chain. “And what d’ye say now, my wanton gentleman?”

“This, madam, and beg you will believe me: The young man you allude to is not my servant and what he does is no concern of mine indeed.”

“Fibs!” she cried in dreadful screech. “Fibs and fiddlesticks! The wretch has been very often seen in your company! Ay, I saw you together myself, I did! Ah, and why—why should he call her ‘Virginia’ if her real name be Ciss—ay, Cecily Dare? Why? Tell me that—but no, you won’t, you’ll fib and fob me off, so no matter! Instead, hear me and—take warning! Yes, warning, d’ye hear? Since Virginia or Ciss pleads my protection—protect

her I will, so—touch her at your peril! For, mark this, though such very, very aged person, I am powerfully served! So, I warn ye again, touch her at your own peril! And now, dear Mr. Brandonleigh, my poor old throat is extreme dry; you may order me tea and plenty on't, with cinnamon or seed cake. Also, you may present your handsome friend."

So, perforce, when I had rung and given the order, I presented George as Mr. Robinson, of London.

"Aha," quoth she, leering on me slyly, "not Smith, or Brown, or Jones, but—Robinson, eh, sir?"

"And," said George instantly, "a Robinson very humbly at your service, Lady Polgarth!" He rose and bowed gracefully; he even took her hand to kiss those talonlike fingers with the fulsome gallantry of a past generation.

Tea now making its appearance and proving to be for one only, Lady Polgarth screeched horridly at the frightened maid, calling for two other cups and saucers and more cake.

And so presently this most imperious old dame poured out for George and myself the beverage neither of us wanted and yet sipped dutifully beneath her baleful eye; then, having gulped thirstily, she chatted to us—or rather to George—of love and divers amorous episodes of her long life, such as I may not set down here.

"Yes, I was beautiful!" she sighed, turning from me the better to ogle George, and very odiously, I thought. "Oh, indeed a very lovesome creature, too beautiful for my own peace and good. Faith, dear Mr. Robinson, 'tis pity you should not see and know me as I was! You shall visit me at Trelant and peep at my picture, my portrait, painted as The Waking Venus." George said he should be charmed and went on to flatter her very artfully, and she to simper and prattle of her youthful peccadilloes so blatantly that I, finding myself still perfectly ignored, was about to steal away when the conversation took a turn that gave me instant pause, for:

"Ah yes, yes indeed," she tittered in answer to a question by George, "the gay butterfly was caught, the bird was caged, Venus was fettered at last, for I suffered wedlock and was led to the altar in bonds of gold."

"And," said I, interposing, "one naturally wonders who was the so fortunate man to win such . . . beauty?"

"Why, my Tom, of course," she answered, scarce deigning me a glance. "Sir Thomas Polgarth, the famous 'sporting beau.' "

“But, madam,” I retorted, leaning nearer, “I allude to your . . . first husband!” Scarcely had I uttered the words than I regretted my temerity, for now indeed she looked at me, she glared, and with such expression that I quailed inwardly in expectation of personal violence; then she smiled, nodded, and tittered with a frightful girlishness, saying:

“Dear Mr. Brandonleigh, when my charming Robinson visits me he may bring you along and I’ll show you a portrait of my First, painted shortly before I loved and lost him and perhaps—— Who the devil’s that?” she broke off as came a rap upon the door. “Come in,” she cried, “whoever you be, come and show yourself!”

The door opened to show a tall, imposing personage supremely well dressed, whom I recognised instantly. He bowed to us in stately fashion, then, turning to our visitor, his impressive dignity was sharply contrasted by the very oddly submissive, wheedling manner of his address:

“Darling Mama, I noticed the chariot, ventured enquiry, and, finding you here, here am I to escort you home.”

“God’s blood, boy!” she exclaimed, using this fearful oath as it had been a term of endearment, “dear Mama has no will for home, so why dog her? Mama is content to bide here awhile—tea, you’ll observe, and company. Gentlemen both, you here behold my one olive branch, my solitary pledge of love, my only son, my Wilfred—Sir Wilfred Polgarth of Trelant . . . Mr. Brandonleigh and Mr.—hem, Robinson! So now,” she continued, as we bowed to one another, “now, Willy love, pull bell and order yourself cup and saucer.”

“Nay, but, Mama,” he demurred, with awkward, shambling movement and in voice so like a bleat as to make his size and dignity pitifully ridiculous, “first allow me——”

“Ring!” The word was a screech accompanied by a passionate thudding on the carpet of her ebony stick. “Ring, bad boy! Then bring chair and sit ye here beside Mama.” Meekly submissive, Sir Wilfred obeyed and, sitting thus beside his terrible old mother, glanced about the chamber, looked at her, and shook his head, saying:

“She does not appear to be with you, Mama, and as she is not in the carriage, I infer she must be shopping in the town.”

“Who, Willy boy, who?”

“Miss Dare.”

“Oh, but she didn’t ride with me today, silly Billy!”

“Well, she’s not at Trelant, Mama.”

“Of course not, gaby; this is her day off, and she always goes a-walking.”

“But not today, Mama! She told little Tamsin and the maid, Anne, how she meant to stay at home for fear of being followed and accosted again by that prowling fellow.”

“Oh—ha! And d’ye tell me she’s not at Trelant, eh—eh?”

“Yes, ma’m, I do—for she is certainly not there. And, what’s more, Tamsin is weeping and the maid’s in a panic, for Betty vows she heard a scream in Tower Wood. So there I went with Jason and some of the men and, sure enough, found her reticule and what looked like signs of a struggle.”

“He got her! Oh, villainy!” screamed Lady Polgarth and, to my indignant amazement, struck at me with her stick, and so suddenly that I only just avoided the blow. “Villain!” she screamed. “Kidnapper! This is your wicked doing.”

“Oh, Mama, no no! Forbear, pray forbear!” cried Sir Wilfred, interposing between this very ferocious old creature and myself. “Come now, dear Mama, let us go . . . it may be all a mistake and she safe home again. Come now, let us go see, come.” And so, partly by humble pleading and forceful suasion of hand and arm, son urged mother from the room and in that moment of closing the door glanced back at us, shook his head, tapped his brow, rolled his eyes, and so, to my inexpressible relief, was gone, leaving me somewhat limp in my chair and George peering down from the window.

“Great heavens!” said I, dabbing at heated forehead. “George, what say you now?”

“Well,” he answered, still gazing abstractedly from the window, “I am thinking of our poor Will.”

“Dear me!” I exclaimed, in no little surprise. “Why on earth of him?”

“I am hoping he has succeeded in his avowed purpose and is—off and away with her.”

“Depend upon it!” I answered. “They are probably on the road for London now, Will being such an exceedingly dogged fellow. Yes, you may be sure of it.”

“And yet somehow, Ned, I am not.”

“But why? There are few obstacles may stop such hardy, resolute fellow as William. So why doubt?”

“Ah, Ned, this is question to which our Shrig would answer: ‘Echo alone can reply,’ for I haven’t the least idea.”

CHAPTER XXX

Tells How the Unseen Hand Struck Again

AND so it is that Enoch, my soft-footed, deft-handed servitor, vanishes from these pages as he did from my service, but in his stead was one of my own condition, the hero of my boyhood, and he a man ennobled by suffering, strengthened by hardship, and wise by experience of life's vicissitudes. Thus as the days passed this bond between us, forged so long ago, drew us into an ever closer fellowship.

We had been in residence at the cottage some three days, and upon this sunny morning I was busied in the small front room writing this narrative when I became aware of the slow, stealthy opening of the door . . . then round the edge of it came a shock of haylike hair and whisker pertaining to that small, furtive man called Dan'l; meeting my steady regard, he blinked his pale eyes, edged himself into the room, and, producing a letter from the dingy interior of his hat, laid it before me, said: "No answer!" and was away with the door shut again before I might utter a word. This missive I now saw was superscribed to me in Shrig's painfully neat handwriting:

To E. B. Esquire:
Per D.

The contents, these:

HOND. SIR—

Herewith I bids me good-bye to you and Cornwall and most especial to Trelant. If you should chance to see Miss V. W. tell her as 'tis better to be a poor young hard-working miss alive and kicking than a pretty young lady heiress cold in her coffin. As for yourself, Mr. B., sir, the further off you are from Trelant Tower and nigher to old London town, the better. When Proof ain't and Jasper fails, Vindictiveness is apt to kick up its vicious heels triumphant. And 'tis better to roll luxurious in your own carriage than go floating along of the fishes like us knows who. Or so I venter to think, being,

most respected sir,

now as ever
Yours respect. to serve
J. S.

P.S. A nod, so I hear, is as good as a wink to a blind horse. But, sir, you have got eyes, ditto ears, and so has Miss V. J. S. humbly begs as you'll use same and act according. Both of you.

The perusal of this remarkable epistle disturbed me so profoundly that instantly I summoned George, who as instantly presented himself, though I shook my head in silent reproof to see, though he had abandoned striped waistcoat, that badge of servitude, he was in shirt sleeves, draped with an apron, and grasped a broom.

"George," said I, "drop that thing and sit here by me."

"But, Ned, our Mrs. Nubb, being somewhat shortsighted, has missed certain dark corners in our kitchen, and I——"

"George," I repeated, beckoning, "during your long acquaintance with Jasper Shrig have you ever known him confess to—failure?"

"Frequently, Ned, though I have never known him fail in fact."

"Then give me your opinion of this!" And I thrust the letter into his hand. Having read it through, George took himself by smooth-shaven chin, perused it again more slowly, looked at me, and—slowly closed one eye.

"Eh?" I questioned, in some surprise. "What——"

"Aha!" nodded George. "That is the question—what? Jasper's up to something or other, Ned! Yes, things are moving at last!"

"Evidently!" said I unhappily. "Shrig, having thrown up the case, is removing himself and warning Miss Virginia and me to do the same. Well, she and Will are out of it, safely away already, thank heaven! But what of us, George, you and me? What does he write concerning—Trelant Tower, that ghastly ruin?" So George read out to me:

" 'As for yourself, Mr. B., the further off you are from Trelant Tower and the nigher to London town, the better.' "

"And that part about 'rolling in my carriage'?" So George read again:

" ' 'Tis better to roll luxurious in your own carriage than go floating along of the fishes like us knows who.' "

“A highly repulsive suggestion!” quoth I, repressing an involuntary shudder.

“Why, our Jasper has a something grisly wit, Tedned—which he only indulges when things are going well.”

“However,” said I gloomily, “the mere mention of that Tower fills me with a quite unaccountable yet very dreadful loathing. And now . . . to be thus warned against it! What do you propose we do, George?”

“Nothing!” he answered, folding the letter precisely and placing it upon the table.

“But, good heavens, man—this warning——?”

“A dodge, Ned! A Shrigsian subtlety, old fellow!”

“But, George, how can you be sure of this?”

“Old fellow, suffice it that I am! Therefore, since Miss Wrybrook is safely removed, I propose we remain where we are. For, Ned, I am persuaded Shrig has not given up this case and never will—not such grim old bulldog as Jasper!”

“George,” I demanded, “why and how are you so confident? What do you know?”

“Jasper Shrig! Ay, I know him better than even he suspects, his attitudes of mind, his tenacity, boldness, and grimly original methods. So I am confident he was never hotter on any trail than now and that this quaint epistle is merely part of his peculiar strategy. Hence, Ned, I suggest we abide the issue.”

“Right, George!” I exclaimed. “So be it! Now—off with that apron and on with your coat, for I want you to know certain good friends of mine.”

Merely closing the cottage door—no need for lock or bolt hereabout—we set forth, but had gone no farther than the sea wall which is called The Lugger, though it has no least resemblance to any ship whatever, when we were hailed by Harold Nicholls and his brother Tom, neat and trig as usual, with whom was a quiet, steady-eyed fellow, pigtailed and clad as a smart man-o’-war’s man, whose name, it transpired, was Reginald Raspisson, a Nelson man who had shared in the glory of Trafalgar.

“George,” said I, as we continued our way, “in this small, intimate community I am already aware of more hearty good fellowship than during a year in teeming London, and upon my life, I feel the better for it.”

“No wonder, Tedned, for these are men, like that Nelson sea dog yonder. I also am going to enjoy this village.” So now as we strode along I told him of Sam Trevanion and of the affray on Towan, of the tall, imperturbable Sergeant Phillips, and of their exploits in the combat.

“But,” quoth George, with quizzical side glance, “there is also a—Miss Trevanion, isn’t there?”

“Oh yes,” I answered serenely, “and very charming she is, as you shall see for yourself!” Then I went on to describe our rescue on Towan Beach and the ignominious capture of our adversaries.

Thus we had reached Trevanion’s pretty cottage almost before I knew it; and here, in the garden, we came upon the lugubrious Henry Cragg, who paused in his solitary labour to salute us mournfully.

“A fine day, Henry!” said I.

“Ay, sir—mebbe,” he answered, glancing skyward with lacklustre eye, “though I’ve known finer. But, sir, if ee do come ’oping for to see Mr. Sam —you’re disappointed again, for ’e ain’t in, being out along of his paintbox to make a picter o’ Trelant Tower—though why paint a old ruin when he might paint this here trim cottage as me and Morley whitewashed only t’other day—I dunno.”

“Is Miss Trevanion at home?”

“Ay, she be—though she don’t want no visitors because she d’belong to bake today—a-kneadin’ o’ the dough at this identical minute she d’be and ____”

“Hen-ry!” called a voice, at sound of which I started and glanced askance at George, and thus, finding him regarding me in that same old quizzical manner, I became ridiculously self-conscious, even as I had been wont to do in the old days when his nervous young fag at school.

“That’ll be coals for the fire! Or water from the well! Or—summat! Step ’long o’ me, sirs, and if she sees ee, us’ll know if she’s a mind for to see ee or no, so—come along o’ me.” And follow him we did until, coming in view of the kitchen window, its wide lattice open to the balmy air, we thus beheld Miss Evadne, aproned, bare-armed, and floury; for she indeed, like Mrs. Dolittle, of gracious memory, was kneading dough—but there all similarity ended, for these arms, instead of bony, were beautifully rounded and white as the flour itself, and the floury dab upon her chin seemed only to render her full, shapely mouth the ruddier by contrast.

“Hen—— Oh!” she exclaimed, catching sight of us. “My gracious!” she exclaimed, and, glancing down at her bare arms, flushed, frowned, looked at me, and laughed; and I, struck anew by her loveliness, could but stare like any calfish youth.

“Be it coals or be it water, Miss Vadne?” sighed Henry.

“Both!” she answered. “As for you, Mr. Ned, I can’t shake hands and daren’t leave this dough till I’ve set it away to rise . . . and Sam’s away painting . . . and I’m all flour!”

“And yet,” said I, approaching, hat in hand, “I have never seen you to better advantage! Thus my pleasure is the greater now to present my lifelong friend George Drake—Miss Trevanion.”

George bowed; Evadne bobbed him a curtsey, rustic-fashion, saying:

“Mr. Drake, my brother’s untidy cook bids you welcome. Come in, both of you, and sit down after your walk, here in my kitchen—if you don’t mind risking flour! Come and talk to me, and when I’ve set my bread we’ll have tea in the garden.”

So in we went, and she completely gracious and at her ease despite flour and clinging dough.

“Aha, Mr. Ned,” she exclaimed, “I see how artfully you have combed your locks to hide the battle scar! I trust it is healing well and will be no disfigurement.”

“Entirely, thanks to you,” I answered fervently.

“Mr. Drake, you must know,” she explained, her vivid lips upcurving to dimple her cheek, “that your friend, who detests—no—reprobates (what dignified word!) reprobates all personal violence, went with my brother Sam the other night against those villainous wrecking wretches and was so extremely violent with them that he was wounded!”

“And, George,” I added, “Miss Evadne, while tending my hurt, actually suggested that I—curled my hair with—hot tongs!”

“Because,” she laughed, “I doubted if such curls could really be true, and if they are, they shouldn’t; such adornments are wasted on a mere man! But pray tell me how you do at the cottage. Oh, dear me, yes, I knew of your advent the same hour—news travels apace hereabouts, especially news of foreigners!”

“Foreigners?” enquired George.

“All strangers are foreigners in these parts, Mr. Drake. But, oh—why must you choose poor, dear Mrs. Nubb to look after you?”

“Why, truly,” replied George, with his whimsical smile, “it was rather Mrs. Nubb who chose us—and would not be denied.”

“That I can well believe! And how do you find her?”

“Inclined to . . . well . . . snuffle!” quoth I. “She appears to suffer from a perpetual lowness of spirits.”

“Oh, I know!” laughed Evadne. “She always has, and for no reason ever discovered yet! But you will find her an admirable cook.” It was at this moment we heard a strange and most unexpected sound, the rhythmic, oncoming tramp of feet.

“Whatever is it?” said Evadne, peeping out from the lattice, and I with her. “It cannot be soldiers, surely?” Slowly this measured tramping drew nearer in the lane beyond the screening hedge, then the wicket gate clicked.

“Why,” said Evadne breathlessly, “they are . . . coming here!” Almost as she spoke we beheld the tall, dripping-wet form of Sam, who advanced slowly, looking back at what followed—six men bearing a hurdle whereon lay a muffled shape dreadfully still. Miss Evadne, quiet and purposeful, led the way out into the garden.

“Sam dear, who is it?” she enquired gently; he turned and, seeing me, stood for a moment quite motionless, then came striding to grasp my hands, to look down on me from his great height with grave commiseration, and say in tone gentle as his look:

“Ned . . . my dear fellow, there has been a mishap, an accident . . . your friend Vokes——”

“Will?” I enquired, masking the horror that chilled me. “Yonder. You . . . mean?”

“He must have fallen from some cliff into the sea. I chanced to spy him just in time, Ned, swimming very feebly, at his last gasp, and got him out still alive, thank God!”

“Don’t talk now, Sam!” said his sister. “Let him be taken up to the spare chamber; he must be got to bed at once . . . and one of you men run for Doctor Scott . . . and run your best!”

So poor Will was borne upstairs and there stripped of his sea-wet garments by Sam and George and me, in the doing of which George showed

us a great, slow-bleeding contusion hidden in the unconscious man's thick hair.

"What d'ye say to this?" he demanded softly.

"It looks quite dreadful!" said I.

"It does, Tedned, for it shows very like—attempted murder!"

"Merciful heaven!" I exclaimed. "You don't suggest——"

"He may have received it in the fall," quoth Sam.

"He may, of course," George murmured, touching the ugly wound with gentle, questing fingers, "yet I am inclined to believe it was this that caused his fall. Was he able to say anything, sir, when you rescued him, then or after—anything?"

"Yes, sir, just as I reached him he tried to tell me something about 'the verge,' it seemed—which suggests he was on the cliff verge when it gave way or he slipped."

"Or," George suggested, "he might have been trying to utter the name 'Virginia,' sir?"

"Yes, certainly!" Sam nodded. "For, as I say, his speech was faint and very indistinct; his tongue seemed paralyzed—as he himself is now, poor fellow! Would God that Scott were here . . . he looks very near death." Sam paused suddenly, for even as he uttered the word this inert form beneath the bedclothes stirred, the powerful fists clenched, the half-closed eyes opened to glare, and the pallid lips spoke in tone I can only describe as quite terrifying—to me, at least.

"Virg—inia!"

Pleading, anger, and a wild dread all seemed to cry in this one broken word; then the hands relaxed, the eyelids drooped, and before us lay a pale shape of helplessness upon the very threshold of death.

And then, thank heaven, came Evadne to bathe and cherish, like the ministering angel she truly seemed, bidding us go downstairs to await the doctor. So down we crept, soft-treading, to sit or walk about, talking in whispers, though speechless for the most part, until at last arrived the doctor, a grey-haired, breezy, stalwart, though capable-seeming person who, bowing to us, followed Sam upstairs.

And now ensued for me a period of such anxious waiting and profound agitation that, unable to be still, I went forth with George into the garden,

there to walk aimlessly to and fro until we were joined by Sam, who could give us no news and would express no opinion as to the doctor's possible verdict; so when I had introduced and made known to each other these friends of mine, we walked to and fro, all three.

"Sam," I enquired, pacing thus between them, "did you find poor, half-dead Will anywhere near . . . Alwannack Cove?"

"Yes, not far away, between there and Towan. . . . But how should you guess?"

"Ah, Sam, I begin to guess and suspect . . . too much! We know Towan Beach for a wreckers' haunt, but, more than this, I know that from Alwannack Cove there is some secret communication, some hidden way up to the cliff directly above! And beyond this cliff stands . . . Trelant Tower! And in the valley below is Trelant Manor House."

"Ned . . . Ned," sighed he, "you but speak what has grieved and troubled me so long . . . the dire suspicion that these wreckers, poor, ignorant lads, are organised, led, and—yes, protected by those so powerful in this remote, wild neighbourhood as to ride above the law and be immune. I mean those who should——"

"The Polgarths, of course!" said George; at which bold assertion Sam checked in his stride to glance round about with that old half-furtive look which now had in it, I thought, something almost fearful.

"Mr. Drake," said he gently, and with glance still roving, "whatever you suspect you were wiser to keep unspoken, for your own sake—and ours."

"Evidently, sir!" George retorted. "As witness our half-murdered friend upstairs. And yet permit me to say that so long as such black evils are kept secret, so long will they flourish and endure. It is high time the law grappled with and ended this lurking rascality—as I am persuaded it will."

"God send it be soon!" murmured Sam fervently.

"Mr. Trevanion, your prayer will certainly be answered and, as I believe, sooner than you expect. For, sir, our English law, though fallible as humanity and slow to move, is inexorable as it is just. Also, when once upon the track of stealthy Iniquity, never rests or sleeps. Thus I can tell you, as you are probably aware, the law is even now moving against the lurking evils hereabouts."

"Sir . . . sir," stammered Sam, "what . . . whom do you mean?" While I also turned to regard George in no little wonderment.

“I mean,” he answered placidly, “there are some dozen or so evildoers already in prison—you were present at their capture.”

“Ah, you allude to what befell on Towan? Then their captors, those strangers, were——?”

“The Law Manifest, sir!” George replied. “The poor rogues they took then are but the beginning; the greater offenders will soon be as securely ____”

“Hush, sir—hush, pray!” murmured Sam. “Yonder is the doctor at last!”

This stalwart medico, who was pulling on a pair of very worn riding gauntlets as we hurried to him full of anxious enquiry, said little more than “Pooh!” until he had thus reduced us to silence, then:

“No least call for worry, sirs,” said he with a brisk, offhand cheeriness; “young fellow’s strong as a horse and sound as a bell. Taken a fairish crack on the nob . . . don’t quite see how . . . but no least fracture, thanks to good, thick skull . . . temporary concussion . . . seen many such in the Peninsular . . . rap from musket butt usually.”

“Then,” said I, “there is no fear that he may—die, sir?”

“Eh, die, sir? Gammon, sir! No smallest chance o’ such nonsense! Young fellow shall do nicely—with care—thanks to abundant vitality and an uncommon hard occiput. Looks like a prime, fancy boxing cove, a regular miller, eh?”

“Well—yes, sir,” I answered. “I believe he has performed as a pugilist.”

“Performed—ha!” exclaimed the doctor.

“And boxed,” added Sam, “boxed, Scott, with none other than Jessamy—Jessamy Todd.”

“Eh—by jingo, Trevanion, he must be a regular top-sawyer milling cove! We must take precious good care of him . . . Jessamy Todd, by Jove!”

“Sir,” said I, “your patient shall have nurses engaged for both day and night.”

“Quite so!” snapped the doctor. “Ha, Trevanion, I saw Jessamy hammer the Brummagem Chicken . . . four rounds of the best, Sam! Then the Chicken leads with one that looked like being a finisher but, bless ye—Jessamy ducks and counters with a right that knocked the Chicken clean out o’ the ring and ‘time’ too! Most beautifully timed leveller I ever saw! Ah me, those were the days, Sam! Just home from the Peninsular, sick and tired of

amputations and the what nots of bullet and bayonet, but a gay young spark and dashing sportsman—up to anything! Ah, youth, youth! Keep him quiet, Sam, quiet and the room darkened. I'll send nurses and see him again tomorrow. G'day t'ye, gentlemen!" So saying, this grey-haired doctor swung himself lightly astride the horse Henry Cragg had been walking and trotted rapidly away.

"Well," quoth Sam fervently, "thank God for that!"

"Amen!" said I. "For, going by poor William's appearance, I feared the worst. But, Sam, since he must remain here I shall hold myself responsible for . . . everything . . . and hope that you and Miss Evadne will not be too much——"

"My dear Ned, it is our privilege to help poor Vokes for his sake and yours!"

"And he will be as grateful, Sam, as I am." So, in a little while, we took leave of this good friend and both of us unusually silent; for now my anxiety, thus relieved on Will's account, turned the more dreadfully in another direction, and this so troubled me that before we had gone very far my distress found vent in speech.

"George—oh, George, what now of that poor girl Virginia . . . Virginia Wrybrook?"

"Well," answered George, glancing at me somewhat askance, "I think of her, Ned, precisely as do you or did when you spoke of her to Will, 'a young person extremely well able to take care of herself'—these were your words to Will, I remember."

"Yes," said I unhappily, "yes, they were, but this was before I had received Shrig's warning letter; you recall he wrote of her 'better be a poor young governess alive than an heiress in her coffin.' Terrible words, George!"

"Very!" he answered, thus increasing my misery. "Yes, very terrible!" And after we had gone some distance and my distress waxing with every stride, "But," said he, "but merely words, Ned! So don't look so grievously dejected, for there is no cause——"

"But there is!" I retorted with heat. "There is indeed; I see it now, clear as did poor Will."

"And I assure you there is none, not the slightest."

“But there must be—how can you utter such comforting nonsense when ____”

“Because,” answered George, cutting me short, “Jasper Shrig would no more leave her to be harmed than you would me or I you, Tedned! Can you believe such baseness of him?”

“Well, no—no, of course no! . . . and yet what of his letter? Why must he write me such a farrago of ridiculous nonsense?”

“Perhaps because he hoped you might believe it and cause others to believe it also.”

“But ha, confound it, George,” I exclaimed, in high indignation, “does he deem me a loose-tongued chatterer, a gossiping fool, a braying ass, a ____”

“No, no!” laughed George, clapping me on the shoulder as he had been wont to do long ago. “Neither one nor t’other, Tedned, only, well—there was that occasion at the Wheel Inn, eh, old fellow?”

“Well, yes,” I conceded, “though that was a quite other matter than mere idle gossip—a private conversation overheard by stealthy eavesdropper!”

“Exactly, old fellow! And probably, with this in mind, Jasper hoped you might contrive in the same way to have the news of his departure overheard by the same sly person.”

“But why,” I demanded, “why, in heaven’s name, must Shrig be so absurdly secretive, so annoyingly furtive about it?”

“Probably because he is just—Jasper Shrig!”

“And an extremely irritating person, George, as I have frequently informed him. His cautiousness goes beyond all reason! And now—that he should actually have attempted to hoodwink and make me his dupe with his utterly preposterous letter—this exasperates me exceedingly!”

“Naturally, Tedned, it would, of course,” quoth George, his eyes twinkling. “However, there is only one Jasper Shrig! And now I suggest the sooner the better.”

“For what, George, what?”

“The duping and hoodwinking of that crafty fellow at The Wheel.”

“You think it of sufficient importance?”

“I do! How about tomorrow morning?”

“Very well!” I answered a little huffily. “We will ride there tomorrow before calling on the Trevanions to learn how our invalid progresses.”

“Yes,” murmured George thoughtfully, “our invalid!”

“And,” I continued, “I have an idea he was attacked in the same manner and near the same place as poor O’Dowd met his death.”

“Yes, Ned, and yet—what of Jasper’s arrow?”

“Ah, that arrow! I never could quite bring myself to believe in it, George. I am greatly hoping Will may be able to throw some light on this fearful matter.”

“Ay, Ned, I hope he may, though I doubt it. Yes, I doubt if he so much as glimpsed the murderous hand that struck him down . . . to fall, and mark this—into the sea and deep water, or he would certainly have been killed as was O’Dowd. Thus it is quite reasonable to suppose he was attacked at high tide, and this would be somewhere about three o’clock.”

“And,” said I, halting suddenly, “this is Tuesday! And on Tuesdays and Thursdays Miss Wrybrook usually makes tea for herself in a little bowery glen she calls Pixey Dell, a little valley just above—Alwannack Cove. And great heavens, she would be there today! She may have witnessed this attack on Will . . . she herself may be . . . George, in God’s name, what can I do?”

“Nothing!” he answered. “No, not a thing at present, except—trust to Jasper.” Then, seeing me so desperately anxious, George slipped his arm in mine in the old comforting way he so often cherished my boyish sorrows and, drawing me close, murmured, “Harkee, Tedned, for your present solace I must confide to you that Miss Wrybrook, though she herself does not and certainly must not know it, is guarded and watched over all day long, yes, and by night as well!”

“God be thanked!” I exclaimed. “This is Shrig’s doing, I suppose?”

“Of course, Ned!”

“But,” said I, beginning to doubt, “by day and night—how can this be possible?”

“I assure you it is. More I cannot say, for I am under promise, only—Jasper didn’t play the peddler, cheap ribbons and laces, to no purpose.”

“But, George, how do you know so much?”

“Being one of Jasper’s few intimates, how should I not? Also—before coming to you, my dear Ned—I worked with him on several occasions.”

“George,” said I, “you are my constant surprise—but mighty comforter also!”

“Then cheer up, Neddy, and step out, for, b’Gad, I’m uncommonly peckish!”

Thus it was in better humour that we reached the cottage, there to be greeted by a savour of cooking highly delectable, as I informed our Mrs. Nubb whom we found in the act of laying the supper table. At my remark she sighed dismally, pressing in the region of her heart a tablespoon she chanced to be holding, and murmured in faintly sobbing accents best described as something between sniff and moan:

“Thankee, sir, though I d’fear as me stuffing mebbe won’t be seasoned enough for your palate and, if so, then you may prefer your giblets served ’long o’ the gravy and——”

“No, no,” said I, “certainly not!”

“Well, sir, I ’ave done my best as the good Lord do know and I can but ’ope according.”

Thus in good time George and I sat down and did full justice to a fowl very passably cooked and seasoned.

CHAPTER XXXI

How George Proposed a Toast

"GEORGE," said I next morning, as we cantered our animals through the pleasant sunshine, "you ride like a centaur, which was to be expected, but what does rather surprise me is—how you contrive to turn yourself out the complete horseman from hat to spurs at such short notice?" George grinned.

"All yours, Neddy!" he replied, indicating his outfit with a gesture. "A trifle tight here and there, but they'll serve until my own arrive from the tailor's. Aha, but see who approaches yonder!"

Glancing up, I beheld, though still at some distance, no less a personage than Sir Wilfred Polgarth, a very stately figure astride the splendid horse he rode; and I could not help but compare him now with the meekly subservient "olive branch" who had cowered so pitifully beneath the dreadful maternal eye.

"An extremely impressive, not to say pompous, figure, George!"

"Ay, truly, Tedned—away from 'dear Mama'! See now with what a splendid arrogance he beckons us! Well, Sir Wilfred," he apostrophised the oncoming gentleman, "we come, for in you, I think, Destiny beckons. . . . So, Ned, don't be surprised if I should speak of a certain Jew peddler, no matter what I say. Come, let us join Polgarth. By the way, how old would you suppose him?"

"Somewhere about fifty, George."

"Yet he must be nearer seventy."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"They are an impossible family, Ned—almost!"

"Well met, gentlemen!" called Sir Wilfred, saluting us very graciously as we neared him. "Confound me if I was not on my way to ye at this moment!"

"Indeed?" said I.

"Ay, indeed, sir, for I've news for ye. Come, there is an inn nigh at hand, The Wheel; 'tis a good house, I know it well. Let us ride thither and crack a

bottle or perhaps two, ha?"

"Well, thank you, Sir Wilfred, a glass would be welcome," I answered, bowing my acknowledgments. So, turning his animal with stately address, Sir Wilfred rode on beside us.

"Sir, you mentioned news," I suggested.

"Ay, I did, to be sure I did, though perhaps 'tis of small account. That devil of a pother I made the other day was all a mere fool mistake, sir."

"Ah," I exclaimed, "you mean as regards Miss Dare?"

"Why, of course I do, Mr. Brandonleigh, most certainly I do, sir, for Miss Dare, I'm glad to say, is perfectly well, happy as a lark, and right as a trivet! She had simply gone for a walk, no more."

"And the reticule you found, sir?" George enquired.

"Ah—the reticule—to be sure, the reticule. It seems she had let it fall unregarded, lost it she knew not where or how . . . all perfectly simple."

"And the signs and evidences of a struggle, sir?" George persisted.

"Were happily of no matter or consequence, sir, no least account. My anxiety for the young lady's welfare made much of nothing, a mere nothing —a mountain of a molehill! And yonder is The Wheel, a good house, sirs, an excellent house, and James Penrose keeps a notable cellar, more particularly claret, gentlemen, or burgundy, though claret I esteem the king of all wines!"

"I should rather call it 'the queen'!" George demurred. "For I esteem a precious claret as soft and round and seductively feminine."

"King or queen, sir, 'tis, as I say, a royal wine. And here we are!" quoth Sir Wilfred, and, reining up before the inn, he called out in rolling bass voice:

"Ho, James, Jemmy—Jem! Where are ye? Turn out and take our horses."

"Coming, sir, coming!" was the answer, and out to us hurried that same unctuous fellow whose too-much smiling and plumpness had been so contemptuously remarked by poor Will.

"James," said Sir Wilfred, as we dismounted to give our horses in charge of a grim-visaged, brawny fellow who now appeared from the stable yard, "James, two bottles of Number Four, in Linnet."

“Very good, S’Wilfred, and very glad to see ye, sir, I’m sure. Gentlemen, this way—if ye please.”

So we followed, past a door marked “Blackbird,” another “Lark,” to one inscribed “Linnet,” that opened upon a smallish, cosy chamber, where Sir Wilfred graciously made us welcome, wafted us to be seated, and proceeded to do the honours, watched and waited upon by this sleek, ever-smiling landlord, who neither by look nor gesture betrayed the fact that he had ever seen me before.

“Gentlemen,” boomed Sir Wilfred, when the glasses were charged, “I give ye a toast: ‘Church and King and God bless all.’ Jemmy, my good fellow, you may now retire, yet remain in call. Now, gentlemen—the toast!” And so, our smiling landlord having silently removed himself, we drank together.

“Well, gentlemen,” demanded Sir Wilfred, refilling our glasses and then throwing himself back in his chair the better to survey us, “what now?” Quoth he, fixing me with his large-eyed stare, “What, sir, may I ask, are your plans for the future? Do you propose to make a protracted, a long stay among us simple country folk? We hope so, sirs, we sincerely hope so, and shall be happy to extend to you all the—ha—amenities, such as we may, hunting, fishing, the hospitality of our hearths.”

“You are very kind,” I answered, “but our plans, if we have any, are quite indefinite.”

“Ha, so! Indefinite? Then you do not contemplate acquiring property hereabout? If so——”

“Dear me, no, sir! We are, as it were, merely looking around—viewing the country.”

“Oh! And pray, what is your estimation of our Cornwall, your verdict?”

“Romantic, sir, and beautiful,” I answered.

“Though,” added George, “wild, sir, very, very wild.”

“Oh, sir, oh?” Sir Wilfred exclaimed, with a swelling and pompous arrogance. “Sir, the word ‘wild’ is one needs explaining. Yes, sir, I must ask your definition of the word ‘wild’—nay, I must even demand——”

“It is also,” continued George, cutting him short, “a somewhat mysterious, un-English country, indeed an unhealthy country.”

“Eh, what—what?” cried Sir Wilfred, with a sound of indignation very like a snort. “ ‘Unhealthy,’ d’ye say? Good God, sir—unhealthy.”

“Very!” quoth George, cutting him short a second time. “It has long been notoriously unhealthy for ships, and latterly for an unfortunate acquaintance of ours and a friend.”

“How, sir, demme—how? I must beg—nay, I will again demand what, precisely, you may be pleased to mean?”

“Ships!” repeated George. “Ships cast away, an acquaintance dead, and a friend dying—almost!”

“Gad’s life, sir! What’s all this? I say, what’s all this o’ death and dying, eh, sir?”

“Truth!” replied George sombrely. “Your Cornwall has its natural beauties, plenty of rocks and desolate cliffs, for such as enjoy Nature untamed. But for myself, sir, being a Londoner, I prefer less wildness and a trifle more security, with law, order, and so forth.”

“Eh—law and order, sir? Demme, but you speak as if we were savages hereabouts, ay—heathen savages.”

“No—wreckers!” George retorted, and so bluntly that I shrank inwardly; as for Sir Wilfred, he made a spluttering noise, squared his shoulders aggressively, took up his wine, scowled at it, set it down again, made to speak, and was instantly forestalled by George, who repeated:

“Wreckers, sir, false lights and flares, sunken ships, drowned men! The evil became so manifest that the authorities were forced to take action at last.”

“Authorities? Action? When? Where?” cried Sir Wilfred sharply. “What action, sir—what?” And placidly George made answer:

“By the despatch of a celebrated law officer to deal adequately with this villainy.”

Again Sir Wilfred took up his glass, stared at it undecidedly, set it down untasted, and when he spoke his shoulders seemed less aggressive, his tone less dictatorial, or so I thought.

“Do you mean this man, this officer fellow, is actually in Cornwall . . . this neighbourhood?”

“He was!” sighed George.

" 'Was'? Am I to infer by this that he is—gone?"

"He came from London under orders to break up and effect the capture of these wrecking crews."

"And has he, sir? Am I to believe he has actually suppressed these rascals?"

"More or less. I believe he has some few of them securely prisoned."

"Has he indeed? Has he, b'Ged? Prodigious!"

"But," George continued, "this accomplished, he has taken himself, and his fellows, off again—unfortunately!"

"And why unfortunately? How and why?"

"In the matter," sighed George, "of a dead acquaintance and a friend dying—almost!"

"Almost?" quoth Sir Wilfred, continuing his parrotlike repetitions. "And —your friend? Most regrettable! Pray accept my sympathy and condolences. How did the accident happen to your unfortunate friend, and when, sir?"

"Yesterday, and the question I ask is—was it an accident?"

"Ged's life!" exclaimed Sir Wilfred, making his large eyes stare. "Can there be any least doubt?"

"Yes," answered George uncompromisingly.

"Eh—eh? Are you positively suggesting—foul play?"

"No, an investigation."

"And . . . hereabouts?"

"Certainly! Since hereabouts an acquaintance died suddenly."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Wilfred. "Can you possibly be alluding to that unfortunate gentleman who was found drowned not so long ago?"

"And also," said George, "to the friend so nearly drowned yesterday near a place called Alwannack Cove."

"Most unfortunate!" exclaimed Sir Wilfred. "But have you any evidence of assault? Do you suspect anyone, may I ask?"

"Well . . ." George began, then seemed to ponder the question, while Sir Wilfred took up his glass for the third time. "As to . . . suspicions," George murmured thoughtfully, "Ned, wasn't it here, at this very Wheel Inn, you

first saw him . . . were pestered, you'll remember, and almost threatened by that lisping, villainous Jew peddler?" Sir Wilfred, in the act of drinking, choked, whereat George rose and hastened to slap and thump his broad back in that manner held efficacious against such mishaps.

"Yes . . . yes!" gasped Sir Wilfred, so soon as he could articulate. "Jew peddler . . . the Jew . . . damned rogue and rascal . . . murderous, prying . . . villain."

"Oho!" exclaimed George, like one vastly surprised. "Then you also know of this dangerous fellow?"

"To my cost, sirs, to my painful cost!" boomed Sir Wilfred, resettling shirt frills and preening himself like the dandy he was. "Ha, yes—yes indeed! I can tell you this much of the audacious villain, that he is a most desperate, murderous rogue, b'Ged! I caught the trespassing, prying rascal creeping down—ay, stealing about my property, and the sly, lisping knave, pretending humility to my face, assailed me viciously as soon as my back was turned—yes, sirs, positively assaulted me, with the result that I was confined to my bed for some days thereafter with a sprained ankle. Oh, if ever there was an unhanged rogue and one the gibbet groans for—'tis this Jew peddler, ay—he's your man, beyond all doubt. And you tell me he is yet lurking in the vicinity, do ye?"

"So I believe," answered George.

"Then, ha demme, but he shall be sought for, run to earth, taken, and—yes, taken! My people shall beat every wood, every covert, every lane and byway. This I promise ye, gentlemen. Yes, by Ged, this ye may depend on, he shall be sought high and low."

"Excellent!" murmured George, glancing at his watch, whereat I arose, suggesting departure.

"No, no, not yet!" cried Sir Wilfred, with the utmost joviality. "Devil take it, sir, our first bottle is not out yet!"

"However," said I, bowing, "I must ask you to excuse us, sir."

"Well, well then," quoth he with a growing hilarity, as he recharged our glasses, "a parting toss, a final toast!" And instantly, wine aloft, George gave us:

"Damnation to Villainy!"

CHAPTER XXXII

In Which Lady Polgarth Talks Me Out of Countenance

"No!" said Will, scowling up at me from beneath the trim bandage that swarthed his brow. "I can't say. I didn't see who struck me . . . I heard a sound behind me—that's all! So I don't know. But what I am sure of is that 'twould never have happened if you'd ridden with me. And I don't want to talk any more!"

With which ungracious speech and the same black scowl, he turned his back upon me where I stood beside the bed.

Pained and greatly mortified, I turned and went softly from the room and had begun to descend the stair when a light touch arrested me and I saw Evadne leaning down to me across the banister.

"Don't look so grieved," she murmured; "poor Mr. Vokes doesn't mean to be unkind; it is only because he feels so weak and miserable himself, so don't look so distressed."

Her sweet sympathy moved me beyond words, so, taking this gentle, comforting hand, I kissed it very gratefully and went on down the stair without attempting speech. In the garden I joined Sam and George, who were pacing the lawn new-mown and fragrant from Henry's scythe.

"How is our invalid?" enquired George.

"Greatly better," I answered. "Go up and see for yourself. And tell him, George, assure him how and why he need have no further apprehension concerning Miss Wrybrook's well-being." And now I, pacing with Sam in George's stead, asked if he had been able to learn anything more regarding Will's misadventure.

"Nothing, Ned, except that he maintains it was an attempt on his life, a sudden vicious attack from an unseen assailant. Though, since regaining consciousness, the poor fellow has said little except to express gratitude to Evadne and me, with contempt for himself and angry surprise to find himself so extremely weak."

We had reached the lawn's verge and were about to turn for our backward stroll when I halted suddenly, arrested by a sound upon the

afternoon's stillness—a sound indeed so perfectly unexpected and vaguely ominous that it chilled me with the panic fear that I was the victim of some morbid hallucination.

"Eh?" exclaimed Sam, halting also. "What is it, Ned? Why do you stare so strangely?"

"Sam," said I, gripping his arm, "did you . . . hear anything . . . yonder?"

"Yes, of course," he answered, viewing me in troubled surprise, "but only the tap of a stick in the lane."

"A stick . . . tapping, yes!" said I, my gaze still fixed. "The tap of a stick, but . . . no sound of footstep."

"Naturally, because whoever comes is walking upon the grass."

"Probably!" I answered. "Yet why should the stick be heard? And, though all is quiet now, there was—another sound."

"Yes, Ned, but merely somebody brushing against the hedge—some blind person, perhaps, feeling his way. Though, my dear fellow, why should this so agitate you and——"

"Hush!" I exclaimed. "Listen—your blind person is coming on again, nearer—nearer still—if it is indeed a blind person . . . which I doubt. And still no sound of footsteps, Sam!"

"Lord, Ned!" quoth he, with a look of growing concern. "Why . . . my dear fellow . . . you are actually shivering . . . yet your brow all moist! Ned, what ails you?"

"I . . . don't know," I answered miserably. "Oh, Sam, I don't know! It is like an east wind, no—far worse, like a warning, an omen of ghastly evils, a nightmare dread, an inexplicable——" The wicket gate clicked sharply.

"Watch now!" I whispered. Almost as I spoke, round the hedge, shambling towards us, bowed upon ebony stick, came a pitiful figure of Age and Decrepitude, and both of us watching it mumchance.

"Aha, Trevanion!" croaked a too-familiar voice. "Dear Samuel, your dratted lane is too narrow for my chariot, too plaguey strait, so I am forced to walk and hobble afoot. So—you too, Mister Brandonleigh! Ay, there y'are, my fine gallant! Well, well—ha, yes, 'tis very well—two birds with one stone—you and your precious spy! I warned ye, but don't go laying the blame on me! Ha, but my poor old legs, once so admired, cry out 'gainst such exertion, and no wonder, all things considered! So I sit me for what I

ha' to say!" Here, with a sigh like a groan, she sank into the chair Sam made haste to set for her.

"Thankee, Sammy lad, thankee!" she gasped. "Lord bless ee, it seems but yesterday you was fresh from college, preaching your first sermon and mighty earnest about it, in a pulpit too absurdly small for such comely young giant. Ay, ye were a fine lad to fill a woman's eye, Trevanion, ye're a fine man yet; 'tis a wonder no amorous female hath snapped ee, Sammy. Nay, don't ee go to look so shocked at me, my lad; you're a very man in spite o' your holy orders, and all men are sadly human and wicked—outside and in! Ah, but today, Samuel, I'm on errand o' mercy!"

"Lady Polgarth, I am glad to know it," said Sam, bowing.

"And you, Mr. Brandonleigh, what say you?"

"You behold me, madam," I answered, making my obeisance as frigidly ceremonious as possible, "truly relieved and a little surprised."

"Ha, indeed, sir? Then drat and con-found your surprise! But for his reverence here—though to be sure he quit his pulpit job—I should ha' put it stronger."

"Then, madam," I retorted, "I am deeply grateful for Mr. Trevanion's restraining presence."

"Ay, ay, you'll tell me as you don't hold with pretty feminine oath or so, a little ladylike swearing?"

"Madam, I most certainly do not!"

"No!" quoth she, with most vicious sneer. "No, I'll lay a monkey you don't! A monkey, Mr. Innocent Virtue, means five hundred yellow chinkers—eh, Sammy, eh?"

"Lady Polgarth," he answered gently, "you spoke of an errand of mercy."

"Ay, I did, I did. So I am! In basket in the carriage—I've goodies for your poor, prying invalid, jellies, port wine, eau de vie. How does the rascal, Mr. Brandonleigh, your stricken jackal wretch? Ah, but he is better, you'll tell me, and this is very well, I suppose."

"But," said I, "seeing he came so near death, one naturally demands to know how—and why, madam?"

"Then," she answered, with odious mimicry of my words and manner, "one should have sense enough for one to demand of one's poor rogue

invalid one's self."

"Lady Polgarth," said I, with justifiable indignation, "I must protest most strongly against your persistent miscalling of my friend Mr. Vokes, also ——"

"Friend, d'ye say? Gammon, says I! Friend indeed! He's your Peeping Tom, slinking lurker, your creeping spy, your amorous agent, your shameless p—— No, I'll not say it for our Reverend Sam's sake, but—you know what I mean, your guilty conscience shall tell ye!"

"My conscience, madam, is perfectly clear, I am happy to say, and proof against your perfectly unjust and vicious innuendoes. Mr. Vokes, I repeat, is my honoured friend and——"

"Aha!" she exclaimed, thumping holes in Sam's smooth turf with her staff. "Then if your honoured friend pries and trespasses on my land—and after I've warned ye—I am not responsible if he be used like a rascal poacher—not I! No, sir. Oh no! Today I come like angel o' mercy with healing in my wings—if I had 'em—watch ye now!" And, setting the silver whistle to her lips, she blew a blast so ear-piercing and distressingly shrill that I recoiled and, glancing instinctively up at a certain open lattice of the cottage, saw Evadne looking therefrom in shocked surprise, and no wonder. Then the wicket gate clicked again, and to us strode that same stalwart footman carrying a capacious basket.

"Here, my lad, beside my chair!" quoth his grim mistress. "Nearer!" she screeched. "And don't goggle at the company, ye oaf! Off with ye, hurry! Why, now . . . bless my poor old bones—see who comes to glad my eyesight!" she exclaimed as Evadne approached us. "Hey-day, my wench, you've changed since last I saw ye! You've preened your plumage, you've beautified—and for some man, o' course! Now who, I wonder? For I vow ye blossom, ye bloom like red rose o' passion to heart-firing sun, a'gad, ye do! Who is he, lass, who's warmed and set your blood adance, the lucky dog? Ay, you're a luscious armful, a right savoury tit, a fancy piece worth any naughty fellow's kindest attentions."

"Oh—madam!" sighed Evadne, sinking before this coarse old creature in sublimely profound and stately curtsey. "Your Ladyship's eulogy overwhelms me! Such commendation, so elegantly expressed, should raise blush of rapture to the blowsy cheek of the meanest trollop!"

"Aha!" cried leering Age, with shrill cackle of laughter. "Spirit, eh? And a tongue to back it! You'll do, Vadne lass, you'll do! If brother Goliath had more o' that same he'd still be thumping in pulpit and praying aloud o'

Sundays, 'stead o' whispering supplications none hears save his own saintly self as don't need 'em. Ay, Vadne, ye're a wife worth the winning—I'd woo and win ye, ay, and wear ye too, were I but a hot, full-blooded young male wretch, 'stead of a poor, weak, helpless old woman very, very aged and worn wi' burden o' years—so many, many years, child!"

"And consequently," answered Evadne, "in frequent and present need of that solace called—tea!"

"Ah—tea!" moaned querulous Age, drawing herself erect and becoming beautiful. "Now bless thee, child, ay, Evadne girl—though ye must be thirty if a day—'tis suggestion proves thee very woman! Tea! There's soothsome compassion in the mere comfortable sound on't. Tea! 'Tis a sweet, homely word—'tis a comfort none o' these silly man-creatures have, or would have, thought on to hearten this grievously ancient party that is my poor old self, languishing as I sit!"

Scarcely was Miss Evadne out of earshot than this odious old lady must poke at me with her stick, nod first after Miss Evadne's shapely back, then at me, to languish with her wicked bright eyes and sigh prodigiously, so that I, being apprehensive of what indelicacy she might utter, was about to speak further concerning poor Will, but in that moment she pounced, saying, and with dreadfully youthful simper:

"Oh fie—you men, perfidious wretches and polygamous creatures that y'are! D'ye dream, sir, o' wedlock and wifehood, hey? A luscious, dutiful, stay-at-home spouse for your brief joy, then your comfort, and then—aha—a fancy woman for your leisure—hey, Mr. Brandonleigh, sir? Oh, Trevanion! Oho, Samuel, Sammy, my poor dreamy, prayerful Sam, what wolf in sheep's clothing d'ye harbour!"

Sam was looking from this nodding, leering old speaker to me, in troublous mystification, when, to my inexpressible relief, George made his appearance, at mere sight of whom Lady Polgarth uttered a screech of joyous welcome, beckoning him with talonlike finger of which he instantly possessed himself, bowing so very low that, for a moment, actually I thought he would have kissed it.

"Madam," said he, "I rejoice to see you in such high spirits."

"And," she tittered, "all the higher and gayer for sight o' you again, dear Mr. Drake—or is it Robinson, or both, or neither? Oh, I've ears! But no matter, I'll call ye Drake. Bring you a chair, here beside me, and gossip, you and I, for Sammy Trevanion was never a talker except in his pulpit, and Mr. Brandonleigh falls glum and grimly polite at mere sight o' poor old me.

’Twixt you and me and the gatepost yonder—he don’t like me any more than I am in love wi’ him. So talk you for me; let’s prattle and amuse one another, hey?”

“With joy, ma’m. Though first pray tell me of your son, Sir Wilfred.”

“What o’ my little Wilfie, sir?”

“Has he had any luck, madam, has Fortune proved kind?”

“Oh, Mr. Drake!” she simpered. “La, to be sure he has, all and every luck—am I not his dear mama?” George smiled and bowed; she tittered and ogled him, yet when he went on to talk of other matters she pinned him to his original question by demanding:

“Yet what o’ my sweet Wilfred, what naughtiness do you suggest o’ my lamb?”

“Oh,” replied George lightly, “I was merely referring to his quest, madam, the promise he made for the capture of a certain rascal.”

“Ay, but which in particular, dear Mr. Drake—the world is so full o’ rascals—which and who?”

“A dangerous fellow suspected of many things, a Jewish peddler, ma’m.”

Now at this (to me at least) dramatic moment I started and leaned forward, a little too eagerly perhaps, for, before speaking, Lady Polgarth turned and actually put out her tongue at me; then she shook her head at George, saying:

“No, no, Mr. Drake! Lord—no! Ye’re out there; your dangerous rogue cannot possibly be this poor, wretched, peddling man. Oh, I know, for I’ve seen him once or twice selling his trumpery to my silly maids and . . . I know danger when it threatens, I smell it . . . sense it, sirs! And there’s none in this Jew.”

“Sir Wilfred seems to think there is,” said I.

“Oh, but my Wilfie, being cursed with a too-active imagination, is so frequently its fool, Mr. Brandonleigh—sir. His geese are all swans, molehills mountains—he worries himself and others to no purpose—as he did t’other day on Ciss Dare’s account, as ye saw. So your Jew’s no more than a flam, a jack-o’-lantern. And there, glory be, comes Vadne and tea at last, bless her lovesome curves and contours! Han’t you noticed what enticing creetur she is, Mr. Drake—our amorous Brandonleigh has, o’ course; he’s such a wicked

eye for the women—eh, my dear Drake?" But this neither George nor I answered or heeded, busying ourselves with table, chairs, &c., to aid Miss Evadne. As for Sam, he, long ere this, had wandered away to his vegetable garden, whither George was despatched to lead him back. So down we sat to the musical clatter of cups and saucers with the ceaseless chatter of Lady Polgarth's highly unruly tongue, which last kept me, I confess, in constant trepidation; nor were my apprehensions unjustified, for suddenly, and apropos of nothing, this terrible old person pounced at Evadne with the impertinent demand:

"Vadne, my dear, why don't you take this naughty Brandonleigh and make a husband of him—indifferent faithful, yet—a husband? They can be useful creatures—husbands, my child—especially if only—indifferent faithful."

"And supposing, madam," I broke in, my finer susceptibilities shocked and outraged, "supposing a husband is neither faithless nor useful, how then? Pray what would be your own particular method, your suggested treatment of such?"

Lady Polgarth crossed two white claws upon the golden knob of her ebony stick, rested her chin upon them, and, fixing me with her regard, stared at me a long moment perfectly motionless and silent; and as I gazed into her eyes they seemed to grow and widen upon me quite dreadfully. At last she spoke, to my marvellously strange relief, and in tone sweetly murmurous:

"Odd!" said she, in this tender voice so violently contradicted by her passionately vital eyes. "Yes, sir, oddly enough we spoke of husbands last time—no, you did! You were so extreme condescending as to express interest in my First, my Jonas loved and lost, ah me! I said you should see his portrait next time you visited Trelant. Well, sir, this promise still holds. You may visit me whenever you are so disposed. I am a homebody these days, ah me—the place for weary Age is the fireside and an easy chair, but if you come you shall find—an adequate welcome, yes—ah yes!"

Shortly after this George and I rose to take leave, and the last sound I heard as we reached the wicket gate was the shrill cackle of Lady Polgarth's laughter that seemed to follow me like a mocking challenge.

"Well, George," I enquired, as we stepped out together, "what is your estimate of that most remarkable old creature?"

"A great deal, Ned, and a very great deal. A fearless heart, a subtle brain, a nimble wit—a sly cunning so near wisdom, a soul—and here's the pity

on't—a soul vastly evil that might have been so greatly good! A body so old and yet so indomitable! Yes, she begets pity, and this, as they say, is akin to love."

"Love?" I exclaimed. "George, you astound me, you amaze me!"

"And no wonder!" he answered gravely. "For egad, I wonderfully astonish myself! But the thought of this . . . equally astounding old creature and . . . gallows and gibbet . . . nauseates me."

"Oh?" I enquired. "Then you are perfectly convinced now that she——"

"Ned, o' God's name, let us talk of other things."

And so, after some interval, we did, though with this same horrid thought at the back of our minds, until we reached the cottage. And here we found our Mrs. Nubb extremely woeful upon the subject of stuffed veal, though the savour of its cooking was most appetizing—as I told her, which merely reduced her to deeper gloom and tear-suggestive sniffs.

"Thank ye, sir," she wailed, "but 'tis that kidney!"

"Really?"

"Ess indeed, sir—me not knowing if ye wanted it left in, I've took it out for to fry or, mebbe, grill for your breakfast t'morrer. And now p'raps you'll be a-missing it and wanting of it back, and if ye do—and I don't know but what it wouldn't be better if it was—which now it can't be, and me that worrited therefore, as I can't say, and if I did and could—nobody breathing the breath o' life could or would believe. So all as I can say is—kidney or no kidney, 'twas by me done for the best, which nobody can't say fairer—though my sperrits is therefore not withstanding, sir."

"Mrs. Nubb," said I, when at last she paused for breath, "please do not distress yourself—and tell me, were you born in Cornwall?"

"Oh no, sir, far be it and never so! I first see the blessed light o' day in London. Plum Tree Court, Kent Street—though why plum tree I cannot say by no means, seeing as I never see nor yet hear of no plum tree in Plum Tree Court nor any other sort or kind o' tree—never, as I'm a honest, truthful soul. But, Lor', here's me gossiping and that there precious j'int cryin' out to be basted."

CHAPTER XXXIII

Tells How I Received an Appeal for Help

NEXT morning I awoke from a heavy slumber that had been troubled by dreams of vague evils, and thus was the more glad to behold bright sunshine flooding through my open lattice and even to hear a dolorous wail uprising from the kitchen where Mrs. Nubb was chanting a dirgelike ditty accompanied by the rattle of crockery that portended breakfast.

But when in due season I descended to the small parlour, expecting there to be greeted by George, who persists in still rising at uncomfortably early hour, I found, and to my no little surprise, a sealed letter addressed to me in his writing, this:

> MY DEAR TEDNED,
>
> I am called away and, forgive me, go I must, with or without your permission and upon a matter which I am bound to keep secret awhile, even from you. Wherefore pray forgive again
>
> Your very devoted and grateful
> friend and servitor,
> GEORGE

Puzzled and a little annoyed, I summoned Mrs. Nubb to enquire precisely how and when George had departed, only to find her dismally voluble though vague.

"An 'ole hower, sir, 'twould be as he come creeping downstairs, two howers or mebbe a bit more as he took and went, and scarce a bit o' breakfast, along of a smallish gentleman in whiskers—very p'lite, 'e was, and so meek as a mouse he looked."

"A smallish gentleman?" I repeated. "Were his whiskers and his hair light—straw-coloured?"

"Oh no, sir, never straw, more kind of horburn, if not brown—black they was not and couldn't be, far from it, nor yet red or I'd have took particular notice by reason o' my sister-in-law's oldest as do have locks so red as furnaces and fiery flames."

“Thank you, Mrs. Nubb, I will take breakfast now if it be ready.”

“Which, sir, ready it shall be in—say seven, say ten, or a bit more, minutes by the clock, that kidney, sir, as I saved ’special, along of a rasher or so o’ bacon. Though I’m a bit worrited along o’ thinking as pr’aps you might ha’ preferred it with a hegg or bit o’ gammon cut thick and frizzled and nice pot o’ coffee—though I’m afeared as you’ll call for tea or——”

“No, no, coffee! Coffee by all means,” I protested.

Thus presently I took a lonely breakfast, wondering, with every sip and mouthful, why Shrig had sent the man Daniel at such early hour and what he could possibly want of George.

And here, yet again, Jasper Shrig’s furtive ways and ridiculously secretive methods irritated me so extremely that I did but scant justice to the excellent comestibles before me.

My meal ended and the table cleared, I sat down, cut and trimmed a new quill pen, and continued the writing of this narrative until disturbed by a tap on the door and reappearance of Mrs. Nubb.

“Sir, if you please,” wailed she, “and humbly begging yore parding, I begs to henquire if you be aware as that Pentreath’s Anne has been a-peeping and likewise a-prying on you at your writings.”

“Who?” I demanded a little irritably. “Whom did you say?”

“Anne, sir, that there young Annie.”

“But who is she?”

“Jan Pentreath’s heldest, sir, baptized Anne, though her pore mother, as come from Trehallow, was for naming her Nan, but Parson Trefusis, being hold and deaf-like, couldn’t ketch the N so he made it without and ups and ’tizes her Anne.”

“Yes, yes,” quoth I. “But what were you telling me about her . . . peeping and prying, was it?”

“That same, sir, it were indeed—through the winder there very sly! I ketched her in the very hact, which considering as her pore mother be a decent soul, mebbe, yet I don’t say but as with such a father she’s to be blamed, pore gal, if spy she do. Lay the blame, I says, on oo and where it do belong, I says, and that’s Jan Pentreath for being no better than what ’e is, which couldn’t be no worse if——”

“But, good gracious, Mrs. Nubb! Why should this girl pry upon me? Where is she—what can she want?”

“What she wants, sir, I don’t know, and where she be I cannot say. Ketched her peeping, I did, and shooed her away, I did. And, sir, away she went, but whether downalong village or upalong cliff and Nellyers, I do not know, and, being ever a truthful soul, therefore say I cannot and will not, only——”

“Then,” I sighed, taking up my pen, “if she should return, you will please enquire her business.” Mrs. Nubb having, as it were, sighed herself out of the room, I addressed myself to the manuscript before me, pausing now and then to con a sentence or listen to the soothing, never-ceasing murmur of the sea among the jagged rocks beneath the garden wall—thus I had written no more than a dozen lines when, yet again, Mrs. Nubb tapped and entered, sighing:

“Ronnie wishes a word with ee, sir.”

“Oh? And who may Ronnie be?”

“Mr. Greet, sir, our Postmaster—though I d’mind him, and seems but yesterday, as a little mischeevious imp of a urchin.”

“Where is Mr. Greet?”

“Hout on the mat, sir.”

“Then desire him to come in.”

Mr. Greet was slim and trim, a well-looking, tallish young man whose speech and bearing matched his good looks.

“Mr. Brandonleigh,” said he, returning my salute with a little bow, “there is a young girl in my office very urgent to see you.”

“Which surprises me,” I answered. “Who is she, pray, and what does she want?”

“Sir, she is Anne Pentreath, one of the maids over to Trelant House. I think she has some message for you, though she appears so nervous and upset that I can’t be sure.”

“I will see her at once!” said I, rising in such sudden and violent trepidation as required a supreme effort to conceal. “Be so good, Mr. Greet, as to show me to your office.”

A short walk brought us to the Post Office just above the Porth, and here I beheld that same very pretty maid I had remarked at Trelant Manor, and who now, at mere sight of me, burst into a very torrent of excited, breathless speech:

"Oh, sir, 'tes Miss Cecily . . . poor Miss Dare . . . she do want ee for to take her away with ee . . . to run off wi' her this very night and she'll be a-watchin' for ee to come . . . and the little windy in the angle open for ee to creep in by. . . . And will ee please say to me as you will so I can tell her as you'll be there sure and certain at ha'-past 'leven without fail, sir, if you please? And that's all."

Sudden as she had begun, this strangely agitated young girl ended and stood looking on me great-eyed and actually trembling, while I regarded her surprised and for the moment distressed beyond reply.

"Sir," said the young Postmaster, "excuse me!" And he went out, closing the door softly.

"You are Lady Polgarth's maid, and named Anne?"

"Yes, please, sir, I be."

"Anne, why are you trembling?"

"I dunno, sir."

"Has anything happened at the house to frighten you?"

"No, sir. Oh no!"

"Then why are you afraid?"

" 'Tisn't fear, sir, it be only . . . Oh, I dunno what it be."

"Is Miss Dare frightened also?"

"No, sir."

"Is she well, quite well?"

"Ay, that she be, sir."

"Did she seem happy when you left her?"

"Oh . . . well . . . yes, sir, yes, she did."

"Then why does she wish to be . . . taken away from Trelant House?"

"I dunno, sir—'cept it be as she's fell in love with ee, sir."

“Tell me again exactly what she said, her very words, Anne—no, first, why did she send me no written message or token?”

“Oh, but she did, sir! She give me this here written for ee,” and from the bosom of her trim gown Anne drew a small, folded paper whereon, and scrawled very wildly, I read these appalling words:

> For God’s sake come to me I am afraid at last for my life so for my life’s sake don’t fail me I scribble this in the dark. Don’t fail, Anne will tell you time and place. Help me or——

This most piteous appeal ended abruptly with a deep-scored pencil mark, as if the writer had leapt in swift panic. And as I gazed upon this unfinished, hastily scribbled supplication I imagined the fearful, trembling girl forming these sprawled characters with shaking fingers, her every terrified sense upon the alert for the grim peril that menaced her, and with myself her last desperate hope of deliverance. And instantly I began to doubt my ability to cope with such a dire situation and was swept by such wave of nauseating dread that I shivered while my whole being revolted—yet in this same instant my mind was made up, my course chosen, my will strong and resolute, my determination to dare all, fixed and immutable.

“My child,” said I gently, “Miss Dare writes here: ‘Anne will tell you the time and place.’ What does this mean precisely?”

“Oh, sir, it d’mean as ee must be there at ha’-past ’leven this night, and the place is the little windy by the side door, on the right as ee d’go, as leads to the garden and bowling green. ’Tes the windy as I am to leave open so’s you can climb through and——”

“Good heaven!” I exclaimed, aghast. “Am I expected to break into the house?”

“Oh no, sir, no! You just climbs through the lattice, and I’ll be a-waiting in the dark for to take and show ee the way to she.”

“But why must I enter the house, Anne? What need is there? Why cannot Miss Dare come out to me?”

“Oh, sir, I . . . I dunno! Don’t ee ask me, for I can tell ee no more. All as I know is that what I was to tell ee and as I’ve told.”

“Still, I cannot understand why Miss Dare cannot meet me outside the house or at least by the window. . . . Ah, do you suggest she is . . . locked up . . . a prisoner? Merciful powers—is she indeed locked in at night? Tell me,

child, tell me—answer me!" The passionate earnestness of my manner seemed to terrify the girl beyond all reason, for she cowered away almost as if expecting I should strike her and answered in breathless, sobbing whisper:

"Yes . . . no . . . I cannot tell ee any more. Oh, don't ax me, for I've said all as I minds. So let me go now, sir—please! Oh, do ee now, sir. Oh, do!" Her agitation had now become so extreme that I felt compelled to open the door, which she reached with a kind of leap; then, finding I made no effort to stay her, she turned to enquire breathlessly:

"Oh, please, what must I tell her? Will ee please to be there by the little windy at half-past 'leven? Oh, will ee, sir?"

"Yes, of course," I answered, "but tell me, Anne, pray explain just what ____"

But even as I spoke she turned and sped away in such terrified haste that I gazed after her in surprise and a growing apprehension, then turned to find the young Postmaster looking at me and so very oddly that I deemed it wiser to proffer some explanation, and found him so highly intelligent and sympathetic that I became the more particular as to the causes for my present harrowing anxiety—though taking care to make no mention of the Wrybrook Murder.

"So there, Mr. Greet," said I, my explanation ended, "there is the situation, and a highly repugnant one for any poor gentleman to have forced upon him! For, as I tell you, it seems that I am actually expected to effect violent entry into the house, like any burglarious felon! Yet in such desperate circumstance what other could any man do but answer such appeal and adventure it alone, since in this remote country, that seems beyond reach of the law, to whom could I turn for assistance?"

"To me, sir—if you will," he answered, in his soft, pleasant diction, "for the matter seems urgent, and as for the law—well—there are no constables nearer than Truro." Now though he spoke quietly as usual, there was about him such air of grim resolution that my heart warmed to him as I enquired:

"Do you mean that you will afford me your assistance in this troublesome business?"

"I shall be honoured, sir," he answered, with such natural dignity as won upon me even more.

"For, though a village postmaster, sir, I am also a man, and one who can no more refuse help to any woman in distress than can you, Mr. Brandonleigh."

“There will be risk,” I warned him, “and possibly even some little danger.”

“So much the better, sir,” he answered, his grave young face softening to a smile; “ ’twill break the monotony of my office routine.”

“Then,” said I, rising to proffer my hand, “Mr. Greet, I accept your help most gratefully.”

“Sir,” he replied, flushing very youthfully, as he rose, in turn, to grasp my hand, “I . . . I can only say again that you honour me. When must we start?”

“Why, this must depend upon our means of conveyance. My own horses and carriage are stabled in Truro, so I must hire a post chaise. The question is—where?”

“And, sir, ’tis question I cannot answer, for there are none hereabouts.”

“Yet we must have transport,” quoth I, “if only for the young lady’s sake. Surely there is some vehicle to be had?”

“Only farm carts and waggons, sir . . . though I mind now . . . Will Saul picked up a ramshackle old gig at a sale the other day dirt-cheap, and Bill Harris keeps a pony to drag his cart.”

“These must serve, if you can borrow them.”

“Oh, I can do that, sir, and at once,” said he, with look and tone of such capable assurance that it heartened me greatly, and I told him, whereat he flushed again and enquired for the second time:

“Sir, at what o’clock shall we want them?”

“About a quarter past ten, Mr. Greet; we were wiser to give ourselves plenty of time. And,” I added, “allow me to thank you again and most sincerely, indeed I am profoundly beholden to you.” Then back went I to the cottage, hoping greatly that George might have returned; but, finding this vain, set myself to await the advent of this most fateful night, and whatsoever it should bring, with such patience and fortitude as I might.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I Set Forth upon Most Desperate Venture

THE clock in Gerran's old church tower had struck the hour of ten as I stepped from mellow candlelight into a velvet darkness gemmed with stars and traversed the sleeping village where none stirred and no light beamed.

I had taken the precaution to provide myself with plenty of money, and in either capacious pocket of my heavy riding coat lay my silver-mounted travelling pistols.

Thus, then, in answer to such call as no man worthy the name could possibly resist, I went forth to adventure and dare, boldly as my nature allowed, all that lay in wait for me, but though thus armed and nerved, little expecting all the suffering, mental and physical, and ghastly horror I was to endure.

And here I pause to debate this question, namely: Had I indeed known beforehand all and what of evils I was to endure, could and should I have found the resolution to dare them? And, upon due consideration, I do honestly believe the answer to be "yes"—even though, as already confessed at the beginning of this narration, I am not, nor ever shall be, the iron-nerved Hero of vaulting Romance, alas!

With which I will now hasten to the last and concluding incidents and events of this my painfully veracious record.

I found Greet, the Postmaster, looming larger than nature in the starshine, hatted and topcoated to ears and heels, for though the night was fair enough, a chill wind blew in from the darkling, ever-restless sea. Near by stood a large-wheeled gig attached to a very small, plump animal which, Greet assured me, was a pretty good goer and much stronger than appearances warranted. And, as if to prove his words, hardly were we seated in this creaking vehicle than away went this diminutive pony at unexpected pace, stumpy legs in prodigious action, small hoofs waking the sleepy echoes with astonishing clatter until checked by the steep hill.

We drove for some distance without speaking, for I was plunged in unhappy speculation regarding the imminent future, and the young Postmaster refrained from plaguing me with idle talk or question by reason

of his natural good taste, like the very gentlemanly young man he was and is. Thus at last, feeling he had fully earned as much more of my confidence as I felt at liberty to bestow, I now addressed him:

"Mr. Greet," said I fervently, "I must thank you again for your kindly assistance and affording me your companionship in this most objectionable expedition. I confess the whole sordid business both shocks and revolts me! The mere idea that I must perhaps actually . . . clamber through a window, or enter any dwelling in such degradingly stealthy manner, truly appals me. Yet adventure it I must or despise myself as a heartless craven. You appreciate this?"

"Certainly, sir, since you believe this lady in such danger."

"I do indeed."

"But may I ask you how she is so, and why, sir?"

"Mr. Greet, you may, but all I am able to tell you is the fact that I believe her thus imperilled by the will of an extremely potent and . . . terrible person."

"Sir, if you mean Lady Polgarth, I can well believe it."

"Why, pray—why?"

"Because, having been bred and born hereabouts, I've seen her often, know her pretty well, and have heard . . . much more. Ah yes, such things as might, ay, and do, make some people still believe in witches and spells and black magic. Oh, they're a wild lot, the Trelant folk, and up to all manner of wild doings."

"Yes," said I, "wrecking, for instance, and—murder!"

"Why, sir," he answered, after a moment's silence, "I wouldn't go so far as to accuse them of . . . well . . . deliberate killing."

"Yet others do!" said I. "There are grim tales concerning . . . that dreadful old Tower of Trelant." Here ensued a silence broken only by the thud of the pony's small, busy hoofs in the dust, with the rattle and creak of our ancient vehicle, while away beyond the loom of vague trees I noticed a growing radiance that presaged moonrise.

"Sir," said my companion suddenly at last, "I have been wondering why you should venture into the house instead of the lady stealing out to you?"

"Because, as Anne informed me, Miss Dare is kept a prisoner."

“How do you propose freeing her?”

“The problem has vexed me,” I answered unhappily, “though I am hoping the key of her prison may have been merely turned and left in the lock, or that this girl, Anne, may bring it to me.”

“And if not, sir, how then?”

“Then,” I replied even more unhappily, “I must shoot the lock off the door with one of my pistols and keep the other ready for whoever may endeavour to impede us. However, free this lady I must and shall, one way or another.”

“Sir, do you know this girl, Anne?”

“No. I saw her for a moment or so during my one visit to Trelant Manor.”

“Yet—you trust her?”

“Because I must! And why should I not?”

“Sir, I don’t know, for I have nothing against her except—that she’s the daughter of Jan Pentreath.”

“Pentreath?” I repeated. “A dark-avised, Spanish-looking fellow with earrings?”

“Yes, sir, and generally reckoned a pretty bad lot, one o’ the worst in Trelant village. Then, sir, the lady’s note she brought you—are you convinced it is genuine? Do you recognize the handwriting?”

“Not in the least!” I answered, lightly as possible to combat the dismay and misgiving that now assailed me. “Oh no, how should I? You must remember the message was scribbled hastily . . . and in great fear and distress of mind . . . and in the dark! That the writing should seem strange is surely no matter for surprise . . . the wonder is that it should be even legible. As for the girl Anne, she should not be condemned or held suspect for the mere fact that her father is a rascal.”

Here fell another silence what time I watched a horned moon stealing upwards from vague and sombre woodlands, while I strove mentally with doubt and suspicion that refused to be quelled, reason how I would—until I became aware that my companion was addressing me:

“. . . for you haven’t yet told me how best I can help you in this . . . this rescue; exactly what I am to do?”

“As little as possible!” I replied instantly. “I will not permit you to run any avoidable or needless risk. What I ask of you is to carry me near as possible to the house, wait for my return with Miss Dare, then drive us, and fast as possible, to Mr. Trevanion’s cottage, where we shall leave the young lady in his sister’s care. This accomplished, I shall accompany you back to Portscatha.”

“But suppose, sir, the danger is greater than we suppose and that when you get into that house you—don’t come back?”

“Then so soon as the lady appears you will not stay for me—you will away with her to the Trevanions at top speed.”

“Ay, but—suppose she don’t appear either?”

Now although this dire suggestion shocked me, I answered instantly:

“Then you will know things have gone amiss. In which event you will wait a reasonable time and, if we still do not appear, hasten to Truro and summon the constables.”

“I was hoping, sir,” said he diffidently, “to go in with you and help tackle anybody who—well—may need tackling. I’ve brought along Charlie Pope’s stick for the purpose—loaded with lead—Charlie’s the coastguard and has used it with good effect before now. So, if you think I might——”

“No, no!” quoth I, laying my hand upon the shoulder of this true and zealous friend. “No, my dear fellow. I am infinitely obliged to you, but I cannot allow you to become any further involved in this most obnoxious affair.”

The crescent moon, higher now, gave light enough to show me that familiar lane and soon the gateless pillars beyond which I had first seen Virginia, transformed into Cecily Dare, culling flowers while she sang.

We passed between these pillars by a narrow road that, winding up a steep ascent, led through a gloomy little wood beyond which my companion pulled up to point with his whip where below us, bowered in trees within a little valley, rose the gables and chimneys of Trelant Manor. Now as I gazed down upon this house out from the rustling leafage of the dark wood stole a furtive wind that chilled me so that instinctively I glanced thither and, as instinctively, recoiled, for there behind me, rising above whispering treetops stark and grim against the moon’s effulgence, and seeming to scowl upon me more bodefully than ever, loomed the jagged bulk of Trelant Tower.

“The wind strikes uncommon chill!” said my companion.

“Yes!” I answered, buttoning my riding coat closer.

“And you . . . you won’t take me along with you, sir?” he enquired wistfully as I descended from the gig.

“Impossible!” I replied firmly as I might. “From here I must go on alone.”

“Well, you’ll find me waiting here . . . when you come back—meanwhile, good luck, sir!”

“Thank you!” said I fervently. “Thanks, good friend!” And with the word I left him.

Now as I went thus alone down towards Trelant House, with that hateful shape of Trelant Tower scowling after me, I knew myself so greatly afraid that, I here confess, it required a prodigious effort of will to compel my trembling, craven limbs to bear me forward and as much fierce self-restraint to curb and master the unreasoning instinct that bade me turn and flee this loathed neighbourhood in headlong panic. But, setting teeth and clenching moist palms, on I strode until the house rose dark and menacing above me, a place of many windows where no light beamed, an Elizabethan structure built with outflung wings that seemed like monstrous arms reaching forth to grasp and crush me.

I climbed worn stone steps; I turned right along a terrace, following the house wall until in unexpected angle, fronting upon a dim stretch of lawn and gardens, I beheld a latticed window and this a little way open; then, as I stood at gaze, I saw through the panes of this window a pale, vague shape that seemed to waft and beckon me violently. So, not doubting but this must be the girl Anne, I approached and, opening this casement wider, beheld the same vague shape retreating backwards into darkness, yet beckoning me on with the same passionate gestures. Wherefore, laying by all dignity and caution, I proceeded to clamber (and very awkwardly) through this window and stepped, as it seemed, into a fearful nightmare.

CHAPTER XXXV

How I Talked with Death-in-Life

A CLOUD obscuring the feeble moon left me in profound and dreadful darkness, for with this came the realisation that I was alone, deserted and lost in a great black silence; for Anne (if the dim-seen figure had been hers indeed) gave no least sign or sound of her presence. I groped blindly about me, I whispered her name, then stood utterly still, breath in check, to listen, but heard no more than the dull pounding of my own heart loud upon this awesome quietude.

Now as I stood thus completely mazed and at loss, I became aware of a vague sighing that became a harsh whispering that grew louder and balefully familiar—a silken rustling punctuated by the soft, regular tapping of a stick; these sounds, always so strangely abhorrent to me even in full daylight and amid lively company—heard now in the dreadful darkness and unnatural stillness of this great house—bred in me such wild alarm and unreasoning panic that I stared round me, all else forgotten save my own craven, selfish fear, a poor, shivering wretch who gazed sightless upon the dark, a nerveless creature lost to all sense of manhood and every other sense except that of hearing. . . . Rustle and tap! Tap and rustle . . . growing louder, coming nearer . . . passing me by . . . and no sound of foot.

Then instead of darkness was the pallid radiance of faint moon that showed me a broad, panelled corridor and the open window. Instantly I turned to be gone; I took three stealthy paces—and halted. Yes, God be thanked, despite the urge of craven terror, I halted; and now, remembering why and for whose sake I was come, I faced about and went creeping back, desperately afraid, yet as desperately purposeful. I reached a slightly opened door and, after a momentary hesitation, pushed it gently wider—upon the glowing comfort of a fire and beside this, throned in high-backed chair, Lady Polgarth.

"So there you are, dear Mr. Brandonleigh!" said she, in tone and diction that matched her stately air. "I have been awaiting your advent, and you are well to time. Through the window, eh, sir? How undignified, yet how romantic! And the true amorist, the truly ardent lover, cannot be dignified, for passion is mere, stark Nature and dignity ain't! Well, now you may come in, sir, come in and be seated in this chair near me. Ha, well—I felt sure my

note would bring you—and quite skilfully done, don't you think, my appeal of Beauty in distress? She so fair and helpless—you a man gallant and bold and one who is also Mr. Brandonleigh, such a promiscuous adorer of the Sex! 'Twas irresistible, was it not? 'Twas clever as 'tis effective, you'll admit—that pitiful scrawl and scribbled supplication o' mine?"

"Yours?" I murmured, in a profound dismay that had in it no least fear of the speaker, for, now that we were face to face, all my late insensate terror had vanished clean away. "So you wrote that message brought to me by that poor, deceit-shaken child Anne?"

"Of course I did, silly man! And in the dark to make it the more real. And it succeeded! For, as sweet Mr. Pope wrote in that charming silliness called *The Rape of the Lock*, 'Beauty leads us' (or draws us, I won't be sure which) 'by a single hair'—and you, being such devotee of beauties feminine, no matter whose—here you are. And talking of silliness, you are truly such a very silly, ineffectual pomposity, such complacent egotist and so perfectly and supremely content with your futile self. Take a chair—this one! Presently you shall drink tea with me, though first I've a word for your private ear in regard to our Ciss, your pretty Cecily."

So, with ceremonious bow, I seated myself in the chair indicated and, leaning back, surveyed this strange old personage with what I am happy to believe was an air of cold, dispassionate curiosity, which appeared to anger her, for she thumped her stick upon the carpet and said with shrewish petulance:

"Yes, here we are at last, you and I—Mr. Busybody!"

I did not speak or even move; I merely lifted my eyebrows as in languid query.

"Ah yes, Mr. Prying Busybody!" she repeated. "Here you are, and here you will make your final exit from this wicked world along with that sly minx Cecily Dare. Ha—this double-faced, two-named wench Virginia Wrybrook!"

Again I was silent, this time because adequate rejoinder was beyond me; therefore my smiling, slow-nodding old companion went on:

"Oh, I know her! I ha' known this long time, bless you! The trixy miss was boldly artful, yet the audacious fool was actually wearing her father Harry's miniature! I had a long, close look at it one night as she slept—and she slept extreme sound because she had been—hocussed! Ah well, tonight, Mr. Busybody, you and Virginia are going to—elope! Oh yes, it is all

arranged, all duly prepared—by this time tomorrow it will be public news how this naughty Mr. Brandonleigh stole into this house late at night and carried off my great-granddaughter's pretty governess, Cecily Dare. So elope you shall, but you will meet with an accident—the ruin of your carriage will be found at the foot of a . . . well . . . a certain cliff, and if you and she are ever likewise found you will be very far beyond speech and much too far gone to be recognizable except by your personal marks and effects. I do hope that signet ring of yours is a close fit; and what now do you say to this, dear Mr. Brandonleigh?"

But once again I was mute, this time because my mouth had gone dry and my faculties were stunned with a horror almost too fantastic for belief, the more so since the speaker nodded and smiled and said it all quite pleasantly.

Finding me thus speechless, she now blew a shrill call upon her silver whistle, answered almost immediately by two powerful fellows in footmen's livery, one bearing a small table with lighted candles and the other following with tea-things upon a silver tray; these they set before their mistress and departed without apparently so much as glancing towards me.

And now, while pouring the tea, she chatted to me in the same light and seemingly amiable manner.

"And now, dear Mr. Pry, let us talk of husbands—'twill interest you, I know—not of husbands in general but one in particular, my First, my hateful Jonas. For since you, sir, being such extreme busybody, have unearthed or guessed so much and will shortly be forever dumb, I will now inform you that Jonas was a perfect walking abomination whose sordid meanness, cruelty, and general vileness forced upon his miserable, much-enduring young wife the odious necessity of his removal, which was accomplished suddenly, on spur of the moment, though with admirable dexterity. So, with her wifely assistance, Jonas departed to The Better Land, 'tis hoped—though very doubtfully! For, I repeat, he was a detestable husband, a most vile man and cruel father, who drove out his only son with never a penny, poor boy, and simply because his young wife did her woman's best to brighten life for the doleful youth. Poor, poor Harry! Such a sweet boy—and handsome too! His daughter Virginia takes after him, though she lacks his gentle sweetness. But, ah me—dear Harry is of the long ago! Today there is she. And you. And your two friends! Oh dear—and all so very eager to scratch and delve and rake up the dust of bygone years, to come at Jonas with knowledge of how and why! Such inquisitive people—not forgetting that slinking Jew peddler! 'Twas clever of dear Mr. Drake to pounce and spring mention of him upon

me so suddenly—for the moment, just one brief instant, I was almost at a nonplus, almost—yet not quite. I never am caught napping or I should not have lived to be ninety—and young for my age. No, I am never at a loss—except once—or very nearly, and when you, Mr. Busybody, were watching me, of course! The peddler's odious doll! Who is this peddling wretch? Or was the doll your own contrivance? Eh, you won't tell? Ah well, 'tis no matter; drink your tea instead and listen to me just a little longer. Let us tell over the catalogue: There is you, then Virginia, Mr. Drake, Mr. Vokes—and the peddler. So many of you 'gainst one poor, crippled old woman! There was also the young Irishman O'Dowd. Aha, he was the cunning one, the cleverest of ye all! Yes, he was so extreme shrewd that he died of it. Oh, dearie me! What would have happened if poor Mr. O'Dowd had possessed a stronger head? But the drink was his undoing and shrewdness his doom! And here now is—Mr. Brandonleigh, so rich and so silly that without his money he would be but the merest futility! And oh, such preposterous busybody! A gentlemanly Peeping Tom, a superbly polite Paul Pry who has peeped and pried and busied himself into such nuisance that he must be removed, this busybody must become just a body busy no longer. Ah, Mr. Brandonleigh, what pompously arrogant, nonsensical creature I have ever found you! There, now 'tis your turn—say something, do, while I enjoy my tea."

For a long moment I could but gaze upon the speaker who, seeming no other than a pleasant-spoken, stately old dame, was indeed and actually the very figure of death; and it comforts me that I am able to record how steady was my hand as I set down my empty cup and made answer:

"Your cynical admission regarding the murders, first of your unhappy husband Sir Jonas, then of the unfortunate O'Dowd, is quite too horrible, too utterly inhuman for credence, and outrages belief. And yet, beyond even this, I am to understand you now threaten the lives of this poor girl Virginia and myself. . . . It seems no more than nightmare too absurdly fantastical for reality . . . so incredibly ghastly that it goes beyond the power of dread."

"Ah! Then you have no fear—as yet? Let me refill your cup."

"Lady Polgarth, I can but wonder what kind of creature you truly are, for, to believe all you suggest of yourself, I must be mad . . . or——"

"Mad, eh? Ha, I wondered if you would say that! But, mad or no, I am a poor creature weary with age, an old, old woman fighting for all she holds dear—her son, her grandson, her beloved little great-granddaughter, for these walls to shelter them, for the bread they eat, for their ancient name! So

you may regard me as their saviour, or as a homicidal maniac, which you choose, 'tis no matter."

"However," said I, slowly withdrawing my hand from the pocket, where it had been clutching one of my pistols for some time, "as you see, I did not adventure here without due precautions, two of them! And now, though I feel absurdly melodramatic, I must ask you, with no further parley or delay, to bring me where I can have word with Miss Dare."

Lady Polgarth nodded and smiled so pleasantly that I felt the more ridiculous.

"Actually—firearms!" she tittered. "Well, I expected no less of you, Mr. Brandonleigh. Such very cautious gentleman! Such care and forethought for the safety of his own most precious person! And I am aware that your poor, fearful self is of such infinite importance to your so precious self I am perfectly sure you will shoot me the moment you see your beloved person endangered, so we must contrive that you do not."

"Madam," said I, rising, "you will be so obliging as to do as I say or ____"

"Oh, I will—I will!" cried she, making great clatter with her cup and saucer, as if by reason of extreme agitation, though her great eyes met mine with the same half-mocking, unwavering regard, and this should have been my warning. . . . Then, struggling up from her chair, she rose to her splendid height, sank to her cripple's awkward hobble, and went before me down the long room, rustling and tapping yet with no sound of foot.

So I followed this bowed and shambling figure into a gloomy passage floored, roofed, and panelled in black oak that gleamed, here and there, to the candle she bore—a light that seemed to burst asunder to jagged flame, in which moment I was conscious of sharp agony and sickness, whelmed as suddenly, like all else, in—nothingness.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Of Horror and Madness

My return to awareness of myself was—first a consciousness of pain and then, little by little, to a terror of blindness, for now, though my eyes were wide open, I could see nothing; thus it seemed the murderous blow that had stricken me down had destroyed my sight . . . I was blind! Frenzied with despair, I strove to rise, only to find myself quite helpless, bound and pinioned hand and foot.

Here I must confess that I became for some while no more than a struggling, moaning, screaming creature, bereft of reason, who strove and bit and tore at his bonds until, finding all efforts vain, I sank to lie gasping, bruised, and utterly spent.

But, as I lay thus in a misery of mind and body past describing, I heard a scuffling of movement somewhere above me and, looking thither, felt a mighty sense of relief and gratitude to discover that I was not blind, for I beheld a thin line of radiance splitting the darkness above that widened suddenly to a square of dazzling light though this was no more than a flickering lanthorn beyond which I made out two or three vague faces peering down upon me; and instantly I cried out to them for help, though of what I said I have no clear recollection except that I offered money, with wild threats and most unheroical cries and supplications—only to be answered by the thud of the heavy trap door falling, to bring down upon me a shower of dust, and with it the dreadful darkness that now indeed held for me a new and sickening horror; for in this brief interval of light I had seen the grim stone walls that prisoned me, with the slimy floor whereon I sprawled—despair overwhelmed me.

So the haunting terror I had dreaded from the first, and with such strange instinct, was come upon me at last—I was a helpless, wounded prisoner in this fearful Tower of Trelant.

Now indeed I knew the reason for my passionate loathing of the place, knew that it had been a warning, a premonition of what was to befall me here—torment of nerve-racking suspense that was to end in some ghastly form of death, my brutal murder in this awful place at the hands of

abandoned rogues and by the merciless will of this terrible old creature, this maniac whom someone had once named Death-in-Life.

For some while I lay, motionless and despairing, but at last, because I am so merely human fearful of dying and yearning so ardently to live, I began to crawl, bound as I was, and to feel my way about this frightful dungeon. Thus in blinding darkness I crept and writhed, fumbling my way along patiently or pausing in sudden frenzy to beat vainly against the remorseless stone that shut me in. How far I progressed thus our merciful God alone knows; all I remember is that suddenly my bound hands plunged down into space and I hung suspended above a black void whence breathed an air rank and fetid with corruption.

In this appalling situation I remained, my arms, head, and shoulders dangling within this noisome pit that seemed to nauseate and stupefy me with its very loathsomeness. At length, whimpering like fearful child, I wriggled up, inch by inch, back and away, to lie shuddering and breathless while my soul cried thankfulness to God for my merciful delivery from such frightful end. I pleaded also for life. After this, what with the blow upon my head and all I had endured since, I fell in a kind of swoon . . . was roused by dazzling lights . . . saw men bearing lanthorns that showed me that terrible figure bowed upon its staff, nodding and scowling down upon me, a creature this that seemed no more the stately dame careful of speech and bearing, but a very hag who glowered and spoke in rough country idiom.

"Jan do tell me as you've been raising great to-do—crying and weeping, suing and pleading, you that was so mighty arrogant! Yah—where be your pride now, Mr. Busybody? Set my chair here, Jan—ay so! Now you lads leave the lights and away wi' ye. But keep nigh and wait for my bosun's pipe. Off now!"

The men departed instantly like the poor slavish rogues they were; then, with deep, sighing groan, their mistress sank down into the cushioned chair, closing her eyes as if greatly wearied. So for some moments she sat, in the full beam of the lanthorns, then, keeping her eyes still closed, she spoke—as much to herself as to me:

"I'm a failure and therefore damned! I failed because for once I didn't make sure when I might and should ha' done! Yes, I've . . . failed at last, Brandonleigh!" Here she opened her great eyes and looked down upon me very woefully. "You'll rejoice to know that Virginia is away . . . free, to bring ruin and shame on me and mine . . . after all these years! I have lived too long . . . ay, too long! Well, I shall rectify this tonight, for, being a

failure, I'm sick o' life and all failures should die! So die I will gladly, ay, gladly, since my children, my beloved ones, are safe. I made sure o' this beforehand—my Wilfred, my Jason, my precious, small Tamsin . . . all now at sea for France and safety. I only remain . . . to fall with the old house and name, for I be a failure . . . too old for new ventures and weary for death. So when they come to drag me away they'll find only a poor, old, weary woman fast asleep, a failure that shall never wake to fail again! But first—you! You that is the prime and very cause of it all. . . . Oh, I know what chanced in St. Sepulchre's churchyard, ay—the fool O'Dowd was quite eloquent in 's cups. So you now, you that must busy yourself in a body's concerns, shall go as went that Irish sot—no, he died first with an arrow in 's throat . . . an arrow is method very old, like me, sure and silent! But you shall go down alive to Father Neptune or Davy Jones," and she pointed to that foul pit in corner of the dungeon.

"NO!"

This single word was not loud-spoken and yet uttered by such voice as my ears had never heard—so deep and strangely resonant that it seemed to pervade the air all about us ere it died and was gone like a fugitive wind gust.

My aged companion was still pointing towards the pit, but now, though her outstretched arm fell, she continued to stare thitherward with eyes that slowly widened, while her jaw dropped and hung quivering so dreadfully that I turned to follow her gaze.

And then it seemed that suffering had turned my brain, for I beheld that which could not possibly be true yet which my mortal faculties knew as actual and real. . . . I saw uprising from that abyss of death and corruption, slowly and with no sound, a something round, smoothly white, and gleaming—a thing to blast Reason . . . there, grinning upon us, was truly Death-in-Life, a shining skull, its left temporal bone pierced and transfixed by a long bright nail.

And now I knew I must be mad, for, as I gazed upon this incredible horror, it nodded at us in slow, lazy fashion, as it had done before, months ago in St. Sepulchre's churchyard; then, with most dreadful deliberation, it turned itself this way and that, as if viewing us each in turn with its eyeless sockets while with each movement the murderous nail flashed and glittered. And again the deep, hollow voice spoke:

"Marianne!"

"Jonas . . ." she whispered.

“Come!”

Her answer was an awful, thin wailing:

“NO . . . No . . . I cannot! I . . . will . . . not. . . .” But I knew she had risen, compelled by a force beyond even her potent will.

“Come!”

I heard her broken, gabbled supplications and in a screech that rose to a shrill screaming . . . the tap of her staff towards the fearsome thing that beckoned from the abyss.

Then the place seemed full of whirling demon shapes that strove close-grappled . . . lightning seemed to blind me, a thunderclap to deafen me . . . I was kicked, trampled. . . . Then I too wailed and screamed, for that pit of noisome darkness seemed to swallow me.

CHAPTER XXXVII

How I Knew a Dread More Terrible Than Death

A BIRD was singing, somewhere near by, carolling very sweetly, and yet I was marvellously troubled to know if this was song of thrush or blackbird, and there was none to tell me. . . .

A beam of sunshine was showing me a woven pattern upon a curtain, or was it a carpet? And I was grievously harassed to make sure if this pattern was intended to portray an English rose or the French fleur-de-lis, and no one came to resolve me this vexed question. . . .

. . . Someone was leaning over me, a vague face that splashed and spotted me with tears; and this angered me because when I strove to avoid this annoyance I found myself still prone and helpless. . . .

I beheld a glory of sunlight that showed me a trim curtain whereon was patterned that which I knew was a rose though large beyond nature; beyond an open lattice a bird was piping, such flutelike trills and richly liquid notes that I knew this bird must be a thrush. And beside this window, her lovely head bent above some needlework that engaged her, sat Miss Evadne. Now, after I had watched her thus occupied for some long while, I said:

"How do you do, Evadne?"

The needlework seemed to leap from her slim fingers and for a moment she was utterly still, regarding me great-eyed with an expression of almost fearful amazement.

"Ned!"

One word only, and this spoken in a whisper, yet this told me so much, and in her eyes now such look of bright and tender gladness that her image was blurred by sudden, unmanly tears, so that I hid my face in the pillow for very shame. But a hand, ineffably gentle, touched my face, her voice spoke close above me:

"Ned—oh, Ned—have you come back to me—at last?" Then I, unable to utter a word, strove instead to reach and touch her hand, but, finding this beyond my utmost strength, I kept my face averted, yet very conscious and

humbly grateful for that gentle hand upon my brow whence I drew such comfort that, after some while, I sank again to slumber.

When next I opened my eyes it was to the glow of shaded candles and the flicker of steel knitting pins wielded by a large, plump female who was counting to herself in harsh whisper which so irritated me that I spoke at last, and I fear somewhat pettishly, for she started violently and turned to stare upon me over a pair of large, steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Eh, lawks ha' mercy! And is oo awake then?" said she in nauseating, syrupy tone as if addressing some fretful child. "Hushee now and close oo eyes! Sleep's what oo needs and——"

"What are you doing there?" I demanded.

"Knittin' a stockin', my poor lamb. But don't ee talk."

"What were you counting?"

"Me stitches, dearie, only me stitches. So be good and close your——"

"Who the devil—are you?" I gasped, striving to raise myself in the bed and finding it a labour beyond achievement. "Curse it—who are you?"

"Your extry night nuss, my poor——"

"Then go away. I don't like you! Leave me!"

"Fie now, my poor duckie! Stay still, like a sweet soul, and lemme set your pillers for ee, and don't try for to strive nor yet struggle, for you aren't got the strength, my poor lamb. So let your good, kind nursie——"

"Hell and damnation!" I gasped, in strange, wild fury, induced by this creature's officiousness and my own utter feebleness and ineptitude. "Go away!"

"No, no, lovey, my place is here to watch over ee this long night, so be good and——"

"Where is Evadne . . . Miss Trevanion?"

"In her vartuous couch, where she b'longs to be at such hour."

"What o'clock is it?"

"Nigh two in the morning, duckie."

"Woman," I gasped, "don't . . . do not speak to and treat me like an infernal infant!"

“But you’re our poor, precious invalid nigh to death’s dark threshold—though you’re better this night, and so you should ought to be, for you’ve been blistered and bled and cupped, and leeches to your poor bald ’ead ____”

“Bald?” I exclaimed.

“Ay, all your fine curly locks has been shaved off, every single ’air! So now you’re bald as a goose’s egg.”

“Great . . . Merciful . . . Powers!” I gasped.

“There’s been grand doctor gentlemen from Penzance, ay and even London too! And three nusses besides me! Oh, there’s been a fine to-do—and you laying ’twixt life and death o’ brain fever this six weeks and more.”

“Six . . . weeks?”

“Ay, six or seven. And, oh my—how you’ve carried on! Cursing and swearing most shameful and shocking for to hear and raving hideous about ‘pits o’ death’ and ‘nodding skulls’ and murders—enough to give a body the ’orrors! Ah, and fighting your kind nusses, struggling to jump out o’ bed so fierce till we has to call Miss Trevanion to soothe and quiet ee.”

“Oh, God forbid!” I groaned. “Did she hear me . . . see me?”

“That she did—the time as you ’opped out o’ bed so quick and tried to jump out o’ the winder, ’twas her as stayed ee.”

“Then I . . . am in the Trevanions’ cottage?”

“Ay, you be—and a nice time us poor nusses has—tramping and trudging back and forth, there being no room for to sleep us here. Ah, and talking o’ sleep, ’tis time as you went to bye-bye—so off with ee.”

“Then first will you please reach that mirror . . . the looking glass and let me see myself?”

“That I won’t. Oh no! It ain’t good for poor invalids to be’old themselves wasting away to skin and grief and bony skellingtons.”

Her refusal and the manner of it, more especially the mention of skeletons, so wrought upon me that I must have raved against her, for she strove to hush and silence me, and even attempted to stifle my complaints ’neath the bedclothes and I helpless to prevent, struggle how I would. . . . And then in place of this terrifying creature was Evadne to soothe and console me, and I clinging to her with feebly clutching hands while I gasped my new grief:

“Skin and bone . . . a skeleton! And oh, Evadne, I’m so faint, so weak . . . and bald! She says, that awful woman, that my head is shaved! I’m bald, Evadne, and must show . . . most repulsive. . . . Am I indeed? Oh, am I?” And Evadne took me to the warm, tender comfort of her arms and, for answer, closed my eyes with the sweet compassion of her lips until came sleep like a healing angel.

When next I awakened it was to see George bending over me.

“Lord, Tedned!” quoth he with a kind of subdued fervour as he grasped the hand I had fumbled out to him. “Oh, ’tis grand to see you so much more yourself, for, ’twixt you and me, old fellow, we began to fear you’d never turn the confounded corner.” He was still clasping my hand, but seeing his so strongly vital and my own so shrunken and nerveless, I instantly commanded him to bring a looking glass, which, after some hesitation, he did.

So I looked upon my reflection, then cowered away in shocked surprise and painful disgust.

“George,” I gasped. “Oh George, this is appalling . . . even worse than I feared! I’m perfectly frightful! I’m a hairless ghoul, a cadaverous horror, a ____”

“Ned,” quoth he, “you are a man back from death, a soul come up out of great tribulation! For yours has been a sickness both mental and physical, a haunted soul in stricken body—yet you are alive and—sane! Rejoice, man, and be grateful accordingly. As for your bald pate—see here this livid scar of the blow that should have killed you! Ah well, your silky locks shall sprout again, but to cover your nob meanwhile I have had this work of art made for you under my own personal care and supervision—look now!” From his pocket he drew a neat package and, unwrapping this, laid in my bony hands a glossy wig, so exactly like my own vanished hair that I could but gaze upon this artful creation and up at him in gratitude at first too deep for adequate words. At last I said, and very shakily:

“How thoughtful, George . . . how like you . . . my most kind and always efficient George!” But now, when I endeavoured to cover the scarred and gleaming hideousness of my scalp with this merciful adornment, my hands so trembled that he did it for me with his usual deftness, smoothed it here, patted it there, until, save for hollow eyes and prominent cheekbones, I seemed myself again.

Thus comforted somewhat, I leaned back among my pillows and, closing my eyes, ventured to ask that troublous question had vexed me so

persistently yet that even now I hardly dared to utter:

"Virginia . . . is she safe . . . and well?"

"Perfectly, Ned! Oh, perfectly—as I told you she would be—which makes me wonder why on earth you ventured to Trelant—and alone."

"Thank God!" I exclaimed, unheeding George's question. "Jasper Shrig saved her from——" I shivered violently. "Shrig got her away?"

"No, the hero of the occasion was Will, new-risen from sickbed; 'twas Will freed her by means of his fists and a ladder! And, Ned, 'twas she who gave Jasper timely warning of your desperate plight, so Ned, my poor, old fellow, you owe your life first to her, then to Will, and then to Jasper Shrig. Lord, Tedned—how could you allow yourself to be so tricked and duped? For according to Greet, the postmaster, you actually——"

"No!" said I miserably. "No!"

"Nay, but," said George, looking down on me very oddly, "I would but ask what happened when you entered that house."

"Don't!" cried I wildly. "For God's sake don't speak of it! I cannot bear to remember . . . I dare not think of it . . . I must not . . . I will not! The memory sickens . . . drives me frantic . . . madness lies that way . . . madness, I tell you!"

"No, no!" said he, upstarting from his chair. "Hush, Ned! Lie still, old fellow, I'll say no more . . . there now, compose yourself. . . . Shall I send Miss Evadne to you?"

"No—for God's sake don't let her near me."

"As you will, old fellow—though you look very well with your wig to hide——"

"Oh, it is not my looks . . . only . . . she must not come near me again . . . for her own sake . . . my sake . . . promise me . . . swear me this!"

"So be it, Ned, only compose yourself, try to sleep."

"I will. Oh I will, George! Give me my draught, the opiate. Now sit by me . . . take my hand . . . keep her . . . away from me and . . . I'll sleep."

Now although from this time my bodily health began to mend, yet, with returning strength there grew within me a horror of the past and a sick, ever-increasing dread of the future that manifested itself in such strange, unlovely fashion that upon a day when with George's aid I had contrived to stagger

from bed to an armchair beside the open lattice, he propounded the question I had expected:

"Old fellow," said he, settling my pillows with his usual deft care but speaking with uncommon bluntness even for him, "I want to know why you are so changed in your behaviour of late, especially as regards Miss Evadne, and this after all her devoted care!"

"How, George?" I enquired, turning wearily to gaze out upon the sunny garden.

"How?" he repeated hotly. "Lord, man, each time you happen to see her you turn away; if she ventures a word, you mumble or sit dumb! 'Pon my soul, Ned, it seems as if you study how to wound her!"

"Yes!" I answered miserably. "Yes, to be sure, I have seen tears start to her eyes . . . and felt them burn my own! Yes . . . this is why I have determined to leave here—today!"

"Leave . . . today?" he repeated in wide-eyed amazement. "And you scarce able to crawl!"

"However, George, leave I must and will—at once."

"Great heavens, Ned, are you mad?"

"Not at present!" I sighed. "No—not yet! Therefore I am resolved to be gone soon as possible. So you will now have the goodness to make all arrangements—we leave for Truro today."

"But, Ned, you are still an invalid, and much weaker than you suppose."

"Yet strong enough, George."

"Then besides, my dear fellow, to leave thus suddenly . . . these good friends . . . after all their boundless kindness and hospitality, would be worse than graceless! No, no, Tedned, let's call this a sick man's fancy and——"

"Call it what you will, George, but procure me some conveyance at once, or," cried I, with sudden passion, "so sure as God is above, I'll creep away on hands and knees, for go I will . . . today . . . this very hour!" He rose, but stood looking down upon me with such troubled anxiety as irritated me almost past endurance; nevertheless I spoke him gently as I might:

"George," I said, "pray understand I leave this hospitable roof, these . . . dear people . . . not because of any sick fancy but for a very cogent, a most compelling reason! So off with you now, like a good fellow, and get me some vehicle—anything on wheels—go!"

Slowly and unwillingly he obeyed, leaving me to gaze away across the sunny garden and shiver inwardly because of this most dreadful reason that was driving me from such peaceful haven that had become for me the best-loved place on earth.

Now after some while I heard the door open gently and, though I did not glance thither, I knew that Evadne was beside me yet did my best to seem unconscious of her presence.

"Ned?" she murmured.

"Yes?" I answered, keeping my head averted; then I felt her hand upon my arm and for a blissful moment suffered it to remain ere I shrank away as if her gentle touch had burnt me. Here ensued a silence very painful, for me at least, and when she spoke again it was with a piteous quaver in her soft voice:

"Mr. Ned . . . George tells me you . . . you wish . . . he says you are . . . very determined to—leave us."

"Yes," I answered, "the time has come to say good-bye."

"Are you quite . . . quite strong enough?"

"Oh yes—yes, quite, I thank you. And oh, indeed I do thank you most gratefully for all your infinite kindness to me."

"Mr. Ned, you . . . were our friend and very near death!"

"Death!" I repeated. "George informs me, and indeed I know, 'twas you lifted me back to life. . . . And yet death may be a blessing."

"Oh!" she whispered, and I know she had recoiled from me. "Then do you . . . wish for . . . death?"

"Yes!" said I between shut teeth. "Yes, I should be happier dead." At this she gasped, almost as if my words had been so many blows, and, glancing up, I saw she looked down upon me through a glitter of tears; so I turned to stare through the window again as I continued: "But so long as I have life I shall be most humbly grateful . . . the memory of you will remain a fragrant memory."

"Yet now . . . you will go?" she murmured.

"Yes! Now I must go."

"Pray, Mr. Ned, have I . . . we, Sam or I . . . done anything . . . at any time . . . to distress or offend you?" These words, so sweetly humble, were

uttered in voice so gentle that for the moment I dared not speak or even glance towards her.

"Never!" I answered at last. "Ah, don't think it! No wretched man ever had truer, dearer friends . . . and now to part from such is . . . not easy. So I beg you will say to Sam all you can for me of my gratitude . . . and love. And oh, pray let this be our good-bye and farewell."

And thus, impelled by the dread that haunted me, I came again that same day to the Red Lion, in Truro, upon the first stage of my journey to London.

In these last few pages I have been at pains to describe my bodily weakness and suggest something of my strange mental condition, hoping thereby to explain how and why I became the victim of such preposterous though horrible hallucination as threatened to blast my reason and plunge me into a madman's grave; a horror I could scarcely endure to think upon and should certainly never have dared put into words but for George, this most wise and faithful friend who, forcing me to speak, thereby, as I believe, saved my reason. And this the manner of it.

Arriving at the Red Lion, I found myself so distressed and feeble that I must needs get me to bed. But scarcely was I between the sheets than George seated himself beside me, folded his arms, nodded his head quite grimly, and spoke, as often he had done at school, when I, his clumsy young fag, had been discovered in some fault:

"Now, young Tedned, let's hear your trouble—out with it and no shuffling! Tell me what happened that night in Trelant Tower."

"No!" cried I, striving to sit up.

"Yes!" said he, restraining me gently though firmly. "Out with it now—speak up!"

"No!" I repeated. "No . . . don't ask me."

"But I do ask you, and mean to have an answer."

"I . . . I cannot! I . . . must not speak."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because I am . . . afraid."

"Of what, Ned?" And when he had repeated this question more grimly, I answered, whispering:

“Of madness! Yes, of coming insanity! Oh, George, George . . . God help me, I am losing my reason!” Now at this he rose to lean and peer down into my eyes.

“Ha!” he exclaimed. “And what put this fool idea into your noddle?”

“I know it, George! I feel my brain is going.”

“Nonsense, man! Bosh! Stark tomfoolery!” he ejaculated angrily. “What gave you such ridiculous belief?”

“Death!” I answered, shuddering. “I have seen the long dead quick with life . . . dry bones move! I have heard a death’s-head speak. Oh, horrible . . . horrible!”

“Well?” he enquired, apparently quite unmoved. “Go on, young Tedned, describe exactly all you saw and heard.”

“I cannot! I . . . dare not.”

“Rubbish!” quoth he, and so brutally that I could have wept, but contrived to frown upon him instead; whereat he grinned in my face so odiously that I yearned to strike him for such evident disbelieving mockery.

“So,” I gasped, “you insult my weakness.”

“No, I rejoice in your returning strength—come, tell me your horrors and let’s make an end of ’em.”

“George, you speak like a fool!”

“Then be you wiser, Ned, and confide in your friend. Tell me precisely what you heard and saw.” Yet I hesitated until, wearied by his very irritating persistence, I answered shortly:

“Sir Jonas Wrybrook’s skull.”

“Aha!” nodded George. “The grisly thing that nodded at us in St. Sepulchre’s churchyard, by reason of a toad! Well?”

“It moved again, George, and there was no toad. It moved! It looked on me . . . with no eyes! I heard it speak—calling its slayer to vengeance.”

“Ah!” murmured George, stirred to deep and solemn interest at last. “And this was not imagination, Ned?”

“No,” cried I desperately. “I vow to God it was real and actual fact! I saw and heard this because fear had turned my brain and for the moment I was mad. But, oh, George, if mad then—I may become so again, and this thought is killing me.”

“You saw this apparition in Trelant Tower?”

“Yes, but this was no apparition, no vague, ghostly thing, it was actual and real! I tell you I saw it plainly, I heard it speak and so did . . . she, for she answered it.”

“She?” demanded George sharply. “Do you mean—Lady Polgarth?”

“Yes . . . yes, the frightful thing called to her and she obeyed its command.”

“Ah!” sighed George, sinking back in his chair again. “So . . . that was the way of it!”

“Believe me, George, you must believe me!”

“Old fellow, I do.”

“I saw a skull beckon. . . . I heard an awful voice cry out: ‘Come!’ ”

“Of course you did,” he answered very gravely. “For what you saw was some devilish jugglery devised by Jasper Shrig to force confession from that strange, indomitable old creature who would never have betrayed herself otherwise. Yes, I’m pretty sure what you saw was by Shrig’s contriving, and therefore quite real.”

“George . . . Oh, George, do you truly believe so?”

“I do indeed, Ned,” he answered with look and tone of such solemn conviction that my troubled mind knew a most blessed relief; but then Doubt reared its grisly head again and Fear clutched me anew:

“No!” I groaned despairingly. “You say this merely to comfort me.”

“Ned,” he replied impressively, “I am now quite certain that you heard a voice speak and saw a skull move, for . . . what you evidently did not see was a very wonderful yet more terrible old woman lured to her death. . . . What you did not hear was the echo of her fall in the awful darkness of that underground dungeon where she was found. The methods of Jasper Shrig are his own, always very original, terribly just but sometimes fantastically merciless.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

How Beyond the Vale of Dreadful Night I Found a New Life

My sickening dread of probable insanity thus dispelled, my bodily health mended apace; yet being in no fit state for the long journey to London, and having besides no particular desire to be there, I took my ease at this comfortable inn and, leaving George to his own resources, amused myself with the continuation of this narrative, and though the act of writing proved tedious at first because of my debility, I persevered, and with the effort of mind, my strength of body increased.

Some few days had elapsed and I was busied thus when by the morning mail I received the following letter from Virginia.

> Ned my dear friend you were right he is a man and I am (or was) a cat. But my claws are sheathed at last (for the time being). And upon second thoughts I believe in spoiling Will you have improved him (outside and in) so wonderfully that I am humbly grateful. If this letter is inclined to be slightly incoherent, blame Ma who is talking as I write, for here am I safe with her in old London again. Mr. Shrig, who brought me here, tells me I shall be a person of property so soon as my claim is proved, so if someday I should force Will to wed me he will show much better beside me in our carriage than in a grimy blacksmith's leather apron. It was surprisingly brave of you and very gallant to venture yourself for my sake in that dreadful house—which I suppose will be mine someday, and how I shall alter and improve it. Yes, it was splendidly brave of you, as I took care to tell Miss Trevanion. She is beautiful though somewhat too cold and stately though not to you I suppose for as you are probably aware, she loves you. I knew this five minutes after I had mentioned your name. As for Will, I changed my mind concerning him while he was carrying me down that ladder and crushing me (quite pleasantly) so that had he kissed me then as any other man should and would (I hope) I might have seemed kinder than I showed—however! Ma (bless her) sends you her compliments with prayerful wishes for your speedy recovery to health and hopes someday to pour tea for you

again (and so do I). Meanwhile, dear friend Ned, pray know me for

Your truly obliged
humbly grateful
and timidly affectionate
VIRGINIA WRYBROOK
of Trelant (Someday).

This characteristic letter was yet in my hand when I became aware of a rapping upon the door which, opening to my call, showed the trim-clad, squatly powerful form of Jasper Shrig, hat in one hand, knobbed stick in the other. He beamed upon me, then, closing the door with his usual care, he advanced and stood to gaze and shake his head at me.

"Lord, Mr. Brandonleigh!" he sighed. "Dog bite me, but you're on-common shrunk, not to say—bony. I heered as you'd been poorly, but——"

"Poorly!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Poorly, by heavens! I have been and still am an extremely sick and ailing man! I feared for my reason! I suffered most acutely . . . and all this is directly the result of your ghastly proceedings, your ghoulish tricks and perfectly loathsome abominations."

"Sir, you ass-tonish me!"

"And you," I retorted sternly, "you very nearly drove me out of my mind by your most detestable, utterly frightful, and reprehensibly unorthodox methods."

"Then, sir, my best and werry humblest apologies. For of all law officers alive and breathing this here wital air, you beholds the humblest of 'em now standing afore you by reason o' this here Polgarth Case. Sir, I ain't decking nor yet adorning myself with no flowery garlands nor triumphant arches, no! Instead thereof, I here admit, frank and free, as my handling o' this Case has fell short o' my expectations. And why? axes you. Sir, I answers, 'tis all by reason of old Lady Polgarth, and sich a werry ancient party, being a sight too leery and artful for J. Shrig—almost! Ah, sir, she rose far above and beyond all ordinary methods, so, all as pore Jarsper could do was to make 'em as extry-ordinary as possible."

"It would appear so!" quoth I bitterly.

"And, sir, it did the trick. But, though Murder is avenged, Justice wrought and The Law windicated, a werry humbled limb o' that Law stands afore you werry meek——"

“Then sit down,” said I, relenting somewhat; “sit down and be so obliging as to tell me so much of the dreadful business as your natural secretiveness will allow.”

Seating himself in the chair I indicated, Jasper Shrig laid hat and stick upon the carpet at his feet and, placing hands upon his knees, shook his bullet head and sighed again.

“No, sir,” quoth he, “I ain’t crowning myself with laurel nor yet bay leaves, for old Lady P., being sich a reg’lar out-and-outer and full of intellect as a negg is o’ meat, might have diddled Jarsper and cheated The Law but for her pore wictim Sir Jonas and my method o’ using of his remains.”

“And very hideously, Shrig, very gruesomely!”

“Though to werry good purpose, sir.”

“Which perhaps you will now explain.”

“Then, sir, p’raps you’ll mind how, in black viskers and a peddler’s tray, I rambled about Trelant doing a bit o’ business in laces and what not, using my ogles and ditto my listeners? I likewise took partic’lar notice o’ that old Tower as being so remarkable convenient for Windictiveness in general and the Capital Act in partic’lar—and I found as there is a underground passage from the seashore to a cave beneath the foundations and agin the side o’ this cave a iron ladder werry proper to my purpose as if put there years ago so as The Law, in the form o’ J. Shrig, might thereby con-found Williany and con-flummerate Wiciousness in the shape of—us knows oo. So arter aforesaid Wiciousness, having cracked you, Mr. B., on the tibby, sir, has your onconscious person drawed into said Tower, meaning for to ha’ you pitched down to die in cave aforementioned, Jarsper gives the vord and up said ladder goes Dan’l with the nob of poor Sir Jonas, nail and all, under his arm. And then, sir, acting per instructions, ‘Come!’ says Dan’l, werry gruff, and makes Sir Jonas nod and beck.”

“Horrible!” I exclaimed angrily. “Ghastly! Outrageous!”

“Ar!” quoth Shrig, rubbing his knees and beaming. “And, sir, it acted like a charm whereby Wiciousness come to a just end, your life was saved, the Polgarth Case ended, and—there y’are!”

“So then,” quoth I, deeply shocked and disgusted, “you actually . . . with cool deliberation drove your wretched victim to her death?”

“Let’s say she got saved from a finish much more oncomfortable. Hows’ever, The Law is windicated and Wiciousness—ain’t.”

“But,” said I sternly, “in most shocking, most dreadful fashion! Your methods, I repeat, are very reprehensible and highly irregular.”

“Ar!” quoth he, nodding with the utmost complacency. “Irreg’lar is the only vord for it. But now——”

“In fact,” I persisted, angered by his utter callousness, “in fact—you killed her.”

He blinked, pursed his shaven lips as if about to whistle, but spoke instead:

“Now talking o’ yourself, Mr. B., I humbly confess as how you diddled me too.”

“Indeed?” I exclaimed. “How, pray?”

“Along of your young female party, Miss Wirginia. For, blow my dickey, if you didn’t make me think as you was sweet on her and her on you and both on ye set on wedlock, as I says this werry morning to Miss Trewanion.”

“Great heavens!” I exclaimed, starting afoot. “What brought you there—with her?”

“My gig, sir. And I come there looking for you in your bed o’ sickness but found her in the garden instead and werry pretty too, with birds vistling so gay and flowers blowing so sweet and roses blooming all around—ay, and in her lovely phiz too so soon as I spoke your name. So, thinks I. Hallo! Is Miss Wirginia’s pretty nose out o’ j’int or is this here handsome creeter’s loving ’eart doomed to beat in wain? So, arter a bit, ‘Miss Trewanion,’ says I, ‘if Mr. B. has left you so hurried as you informs me, you can take your Bible oath as he has flew to another, but——’ ”

“Now confound you, Jasper!” cried I, in very fury of dismay. “Oh damnation! Ah, what hellish mischief have you wrought for me? What devilish, what infernal harm have you done me now? Here is perfectly damnable mess! Ha, curse it, what more did you say?”

“Say?” he repeated, opening his round eyes wider than usual. “Sir, in all my life I’ve never said, nor yet heard said, so much at sich short notice! Your langwidge, sir, is copious by reason of eddication along of a nat’ral gift and my respect is rose according.”

“Oh, man,” cried I, in extremest agitation, “what more did you tell her?”

“Nought but comfort, sir.”

“What, Shrig, damme—what?”

" 'Ma'm,' says I, werry consoling, 'though our Mr. B. has flew the coop or, as you might say, hopped the perch, Miss Trewanion, so werry sudden along o' Miss Wirginia——' "

"Merciful Powers!" I gasped, sinking feebly into my chair again, while my unconscious tormentor continued placidly:

" ' 'Twill be, ma'm, business as draws him on this here lovely young party's behalf and be-hoof by reason as his 'eart, ma'm, be as big as the dome o' St. Paul's.' "

"This," cried I, starting to my feet once more, "this is insupportable! I must see her, go to her instantly! I must explain. Pray ring the bell while I get ready. Order me a horse . . . no, my own carriage."

"Sir, if 'tis speed as you need I'll drive you in my gig."

"Come then!" said I, clapping on my hat. "And drive fast." And drive he did, for scarcely was I beside him in his lofty vehicle mounted upon ridiculously large wheels, than we were out of the stable yard at breath-taking pace, heedless of traffic and the indignant shouts of other wayfarers, with rattle of hoofs and great wheels that whirled me along the High Street and around corners to the open road, and so away in rolling dust cloud. But presently Shrig checked his horse's astonishing speed to fumble in the pockets of his trim coat whence, after divers bodily contortions, he extracted a letter which he handed to me, saying:

"Read that, sir, and let's hear your werdict."

So I unfolded this letter which I saw was in Will's handwriting and read this:

> Dear and most honoured Sir,
>
> First I beg to apologise my best for the insults I spoke you because events have proved me wrong and you stout-hearted and bold as you are kind. And, sir, I cannot accept your generous offer because you are nowise interested in breeding horses, also because Mr. Shrig has 'listed me under him as a law officer. So I have left Ma and am now lodging with Mr. Shrig and Dick Roe at The Gun, to be nearer my new work, also because Miss Virgie is now safe home again under Ma's wing and I can't bear to see and hear her too often, though she don't mock at me any more, except a bit now and then, which makes me hope she may grow kinder in time and the wonder of wonders happen like as you suggested to me might

be, and Ma says it will surely. But then Ma, God love her, is always kind to everybody. But if, as Mr. Shrig says, she will come in for Trelant and lots of money it will blast and shatter my hopes for I couldn't ever dare as such rich lady to marry with the likes of me could I, sir—no, not I. So now hoping as you are going on well and thanking you for all you did and would have done for me, I am now and shall always remain

Your respectful, very grateful
WM. VOKES

"A fine fellow, Jasper," said I, refolding this epistle; "yes, a fine, manly fellow!"

"Ar! None better, sir, and should make a werry proper limb and no error."

"Limb?" I enquired.

"O' The Law, sir, a nofficer."

"But," I demurred, "with methods less uncanonic than your own, let us hope. But tell me, Jasper, what has become of Sir Wilfred, of young Jason and the little girl?" My companion sighed deeply, shook his head, and, eyeing me askance, answered mournfully:

"Off, sir, clean as a vistle, aboard a French wessel—per the ass-tonishing intellects and artfulness of old Lady P. Ah, 'tis a werry good thing for my perfession as there's precious few the like of her! She is the Vun and Only as happens werry seldom or this here old Wale o' Sorrer might be sorrier."

"Now as regards that mysterious arrow, did you discover anything more?"

"Ar, I did, sir, three or four more, and the bow as shot 'em, same now being placed on ewidence, also bones, as ain't."

"Human bones, Jasper?"

"And plenty on 'em, in that old Tower. Now if you ax me oo's bones or how they come there, all as I can say is—ekker alone can tell."

By this time we were come to that tree-shaded, winding lane now so familiar and endeared to me because of its associations; where, at my bidding, Shrig reined his eager animal to a stop and I clambered down with his powerful hand to aid me.

“Thanks, Jasper,” said I, “thanks and, for the present, good-bye!”

“Talking o’ Lady P.,” said he, in his sudden, unexpected manner.

“But we are not,” said I, “nor have the least wish to speak of or even remember her.”

“Might I ax your reason?”

“There are too many reasons to discuss here—and now.”

“Is vun o’ them my method of her—escape?”

“Escape?” I repeated.

“Ar! Her escape from summat as no fee-male should ought to suffer, or so thinks Jarsper—ay, even though he is Shrig o’ Bow Street. So now, afore you pass judgment on J. S., think of her—a fee-male specie so extry-ordinary ancient and on-common remarkable—then think o’ the pain o’ fetters, the horrorsome gallers, the shame o’ nakedness, tar and gibbet—then judge. Howsomever, she had a more ladylike finish than what must ha’ been for sich a werry owdacious, capital covess! Ah, Mr. B., sir, of all the fee-male capitals I have ever knowed or heered tell on—Lady P. is the Pippin! Hows’ever time’s on the ving, sir—so good-bye till us meets again. My respex to your lovely lady and may young Coopid shoot his little arrer straight to the mark and all be revelry and J.O.Y., J’y, sir!”

And so, with flourish of his whip, Jasper Shrig beamed down upon me and drove rapidly upon his way.

Then slowly I approached the little wicket gate, yet paused there in no little apprehension and a growing nervousness as to how she might receive me considering my very sudden departure. How would she greet me—now that my need for her was so inexpressibly great?

At last I opened the wicket, gently as I might, and, skirting the tall, neatly trimmed hedge, halted again abruptly; for I beheld her now as she had first appeared, kneeling to tend her flowers, and I felt the scald of tears induced by love and joy and the mere sight of this sweetly gracious, so beloved form. Thus, for a long moment, I stood motionless and dumb; then I went to her, my footfalls soundless upon the smooth turf, and, speaking no word, sank to my knees beside her.

Startled by my sudden appearance, she recoiled from me, then, rising with swift, effortless grace, stood gazing down upon me.

“Ned . . . Oh . . . Mr. Ned,” she faltered, “why do you kneel?”

“In gratitude!” I answered. “In humblest, deepest gratitude because the shadow that was between us, the dreadful thought that drove me from you, has vanished forever, thank God. It was horror so ghastly . . . I hardly dare think or speak of it . . . even now.”

“There is no need,” she answered breathlessly. “I know, George told me all . . . how you had suffered . . . and I—— George is here, I mean he is out . . . walking with Sam. Sam and he are great friends.”

“Evadne, oh, my dear,” said I, reaching forth my hands to her, “here upon my knees I plead for your love to bless me, your strength to make me strong, your sweet, gracious self. . . . Oh, Evadne, I need you beyond the telling, want you with my every breath.”

But here she stooped with merciful arms and lifted me to her heart.

Much more I wrote of this happy and never-to-be-forgotten hour, but when afterwards I read it to my Evadne she kissed me in silence, telling me that blessed memory was too hallowed for printer’s ink and must be kept sacred to ourselves.

Here, therefore, I will end this narration, which has turned out so very much other than I intended by reason of the all too frequent mention of my unwittingly intrusive and most unheroical self. But as said Pontius Pilate long ago, now say I:

“What I have written I have written.”

And this effort of mine, whatever its shortcomings, possesses at least this one virtue, that it has been penned with the utmost sincerity.

Thus in taking leave of such patient readers as have borne with me thus far, I would say to any who, like myself, may have to stumble awhile through the Valley of Dreadful Night in pain or fear or sorrow, to these I would now reach the hand of fellowship, bidding them be of good courage and praying that they too, by God’s mercy, shall come up out of the darkness into a glory of light and joy of life—even as have I.

And so to one and all—Fare ye well!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Valley of Night* by John Jeffery Farnol]