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Elizabeth Hall**

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A LOOSE END

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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A LOOSE END.



ne September morning, many years ago, when the Channel Islands seemed further off than they do now, and for some of them communication with the outer world hardly existed, some two hours after the sun had risen out of the sea, and while the grass and the low-growing bushes were still fresh with the morning dew, a young girl tripped lightly along the ridge of a headland which formed the south side of a cove on the coast of one of the smaller islands in the group. The ridge ascended gradually till it reached a point on which stood a ruined building, that was said to have been once a mill, and from which on the right-hand side the path began to descend to a narrow landing-place in the cove. The girl stood still for a moment when she reached the highest point, and shading her eyes looked out to sea. On the opposite side of the cove a huge rock, formed into an island by a narrow shaft of water, which in the strife of ages had cleared its way between it and the rocky coast, frowned dark and solemn in the shadow, its steep and clear-cut sides giving it a character of power and imperturbability that crowned it a king among islands. The sea beyond was glittering in the morning sun, but there was deep purple shadow in the cove, and under the rocks of the projecting headlands, which in fantastic succession on either side threw out their weird arms into the sea; while just around the edge of the shore, where the water was shallow over rocks and weed, was a girdle of lightest, loveliest green. Guernsey, idealized in the morning mist, lay like a dream on the horizon. Here and there a fishing-boat, whose sail flashed orange when the sun touched it, was tossing on the waves; nearer in a boat with furled sail was cautiously making for the narrow passage—the Devil's Drift, as the fishermen called it—between the island and the mainland, a passage only traversed with oars, the oarsmen facing forwards; while the two occupants of another were just taking down their sail preparatory to rowing direct for the landing-place.

The moment the girl caught sight of this last boat she began rapidly to descend the 300 feet of cliff which separated her from the cove below. The path began in easy zig-zags, which, however, got gradually steeper, and the last thirty feet of the descent consisted of a sheer face of rock, in which were fixed two or three iron stanchions with a rope running from one to the other to serve as a handrail; and the climber must depend for other assistance on the natural irregularities of the rock, which provided here and there an insecure foothold. The girl, however, sprang down the dangerous path, without the slightest hesitation, though her skilful balance and dexterity of hand and foot showed that her security was the result of practice.

By the time she had reached the narrow strip of beach, one of the few and difficult landing-places which the island offered, the two fishermen were already out of the boat, which they were mooring to an iron ring fastened in the rock. One of the men was young; the other might be, from his appearance, between sixty and seventy. A strange jerking gait, which was disclosed as soon as he began to move on his own feet, suggested the idea that his natural habitat was the sea, and that he was as little at ease on land as some kinds of waterfowl appear to be when walking. He could not hold himself upright when on one foot, so that his whole person turned first to one side and then to the other as he walked.

"Marie!" he called to the girl as she alighted at the bottom of the cliff, and he shouted something briefly which the strange jargon in which it was spoken and the gruff, wind-roughened voice of the speaker, would have made unintelligible to any but a native of the islands.

The girl, without replying, took the basket of fish which he handed her, slung it on her back by a rope passed over one shoulder, and stationed herself at the foot of the path, waiting for him to begin the ascent: the younger man, who was busy with the tackle of the boat, apparently intending to stay behind.

When the old man had placed himself in position to begin the ascent, with both hands on the rope, and all his weight on one leg, the girl stooped down, and placing her lithe hands round his great wet fisherman's boot, deftly lifted the other foot and placed it in the right position on the first ledge of rock.

"Now, Daddy, hoist away!" she cried in her clear, piping voice, using, like her father, the island dialect; and he dragged himself up to the first iron hold, wriggling his large, awkward form into strange contortions, till he found a secure position and could wait till his young assistant was beside him once more. She sprang up like a cat and balanced herself safely within reach of him. It was odd to see the implicit confidence with which he let her lift and place his feet; having now to support herself by the rope she had only one hand to spare; but the feat was accomplished each time with the same precision and skill, till the precipitous part of the ascent was passed and they had commenced the zigzag path.

Then Marie took her daddy's arm under hers, and carefully steadied the difficult, rickety gait, supporting the heavy figure with a practised skill which took the place of strength in her slight frame. Her features were formed after the same pattern as his, the definite profile, tense spreading nostril, and firm lips, being repeated with merely feminine modifications; and as her clear, merry eyes, freshened by the sea-breeze, flashed with fun at the stumblings and uncertainties of their course, they met the same expression of mirth in his hard-set, rocky face.

"You've got a rare job, child!" said he, as they stood still for breath at a turning in the path, "a basket of fish to lug up, as well as your old daddy. He'd ought to have brought them as far as the turning for you."

"I'd sooner have their company than his, any day," with a little *moue* in the direction of the cove. "I just wish you wouldn't take him out fishing with you, Daddy, that I do!"

"Why not, girl?"

"It's he as works for himself and cares for himself and for no one else, does Pierre," said the girl. "Comin' a moonin' round and pretending he's after courting me, when all he wants, with takin' the fish round and that, is to get the custom into his own hands, and tells folks, if *he* had the ordering of it, there'd be no fear about them getting their fish punctual."

"Tells 'em that, does he?" said the father, his sea-blue eyes suddenly clouding over.

"That he does; and says he'd take up the inshore fishing, if he'd the money to spend: and they should be supplied regular with crabs and shrimps and such; and then drops a word that poor André he's gettin' old, and what with being lame, and one thing and another, what can you expect, and such blathers!"

"Diable! Do you know that for certain, child?" said André, stopping in the path, and turning round upon her with a face ablaze with anger. "I should like to hear him sayin' that, I should."

"Now, Daddy," she cried with a sudden change of tone, "don't you be getting into one of your tantrums with him. Don't, there's a dear Daddy! I only told you, so you shouldn't be putting too much into his hands. But he'd be the one that would come best out of a quarrel. He's only looking for a chance of doin' you a mischief, it's my belief."

"H'm! 'Poor André a gettin' old,' is he?" grunted her father, somewhat calmed. "Poor André won't be takin' *him* out with him again just yet awhile—that's a certain thing. Paul Nevin would suit me a deal better in many ways, only I' bin keepin' Pierre on out o' charity, his pore father havin' bin a pal o' mine. But he's a deal stronger in the arms, is Paul."

They reached the cottage, which stood on the first piece of level ground on the way to the mainland. There was no other building within sight; and with its bleak boulders and rocks of strangest form, in perpetual death-struggle with the mighty force of ocean, resounding night and day with the rush and tramp of the wild sea-horses, as they flung themselves in despair on their rocky adversary, and with the many voices of the winds, which scarcely ever ceased blowing in that exposed spot, while the weird notes of the sea-fowl floated in the air, like the cries of wandering spirits, the solitary headland seemed indeed as if it might be the world's end.

The cottage consisted of one room, and a lean-to. Nearly half the room was taken up with a big bed, and on the other side were the fire-place and cooking utensils. Opposite the door was a box-sofa, on which Marie had slept since she was a child, and which with a small table, two chairs and a stool, completed the furniture of the room; the only light was that admitted by the doorway, the door nearly always standing open; the lean-to was little more than a dog-kennel, being formed in fact out of a great heap of stones and rubbish, which had been piled up as a protection to the cottage on the windward side; and three dogs and two hens were enjoying themselves in front of the fire.

It was here that Marie had lived, ever since she could remember, in close and contented companionship with her father: whom indeed, especially since he had the fever which crippled him three years before, she had fed, clothed, nursed and guarded with a care almost more motherly than filial.

CHAPTER II.

Marie was leaning over the low wall of a cottage garden in the 'village,' as a clump of small houses at the meeting of four cross-roads was called, and waiting for the kail which she had come to buy for the evening's soup from Mrs. Nevin, who cultivated a little plot of ground with fruit and vegetables. The back-door of the cottage, which opened on the garden, was ajar, and she could hear some one enter from the front with a heavy tread, and call out in a big, jovial voice, "Hullo, Mother, we're in luck to-day! You'd never guess who's goin' to take me on. Lame André, he's goin' to give Pierre the sack, and says he'll have me for a time or two to try. Says I'm strong in the shoulders, and he guesses I can do him more good than Pierre. I should think I easy could too, a pinch-faced whipper-snapper like that!"

"And high time it is too that André had his eyes opened," rejoined Mrs. Nevin; "often it is I've told Marie, as there she stands, that her father don't ought to trust the fish-sellin' too much to that Pierre: a lad as could rob his own grandmother the moment the life was out o' her body."

"Well, Mother, you've often told me about that five franc piece, but nobody can't say that she hadn't given it him before she died, as he said—"

"Given it him, I should think so, when she never would have aught to say to him for all his wheedling ways, and his brother Jacques was her favourite; and poor old lady if she'd a known that Pierre was goin' to be alone with her, when she went off suddint in a fit, I guess she'd a locked up her purse first, I do."

"Well, I must say he turned a queer colour when he heard André say he didn't want him no more: and you should have seen the look he gave him, sort of squintin' out of his eyes at him, when he went away. He ain't a man I would like to meet unawares in a dark lane, if I'd a quarrel with him."

"Hullo, where's Marie?" cried Mrs. Nevin, coming out of the door with the kail ready washed in her hand. "She never took offence at what we was sayin', think you? Folks did say, to be sure, that she and Pierre was sweet on one another some time since. Well, she's gone, any way," and the good woman stood for a few minutes in some dismay, shading her eyes as she looked down the road.

Marie's slight, girlish figure vanished quickly round the turning in the lane, and Mrs. Nevin could not see her pass swiftly by her own cottage, and up the ridge to the old mill. When she reached the point at which the path began to descend to the cove, she paused and looked down. The keen glance and alert figure, poised on guard, suggested the idea of a mother bird watching her nest from afar. The tide had gone out sufficiently for the boats to be drawn up on the eight or ten feet of the shelving shore, which was thus laid bare, and the glowing light of the sunset touched in slanting rays the head and hands of an old man seated on a rock and bending over some fishing tackle, which he seemed to be repairing.

Round the extreme point of the headland, which in a succession of uncouth shapes dropped its rocky outline into the shadowy purple sea, there was visible, hastily clambering across pathless boulders, another man, of a young and lithe figure, and with something in the eager, forward thrust of the head, crouching gait, and swift, deft footing that resembled an animal of the cat species when about to leap on its prey. He was evidently making for the cove, but would have to take the rope path in order to reach it, as there was no way of approaching it on that side except over the sheer face of rock. Marie was further from the rope than he was, but her path was easier. The moment her eye caught sight of the crouching, creeping figure, she sped like a hare down the path, till she reached a point at which she was on a level with the man, at a distance of about a hundred feet. There she stood, uncertain a moment, then turned to meet him. He seemed too intent on his object in the cove to notice her advance, till she was within speaking distance, when she suddenly called to him "Pierre!"

Her clear, defiant tone put the meaning of a whole discourse into the word. The man turned sharply round with an expression of vindictive malice in his fox-like face.

"Well, what do you want?"

"What are you doing here, please?"

"What's that to you, I should like to know?"

"Come nearer, then I can hear what you say."

"I sha'n't come no nearer than I choose."

"Don't be afraid. I ain't a-goin' to hurt you!"

The taunt seemed to have effect, for he leaped hurriedly along over the rocky path, with an angry, threatening air that would have frightened some girls. Marie stood like the rock beneath her.

"Now, Miss, I'll teach you to come interfering with business that's none o' yourn. What, you thought you'd come after me, did yer? because you was tired o' waitin' for me to come after you again, I suppose."

"What is that you're carryin' in your belt?" she demanded calmly. A handle was seen sticking up under his fisherman's blouse. "You believe its safer to climb the rocks with a butcher's knife in your pocket, do you? You think in case of an accident it would make you fall a bit softer, hey?"

"It don't matter to you what I've got in my pocket," he rejoined, but his tone was uncertain. "I brought it to cut the tackle—we've got a job of mending to do."

"I don't know whether you think me an idiot," she replied; "but if you want me to believe your stories you'd better invent 'em more reasonable. Now, Pierre, this is what you've got to do before you leave this spot. You've got to promise me solemnly not to go near Daddy, nor threaten him as you once threatened me on a day you may remember, nor try to intimidate him into takin' you back. Neither down in the cove, nor anything else: neither now, nor at any other time."

Her girlish figure as she stood with one arm clasping the rock beside her, looked a slight enough obstacle in the path.

"Intimidate him! A parcel o' rubbish; who's goin' to intimidate him as you call it. Get out o' the way, and don't go meddling in men's concerns that you know nothing about."

He seized her wrist roughly, and with her precarious footing the position was dangerous enough: but she clung with her other arm like a limpit to the rock. He attempted to dislodge her, when she suddenly turned and fled back on her own accord. He hastened after her, and it was not till he had gone some yards that, putting his hand to his belt, he found that the knife had gone.

"The jade," he muttered, "she did it on purpose," and even with his hatred and malice was mingled a gleam of admiration at the cleverness that had outwitted him. He hurried on towards the cliff path, but the sunset light was already fading into dusk, and he had to choose his footing more carefully. When he reached the point where the rope began, Marie had already gone down and was leaning on the rock beside her father. Had he been near he might have noticed a strange expression in her eyes, as she furtively watched the precipitous descent. The purple shadows now

filled both sky and sea, and the island opposite reared its grand outline solemnly in the twilight depths, as though sitting in eternal judgment on the transient ways of men. The evening star shone softly above the sea. Suddenly a crash, followed by one sharp cry, was heard; then all was still.

"Good God! That's some one fallen down the path—why don't you go and see, child?" but Marie seemed as if she could not stir. Old André slowly dragged himself on to his feet, and took her arm, and they went together. At the foot of the path they found the body of Pierre, dead, his head having struck against a rock.

"He must have missed his footing in the dark," said André, when they had rowed round to the fishing village to carry the news, and the solitary constable had bustled forth, and was endeavouring to collect information about the accident from the only two witnesses, of whom the girl seemed to have lost the power of speech.

"He must have missed his footing in the dark; and then the rope broke with his weight and the clutch he give it. It lies there all loose on the ground."

"It shouldn't have broken," said the constable. "But I always did say we'd ought to have an iron chain down there."

CHAPTER III.

Fifty years had passed, with all their seasons' changes, and the changing life of nature both by land and sea, and had made as little impression on the island as the ceaseless dashing of the waves against its coast. The cliffs, the caves and the sea-beaten boulders were the same; the colours of the bracken on the September hills, and of the sea anemones in their green, pellucid pools, were the same, and the fishermen's path down to the cove was the same. No iron chain had been put there, but the rope had never broken again.

A violent south-west gale was blowing, driving scud and sea-foam before it, while ever new armies of rain-clouds advanced threateningly across the shadowy waters—mighty, moving mists, whose grey-winged squadrons, swift and irresistible, enveloped and almost blotted from sight the little rock-bound island, against which the forces of nature seemed to be for ever spending themselves in vain. From time to time through a gap in the shifting cloud-ranks there shone a sudden dazzling gleam of sunlight on the white crests of the sea-horses far away.

The good French pastor, who struggled to discharge the offices of religion in that impoverished and for the most part socially abandoned spot, had just allowed himself to be persuaded by his wife that it was unnecessary to visit his sick parishioner at the other end of the island that afternoon, when a loud rat-tat was heard in the midst of a shriek of wind, through a grudging inch of open door-way. The hurricane burst into the house while a dripping, breathless girl panted forth her message, that "old Marie" had been suddenly taken bad, and was dying, and wanted but one thing in the world, to see the Vicar.

"I wonder what it is she has got to say," said the Vicar, as his wife buttoned his mackintosh up to his throat. "I always did think there was something strange about old Marie."

A mile of bitter, breathless battling with the storm, then a close cottage-room, with rain-flooded floor, the one small window carefully darkened, and on a pillow in the furthest corner, shaded by heavy bed-curtains, a wrinkled old woman's face, pinched and colourless, on which the hand of Death lay visibly.

But in the eagerness with which she signed to the pastor to come close, and in the keen glance she cast round the room to see that no one else was near, the vigour of life still asserted itself.

"I've somewhat to tell you, Father," she began in a rapid undertone, in the island dialect. "I can't carry it to the grave with me, tho' I've borne it in my conscience all my life. When I was a young lass it happened, when things was different, and the men were rougher than now, and strange deeds might be done from time to time, and never come under the eye o' the law. And you must judge me, Father, by the way things was then, for that was what I had to think of when it all happened.

"There was a young man that used to come a' courting me when I was a lass o' nineteen, and he had a black heart for all he spoke so fair; but I didn't see it at the first, and he was that cliver and insinuat'ing, and had such a way o' talkin', and made so much o' me, I couldn't but listen to him for a while. And he used to go out fishin' wi' my father, and Daddy, he was lame, so Pierre used to take the fish round and do jobs with the boats for him, and this and that, so as Daddy thought a rare lot o' him; and when he seed we was thinkin' o' each other, he sort o' thought he'd leave the business to him and me, and we'd be able to keep him when he got too old to go out any more. And all was goin' right, when one day Pierre says to me, would I go out in the boat and row with him to the village, as he'd got a creel of crabs to take round, so I got in and we rowed: and we went through the Devil's Drift, and he says to me sudden like, 'When we're man and wife, Marie, what'll your father do to keep hisself?' 'Keep hisself,' I said, 'why ain't we agoin' to keep him?' And then he began such a palaver about a man bein' bound to keep his wife but not his father-in-law, and it not bein' fit for three grown people to live in one room, as if my father and mother and his father afore him and all his brothers and sisters hadn't lived in this very room that now I lie a-dyin' in; and I said 'well, as I see it, if you take Daddy's custom off of him, you're bound to keep

Daddy.' And he said that wasn't his way o' lookin' at it, and I went into a sudden anger, and declared I wouldn't have nought to do with a man that could treat my Daddy so, and he was just turning the boat round to go into the Drift, and there came such an evil look in his eyes so as it seemed to go through my bones like a knife, and he said 'You shall repent this one day—you and your daddy too,' and I said not another word and he began to row forwards through the Devil's Drift. And somehow bein' there alone with him in that fearsome place, when a foot's error one side or the other may mean instant death, as he sat facin' me I seemed to see the black heart of him, as I'd never seen it before, and there was summat came over me and made me feel my life was in his hands, in the hands of my enemy.

"Well, I said no more to him, not one word good or bad, the rest of that evenin's row, and I never went out with him no more. But now, Father, this is what I want to say—for my breath is a goin' from me every minute—my Daddy, he was like my child to me, me that have never had a child of my own. I had watched him and cared for him as if I was his mother, 'stead of his bein' my father, and a hurt to him was like a hurt to me: and when that man talked o' leavin' him to fend for himself in his old age, the thought seemed as if it would break my heart: and now I knew he had an enemy, and a pitiless enemy: and I tried to stop him goin' out alone with Pierre, and I wanted him to get rid o' him out of the fishing business altogether, and father he took it up so, when I told him Pierre said he was gettin' too old to manage for hisself, that he up and dismissed him that very day: and then I heard Lisette Nevin and Paul talkin' and savin' how ill Pierre had taken it, and I seemed to see his face with the evil look on it; and something seemed to say in my heart that Daddy was in danger, and I couldn't stop a moment; I went flying to the cove where I knew he'd gone by hisself, and there from the top of the path I saw the other one creeping, closer and closer, like a cruel beast of prey as he was: and I went down and I met him, and he'd a knife in his belt, and of one thing I was certain, he might have been only goin' to frighten Daddy, but he meant him no good."

She lowered her voice, and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Father, do you understand? Here was a man without ruth or pity, and with a sore grudge in his black heart. Was I to trust my Daddy to his hands, and him old and lame?" She paused another moment, then drew the Vicar close to her and whispered in his ear, "I cut the rope. I knew he was followin' me. I let myself halfway down, then clung to the iron hold and cut the rope, with the knife I'd taken from him. It was at the risk of my life I did it. And he followed me, and he fell and was killed. Father, will God punish me for it? It has blighted my life. I have never been like other women. I never was wed, for how could I tend little children with blood on my hands? And the children shrank from me, or I thought they did. But it was for Daddy's sake. He had a happy old age, and he gave me his blessing when he died. Father"—her voice became almost inaudible—"when I stand before God's throne—will God remember—it was for Daddy's sake?"

The failing eye was fixed on the pastor's face, as if it would search his soul for the truth. The fellow-being, on whom she laid so great a burden, for one moment, quailed: then spoke assuring words of the mercy of that God to whom all hearts are open: but already the ebbing strength, too severely strained in the effort of disclosure, was passing away, and the words of comfort were spoken to ears that were closed in death.

Under the South wall of the island burying-ground is a nameless grave: where in the summer days fragments of toys and nose-gays are often to be seen scattered about; for the sunny corner is a favourite play-place, and the voices of children sound there; and they trample with their little feet the grass above Marie's grave, and strew wild flowers on it.

IN A BRETON VILLAGE.

PART I.



In a wild and little-known part of the coast of Brittany, where, in place of sandy beach or cliff, huge granite boulders lie strewn along the shore, like the ruins of some Titan city, and assuming, here the features of some uncouth monster, there the outline of some gigantic fortress, present an aspect of mingled farce and solemnity, and give the whole region the air of some connection with the underworld,—on this coast, and low down among the boulders out to sea, stands a little fishing village.

The granite cottages with their thatched roofs—bits of warm colour among the bare rocks—lie on a tongue of land between the two inlets of the sea, which, when the tides run high, nearly cut them off from the mainland. Opposite the village on the other side of the little inland sea, is a second cluster of piled-up rocks thrust forth, like the fist of a giant, to defy the onslaught of Neptune, and on a plateau near the summit, is the skeleton of a house, built for a summer residence by a Russian Prince, who had a fancy for solitude and sea air, but abandoned for some reason before the interior was completed. Solitary and lifeless, summer and winter, it looks silently down like a wall-eyed ghost over the waste of rocks and sea.

Below the house and close down by the seashore, is a low, thatched cottage, built against the rock, which forms its back wall, and on to which the rough granite blocks of which the cottage is constructed are rudely cemented with earth and clay; the floor also consists of the living rock, not levelled, but just as the foot of the wanderer had trodden it under the winds of heaven for ages before the cottage was built. In this primitive dwelling—which was not, however, more rude than many of the fishermen's cottages along the coast—there lived, a few years since, three persons: old Aimée Kaudren, aged seventy, who with her snow-white cap and sabots, and her keen clear-cut face, might have been seen any day in or near the cottage, cutting the gorse-bushes that grew about the rocks for firing, leading the cow home from her scanty bit of grazing, kneeling on the stone edge of the pond by the well, to wash the clothes, or within doors cooking the soup in the huge cauldron that stood on the granite hearth. A sight indeed it was to see the aged dame bending over the tripod, with the dried gorse blazing beneath it, while its glow illumined the dark, cavernous chimney above, was flashed back from the polished doors of the great oak chest, with its burnished brass handles, and from the spotless copper saucepans hanging on the walls; and brightened the red curtains of the cosy box-bedstead in the corner by the fire.

The second inhabitant of the cottage was Aimée's son, Jean, the fisherman, with his blue blouse, and his swarthy, rough-hewn face, beaten by wind and weather into an odd sort of resemblance to the rocks among which he passed his life—the hardy and primitive life to which he had been born, and to which all his ideas were limited, a life of continual struggle with the elements for the satisfaction of primary needs, and which was directed by the movements of nature, by the tides, the winds, and the rising and setting of the sun and the moon.

And thirdly there was Jean's nephew, Antoine.

The day before Antoine was born, his father had been drowned in a storm which had wrecked many of the fishing-boats along the coast, and his mother, from the shock of the news, gave premature birth to her babe, and died a few hours after. His grandmother had brought up the child, and his silent, rough-handed uncle had adopted him, and worked for him, as if he were his own. So the little Antoine, with his blond head, and his little bare feet, grew up in the rock-hewn cottage, like a bright gorse-flower among the boulders, and spent an untaught childhood, pattering about the granite floor, or clambering over the rough rocks, and dabbling in the salt water, where he would watch the beautiful green anemones, that had so many fingers but no hands, and which he never touched, because, if he did, they spoilt themselves directly, packing their fingers up very quickly, so that they went into nowhere: or the prawns, that he always thought were the spirits of the other fish, for they looked as if they were made of nothing, and they lay so still under a stone, as if they were not there, and then darted so quickly across the pool that you could not see them go.

Antoine knew a great deal about the spirits: how there were evil ones, such as that which dwelt in the great mushroom stone out yonder to sea, which was very powerful and wicked, so that the stone, being in fear, always trembled, yet could not fall, because the evil spirit would not let it: and then there were others which haunted the little valley beyond Esquinel Point, where you must not go after dark, for the spirits took the form of Little Men, who had the power to send astray the wits of any that met them. Antoine feared those spirits more than any of the others: they were so cunning and wanted to do you harm on purpose: and when he went with his grandmother to pray in the little chapel on the shore, he used to trot away from her side, as she knelt on her chair with clasped hands and devoutly murmuring lips; and he would wander over the rugged stone floor, till he found the niche in the wall where St. Nicholas stood, wearing a blue cloak with a pink border, and having such lovely pink cheeks: the kind St. Nicholas that took care of little children, and that had three little boys without any clothes on always with him, in the kind of little boat he stood in. And Antoine would pray a childish prayer to St. Nicholas to protect him from the evil spirits of the valley.

Antoine grew up very tall and strong. He accompanied Jean on his fishing expeditions from the time he was twelve years old, and his uncle used to say that he was of more use than many a grown man. He knew every rock and even-current along that dangerous coast: he could trim the boat to the wind through narrow channels in weather in which Jean would hardly venture to do it himself: and the way in which the fish took his bait made Jean sometimes cross himself, as he counted over the shining boat-load of bream and cod, and mutter in his guttural Breton speech, "'Tis the blessed St. Yvon aids him." Everybody liked him in the village, and he took a kind of lead among the other lads, but, whether it was the grave gaze of his blue eyes, or his earnest, outright speech, or some other quality about him less easy to define, they all had the same kind of feeling in regard to him that his uncle had. He was different from themselves. There were indeed some among them in whom this acknowledged superiority inspired envy and ill-will, and one in particular, a lad that went lame with a club foot, but who had a beautiful countenance, with dark, glowing eyes and finely-cut features, never lost an opportunity of saying an ill word of, or doing an ill turn to Antoine. Geoffroi Le Cocq seemed never far off, wherever Antoine might be. He would lounge in the doorway of the café, watching for him, and sing a mocking song as he passed down the road. He would mimic his sayings among the other lads, who were not, however, very ready to join in deriding him. And once he contrived to poison the Kaudrens' bait, just when weather and season were at their best for fishing, so that Antoine brought not a single fish home. Jean, with the quick-blazing anger of his race, declared that if he could find the man who had done it, he would "break his skull." But Antoine, though he knew well enough who had done it, held his peace. Geoffroi was quicker of speech than Antoine, and on the Sunday, when the whole

village trooped out of the little chapel after mass, and streamed down the winding village road, the women in their white coiffes and black shawls, and the men in their round Breton hats with buckles and streaming ribbons, while knots began to collect about the doors of the village cafés, and laughter, gossip and the sound of the fiddle arose on the sunny air, Geoffroi would gather a circle round him to hear his quips and odd stories, and to join in the fun that he would mercilessly make of others less quick than himself at repartee. It was extraordinary on these occasions how Geoffroi, like a spider in his web on the watch for a fly, would contrive to draw Antoine into his circle, sometimes as though it were merely to show off his cleverness before him, at other times adroitly lighting on some quaint habit or saying of Antoine's, holding it up to ridicule, now in one light, now in another, with a versatility that would have made his fortune as a comedian, and returning to the charge again and again, in the hope, as it seemed, of provoking Antoine's seldom-stirred anger: but in this entirely failing, for Antoine would generally join heartily in the laugh himself. Only once did a convulsion of anger seize him, and he strode forward in the throng and gave Geoffroi the lie to his face, when the latter had said that Marie Pierrés kissed him in the Valley of Dwarfs, the evening before. He knew that Geoffroi only said it to spite him; for Marie—the daughter of Jean's partner—was his fiancée, and was as true as gold: but the image and crush that beautiful face of Geoffroi's. He clenched his fist and dared him to repeat the words. Geoffroi would only reply, in his venomous way, "Come to-night to the Valley and see if I lie." And the same instant the keen, strident voice was silenced by one straight blow from Antoine's fist.

In the confused clamour of harsh Breton speech that arose, as neighbours rushed to separate the two and friends took one side or the other, Antoine strode away with a brain on fire and a mind intent on one object—to prove the lie at once.

To go to the Valley of Dwarfs in order to spy on Marie and Geoffroi was impossible to him. But he marched straight off to Marie's cottage. He knew she would deny the charge, and her word was as good as the Blessed Gospel: but he longed to hear the denial from her lips. He pictured her as she would look when she spoke: the hurt, innocent expression of her candid eyes: her rosy cheeks flushing a deeper red under her demure snow-white cap: her child-like lips uttering earnest and indignant protestation. When he reached the cottage, he found the door locked; no one was about; he leaned his elbows on the low, stone wall in front and waited.

Presently clattering sabots were heard coming down the road, and he perceived old Jeanne Le Gall trudging along, her back nearly bent double under a large bundle of dried sea-weed. She and her goat lived in the low, rubble-built hovel, that adjoined the Pierrés' cottage, and from her lonely, eccentric habits, and uncanny appearance, she had the reputation of being a sorceress. Antoine called to her to know where Marie was.

"Gone to the widow Conan's," mumbled the old woman, her strange eyes gleaming under the sprays of sea-weed, "she and her father and mother, all of them."

She deposited her load, and hobbled off again, fixing her eyes on Antoine as she turned away, but saying nothing more.

Antoine strolled a little down the lane, seated himself on the steps of the cross at the corner, and waited—evening was drawing on and they were sure to return before dark.

Presently the cluck, cluck of the sabots was heard again, and old Jeanne slowly approached him from behind. She said something in her toothless, mumbling way, and held out a crumpled bit of paper in her shaking hand. He opened it and read, scrawled as if in haste, in ill-spelt Breton:

"I go to a baptism at St. Jean-du-Pied, and cannot return before sun-down. Meet me at the cross on the hill-side at six o'clock, as I fear to pass through the valley alone in the dark. Marie."

As he studied the writing, the old woman's mumblings became more articulate. She was saying, "'Twas the child Conan should have brought it an hour ago. But he is ever good-for-nothing, and forgot it."

Antoine looked at the sun, which was already westering, and perceived that he must set out to meet Marie in half-an-hour. He got up and walked slowly towards the sandy shore of the little inlet, wide and wet at low tide, on the other side of which lay his own home. He walked slowly, but he felt as if he were hurrying at a headlong pace. The thought kept going round and round in his brain like a little torturing wheel, which nothing would stop, that after all Marie *was* going to the Dwarf's Valley this evening, just as Geoffroi had said. Geoffroi's words were still sounding in his ears, and his right hand was clenched, as he had clenched it when the whirlwind of anger first convulsed him.

He entered his own cottage, hardly knowing what he did.

Old Aimée was bending over the cauldron, cutting up cabbage for the soup.

"Good-bye, Grandmother," he said. "I am going to the Dwarf's Valley."

Aimée looked up at him out of her keen old eyes.

"And why are you going there in the dark?" she said, "'Tis an evil meeting place after the sun has set."

"Why do you say meeting place, Grandmother Whom do you think I am going to meet there?"

"The blessed Saints protect you," she replied, "less you should meet Whom you would not."

Antoine strode out again, without saying more. He fancied he was in the Valley of Dwarfs already, about to meet Marie. He saw the weird, gnarled trunks of trees on either hand, that grew among—sometimes writhed around—the huge fantastic boulders: the dark cave-like recesses, formed strangely between and under them where the dwarfs lay hidden to emerge at dusk: the sides of the ravine towering up stern and gloomy on either hand: and high above all against the sky, the grey stone cross at which he was to meet Marie. He saw it all as if he were there, and the ground beneath him, as he tramped on, seemed unreal. Twilight was already falling over the rocks and the grey sea: there were no lights in the village, except such as shone here and there in a cottage window: the distant roar of the sea was heard, as it dashed over a long line of rocks two or three miles out, but there was hardly any other sound: the place indeed seemed God-abandoned, like some long-forgotten strand of a dead world, with the skeleton house on the rock above for its forsaken citadel.

It was already dark in the ravine when Antoine arrived there, and anyone not knowing how instinctive is the feeling for the ways of his mother earth in a son of the soil, would have thought his straightforward stride, in such a chaos of rocks and pitfalls, reckless, till they observed with what certainty each step was taken where alone it was possible and safe. He was making his way through the valley to the cross above, where the light still lingered, and it yet wanted some fifteen minutes to the time of *rendez-vous*, when he suddenly stopped in a listening attitude; he had reached a part of the valley to which superstition had attached the most dangerous character. A particular rock called "The Black Stone," which towered over him on the left, and slightly bending towards the centre of the valley, seemed like some threatening monster about to swoop upon the traveller, was especially regarded as the haunt of evil spirits. It was in this direction that he now heard a slight sound, which his practised ear discerned at once as not being one of the sounds of nature. Immediately afterwards the shadow of the rock beside him seemed to move and enlarge, and out of it there sprang the figure of a man, and stood straight in Antoine's path. Antoine's whole frame became rigid, like that of a beast of prey on the point of springing, even before the shadow revealed its limping foot.

Geoffroi was the first to speak.

"You gave me the lie this afternoon. Take it back now and see what you think of the taste of it. Would you like to see Marie?"

"What are you saying? What is it to you when I see Marie?"

"It is this—that I have arranged a nice little meeting for you. Hein? Are you not obliged to me?"

Antoine's voice sounded hollow and muffled as he replied, "Stand out of the path. You have nought to do between her and me."

"You think so? Then you shall learn what I have to do. You think you are going to meet her at the cross at six o'clock. But you will not, you will meet her sooner than that. It was I that sent you that message, and I have advanced the time by half an hour. Am I not kind?"

Antoine's hand was on his collar like an iron vice.

"What have you done with her? Where is she?"

Geoffroi writhed himself free with movements lithe like those of a panther. "Will you take back the lie," he said, "or will you see the proof with your own eyes?"

He was turning with a mocking sign to Antoine to follow, when from the left of the rock beside which they stood, there darted forward the white-coiffed figure of a girl, who with extended arms and agonized face, rushed up to Geoffroi, crying, "Take me away—I have seen Them! Take me away."

She clung to Geoffroi's arm, and screamed when Antoine would have touched her. Antoine stood for a moment as if turned to stone. Marie seemed half fainting and clung hysterically to Geoffroi, apparently hardly conscious of what she was doing. Geoffroi took her in his arms and kissed her. The act was so loathsome in its deliberate effrontery, that Antoine felt as if he was merely crushing a serpent when he struck him to the ground and tore Marie from his hold. But he was dealing with something which he did not understand for Marie, finding herself in his grasp, opened her eyes on his face with a look of speechless terror, and breaking from him, fled down the ravine, springing from rock to rock with the security of recklessness.

Antoine followed her, stumbling through the darkness, but his speed was no match for the madness of fear, and his steps were still to be heard crashing through the furze bushes and loose stones, when the white coiffe had flitted, like some bird of night, round the projecting boulders of the sea-coast, and disappeared.

PART II.

Old Jeanne Le Gall was leaning on her stick in her solitary way beside the arched wellhead at the top of the lane, when she heard flying steps along the pathway of rock that bordered the sea, and peered through the twilight with her cunning old eyes, alert for something uncanny, or

perchance out of which she could make some profit for herself. Already that day, she had earned a sou by carrying a bit of a letter, and telling one or two little lies. As the steps came nearer, a kind of moaning and sobbing was heard, and the old woman, muttering to herself—"It is the voice of Marie. What has the devil's imp been doing to her?"—hobbled as fast as she could to the turning that led to the sea, and just as the flying figure appeared, put out her skinny hand to arrest it. There was a sudden scream, a fall, and Marie lay in the road, like one dead.

The cry brought to their doors, one after another, the occupants of the neighbouring cottages; and as the dark-shawled, free-stepping Breton women gathered round, for the clattering of sabots and of tongues, it might have been a group of black sea-fowl clamouring over some 'trouvaille' of the sea, thrown up among their rocks.

They raised her painfully, with kind but ungentle hands, wept and called on the saints, availing little in any way, till the heavy tramp of a fisherman's nailed boots was heard on the rocks, and Antoine thrust the throng aside, and bending over, took her up in his arms, as a mother might her child, and without a word bore her along the road towards her home.

But he had scarcely placed her on the settle beside the bed, when her eyes opened, and as they rested on him, again the look of terror came into them: she flung herself away from him with a scream, and sobbing and uttering strange sounds of fear and aversion, was hardly to be held by the other women.

"She has lost her wits!" they cried. "Our Blessed Lady help her!"

White with fear themselves, and half believing it to be some supernatural visitation, they clung round her, supporting her till the fit had passed, and she lay back on the bed exhausted and half unconscious: her fresh, young lips drawn with an unnatural expression of suffering, and her frank, blue eyes heavy and lifeless. Antoine was turned out of the cottage, lest the sight of him should excite her again, and he marched away across the low rocks to his own home on the solitary foreland. As he passed the chapel on the shore, he saw through the open door, a single taper burning before the shrine of St. Nicholas, and just serving to show the gloom and emptiness of the place; and it seemed to him as though the Saints had deserted it.

He never saw Marie again. Once during her illness, the kind, clever old Aimée, wrung by the sight of her boy's haggard face, as he went to and fro about the boats, without food or sleep, took her way to the Pierrés' cottage, with the present of a fine fresh "dorade" for the invalid; and when she had stood for a minute by the bedside leaning on her stick, and looking on the face of the half-unconscious girl, she began with her natty old hand to pat Marie's shoulder, and with coaxing words to get her to say that she would see Antoine. But at the first sound of the name, the limp figure started up from the pillows, and from the innocent, childish lips came a stream of strange, eager speech, as she poured forth her conviction, like a cherished secret, that Antoine was possessed of the Evil One: for Jeanne, the sorceress, had told her so: that he was one of *Them*, and by night in the valley you could see him in his own shape. Then she grew more wild, crying out that Antoine would kill her: that he had bewitched her, and she must die.

Anyone unaware of the hold which superstition has over the Breton mind, would perhaps hardly believe that the women stood round awe-struck at this revelation, seeing nothing improbable in it. In spite of her dangerous state of excitement, they eagerly pressed her with questions as to what she had seen, and what Jeanne had said, but she had become too incoherent to satisfy them, and only flung herself wildly about, crying, "Let me go—he will kill me—let me go:" till she suddenly sank down motionless on the pillow, was silent for a few moments, and then began to murmur over and over in an awe-struck, eager whisper, "Go to the Black Stone this night, and you shall see. Go to the Black Stone this night, and you shall see."

While the old cronies shook their heads, muttering that it was true, there had always been something uncanny about Antoine: and see the way he would draw the fish into his net, against their own better sense: it was plain there was something in Antoine they dared not resist:—old Aimée hobbled out with her stick and sabots, without saying a word, went round to the open door of the next cottage, and peered round the rough wooden partition that screened off the inner half of the room. On a settle beside the hearth, where a cauldron was boiling, sat Jeanne, the sorceress, with her absorbed, concentrated air, as though her thoughts were fixed on something which she could communicate to no one: she turned her strange, bright eyes on the figure in the entrance, without change of expression, and waited for Aimée to speak.

Aimée's face was like a cut diamond, so keen and bright was it, as leaning on her stick, which she struck on the floor from time to time with the emphasis of her speech, she said in her shrill Breton tones:—

"Mademoiselle Jeanne, I have come to ask of you what evil lie it is that you have told to the child Marie, that lies on her death-bed yonder. Come. You have been bribed by Geoffroi, that I know, and a son will purchase snuff, and for that you will sell your soul. Good—It is for you to do what you will with your own affairs: but when you cause an injury to my belle-fille, so that she becomes like a mad woman and dies, I come to ask you for an account of what you have done, Mademoiselle: that you may undo what you have done, while there is yet time, Mademoiselle."

Jeanne's thin, stern lips trembled, almost as if in fear, as she listened to Aimée. She turned her shaking head slowly towards her, then fixed her deep eyes on hers, and said:

"I have warned your belle-fille, that she may be saved. It was my love for her. Let her have

nought to do with Them that dwell in the rocks and the trunks of the great trees."

Old Aimée shook her stick on the floor with rage.

"Impious and wicked woman! Confess, I say, or I will tell the good curé, who knows your tricks, and he will not give you absolution; and then the Evil Ones will have their way with you yourself, for what shall save you from them?"

The thin lips in the strange face trembled more. "The old sorceress dwells alone, abandoned of all," she murmured. "If she take not a sou when one or another will give it her, how shall she contrive to live?"

"What is it," demanded Aimée, with increasing shrillness, "that you have told the child Marie about my grandson?"

A look of cunning suddenly drove away the expression of conscious guilt in Jeanne's face. She dropped her eyes on the floor, mumbled inarticulately a moment, and then said shiftily, "You have perhaps a few sous in your pocket, Madame, to show good-will to the sorceress; for without good-will she cannot tell you what you seek to know."

Aimée's keen eyes flashed, as drawing forth two sous from her pocket, she said in a tone of incisive contempt, "You shall have these, Mademoiselle, but not till you have told me the whole truth, as you would to the curé at confession. Come then—say."

The sorceress began with shuffling tones and glances, which grew more sure as she went on:

"I watched for the little one returning on the afternoon of Sunday—*he* told me to do so. I was to give her the message that Antoine desired to meet with her at the entrance of the Dwarf's Valley: I had but to give the message: it was not my fault. I am but a poor old woman that does the bidding of others."

"Well, well," said Aimée, impatiently, "what else did you tell her?"

Jeanne looked at her interlocutor again, and a strange expression grew in her eyes.

"It is Jeanne that knows the Evil Ones, that knows their shape and their speech. She knows them when they walk among men, and she knows them in their homes in the dark valley."

"Chut, chut," cried Aimée, the more irritably that her maternal feelings had to overcome her natural inclination to superstition. "It is only one thing you have to tell—how did you frighten Marie so that she is ready to go out of her wits at the sight of Antoine?"

"Nay, it was Geoffroi that frightened her, as they went up the ravine together. I had but told her not to go alone, for that They were abroad that night." The old woman broke into a curious chuckle. "How she shivered, like a chicken in the wind! H'ch, h'ch! Then *he* took hold of her arm and led her away, for I had told her *he* was a safe protector against the spirits, not like some that wear the face of man and go up and down in the village, saying that the people should not believe in Jeanne the sorceress, for that she tells that which is untrue—while they themselves have dealings such as none can know with the Evil Ones."

Aimée looked at her keenly for some moments with a curious expression on her tightly-folded lips.

"You would have me believe that Marie went into the ravine when she knew the spirits were about, and went on the arm of Geoffroi?"

"I tell you, Grandmère, that she did so. It was Jeanne that compelled her. For Jeanne knows when a man is in league with Them, and she said to Marie, 'Thou wilt wed Antoine, but thou knowest not what he is; go to the Black Stone to-night, and thou shalt see.' H'ch! Jeanne knows nothing, does she? But Marie went, for she knew that Jeanne was wise. And what she saw, she saw."

It was strange to see the conflict between superstition and natural affection in the face of Aimée. Her thoughts seemed to be rapidly scanning the past, and there was fear as well as anger in her look. Could it be that this child, flung into her arms, as it were, from the shipwreck, born before his time of sorrow, the very offspring of death,—that had always lived apart from the other lads, with strange, quiet ways of his own—that had astonished her by his wise sayings as a child—and that, growing up had brought unnatural prosperity to the home, as though some higher hand were upon him—could it be that there was something in him more than of this earth? Her hand trembled so that it shook the stick on which she leant: she made one or two attempts to speak, then dropped the two halfpence on the table, as if they burnt her, and went out.

When Marie was a little better, they sent her away to her married sister's at Cherbourg, for the doctor said that the only chance of recovering her balance of mind, lay in removing her from everything that would remind her of her fright, or of Antoine. News travels slowly in those parts, especially among the poor and illiterate, and for months Antoine heard nothing of her, except for an occasional message brought by some chance traveller from Cherbourg, to the effect that she was still ill: while his own troubles at home grew and gathered as time went on. For since that night in the ravine everything seemed to have gone wrong. A superstitious fear had associated itself with the idea of Antoine in the minds of the other villagers. The Kaudrens' cottage was more and more avoided, and the fishing business was injured, for people chose rather to buy their fish of those of whom no evil things were hinted. The Pierrés themselves were infected with

this feeling, and Marie's father would go partner with Jean no longer. Jean could not support a fishing smack by himself, and gave up the distant voyages, confining himself to the long-shore fishing, and disposing of his oysters, crayfish and prawns as best he could in the more remote villages. Meanwhile, old Aimée, getting older and more feeble, would sit knitting in the cottage by a cheerless hearth, and as the supply of potatoes, chestnuts and black bread grew scantier and scantier, would furtively watch Antoine, with anxious, awe-struck glances, and then would sometimes cross herself, and wipe a tear away unseen.

It was on a wild, stormy morning of January, that a letter at length arrived for Antoine from Cherbourg. The news was blurted out with tactless plainness. 'La pauvre petite' was no more. In proportion as she grew calmer in mind, it appeared, Marie had grown weaker in body: and a cold she had contracted soon after her arrival in Cherbourg, had settled on her lungs, which were always delicate. For weeks she had not risen from her bed, but had gradually pined away. There was a message for Antoine. "Tell him," she had said, in one of her last intervals of consciousness, "that I cannot bear to think of how I acted towards him. Tell him I did not know what I was doing. Ask him to come—to come quick. For I cannot die in peace, unless he forgives me." But she had died before the message could be sent.

Antoine read the letter, crushed it in his great, trembling hand, and looked round him as though searching blankly for the hostile power, that had thus entangled, baffled and overthrown him. That voice from the grave seemed to call on him to claim again the rights that had been snatched from him. She was his, and he would see her face once more: he would go to Cherbourg, and look on her dead face, that he might know it, for she was his.

He would be in time, if he caught the night train (the funeral was the following day). He would have to walk to St. Jean-du-Pied, the next village along the coast, from which a *diligence* started in the afternoon to the nearest railway station. Old Aimée did up a little packet of necessaries for him, and borrowed money for the journey, saying nothing as she watched his face, full of the inarticulate suffering of the untaught. Antoine scarcely said farewell, as he walked straight out of the cottage door towards the sea, to take the shortest route to St. Jean-du-Pied by the coast. The rocks were white from the sea-foam, as if with driven snow, and the black sea was lashed to madness by a gale from the North East. The bitter wind tore across the bleak country-side, scourging every rock, tree and living thing that attempted to resist it, like the desolation of God descending in judgment on the land. Wild, torn clouds chased each other across the sky, and the deep roar of the sea among the rocks could be heard far inland.

Antoine's thoughts meanwhile were whirling tumultuously round and round one object—an object that had hovered fitfully before his mind for many weeks—pressing closer and closer on it, till at length with triumphant realization, they seized on it and made it the imperious necessity of his will.

Ever since the night in the ravine, Antoine had been living in a strange world: he had not known himself: his hand had seemed against every man's, and every man's hand against his. He never went to mass, for he felt that the good God had abandoned him.

Now he suddenly realised what it was he needed—the just punishment of Geoffroi. The path of life would be straight again, and God on His Throne in heaven, when Justice had been vindicated, and he had visited his crime on the evildoer. That he must do it himself, was plain to him.

He marched on, possessed with a feeling that it was Geoffroi whom he was going to seek, towards the projecting foreland that shut in the village on the east. He was drenched by the waves, as they dashed madly against the walls of rock, and to get round the boulders under such circumstances was a dangerous task even for a skilled climber: but Antoine seemed borne forward by a force stronger than himself, and went on without pause, or doubt, till in a small inlet on the other side of the foreland, he discerned a figure clinging to a narrow ledge of rock, usually out of reach of the tide, but towards which the mighty waves were now rolling up more and more threateningly each moment. There was no mistaking the lithe, cringing movements, the particular turn of the head looking backward over the shoulder in terror at the menacing waters: even if Antoine had not known beforehand that he must find Geoffroi on that path, and that he had come to meet him.

Geoffroi's position was (for him) extremely dangerous. A bold climber might have extricated himself; but for a lame man to reach safety across the sea-scourged rocks was almost impossible. Could he hold on long enough and the sea rose no higher, he might be saved: but there would yet be an hour before the turn of the tide, and already the waves were racing over the ledge on which he stood. Antoine sprang over the intervening rocks, scrambling and wading through the water, as if not seeing what he did, till he set foot on the ledge, and stood face to face with his enemy.

Geoffroi's face was white with fear. He knew his hour was come. In the mighty strife of the elements, within an inch of death on every side, he was at Antoine's mercy.

"Don't kill me," he cried abjectly. "Have mercy, for the love of God."

Antoine grasped the writhing creature by the shoulder. The white face of Marie rose up before him. Geoffroi shrieked. A huge, heaving billow advanced, swept round the feet of both and sank boiling in the gulf beneath. The next that came would leave neither of them there. Antoine stood with his hand on Geoffroi's shoulder, as if he would crush it. Somewhat higher, but within reach, was a narrow projection in the rock, to which there was room for one to cling, and only for one:

and Geoffroi with his lame foot could not reach it alone.

"Let me go," he shrieked. "I will confess all: but save me, save me!"

Suddenly another wave of feeling surged up in the soul of Antoine. He seemed to see the cross on the hill side, as it stood in light that evening when he was to have met Marie there. He saw the good God on the cross again, as he used to see Him in the chapel. He had a strange, deep feeling that he was God, or that God was he. He seemed to be on that cross himself. The great, green wave towered above them twenty feet in air. He grasped Geoffroi by both shoulders, and flung him up to the ledge above with a kind of scorn. The next moment the rolling sea descended. Antoine clung with all his force to the rock, but he knew that he should never see the light again.

So was he drawn out into the great deep, in whose arms his father lay: and the fisher-folk, when they knew it, looked for no sign of him more, for they said he had gone back to the sea, from whence he came. For, though they never knew the true story of his death, they felt that a spirit of a different mould from theirs had passed from among them in his own way.



TWICE A CHILD.



Halfway up the mountain-side, overlooking a ravine, through which a streamlet flowed to the lake, stood a woodman's cottage. In the room on which the front door opened were two persons—an infant in a wooden cradle, in the corner between the fire-place and the window; and, seated on a stool in the flood of sunlight that streamed through the doorway, an old man. His lips were moving slightly, and his face had the look of one whose thoughts were far away. On the patch of floor in front of him lay cross-bars of sunlight, which flowed in through the casement window. The sky overhead was cloudless, while the murky belt on the horizon was not visible from the cottage door. In the windless calm no leaf seemed to stir in the forest around. The cottage clock in the corner ticked the passing moments; the wild cry of the "curry fowl" was heard now and again from the lake; there was no other sound in the summer afternoon, and the deep heart of nature seemed at rest.

The old man's eyes rested on the bars of sunlight, but he saw another scene. On his face, in which the simplicity of childhood seemed to have reappeared, was a knowing, amused look, expressing infinite relish of some inward thought, the simple essence of mischief. Bars of sunlight, just like those, used to lie on the schoolroom floor when he was a little boy, and was sent to Dame Gartney's school to be kept out of harm's way, and to learn what he might. He saw himself, an urchin of five or six years, seated on a stool beside the Dame's great arm-chair. She was slowly, with dim eyes, threading a needle for the tiny maiden standing before her, clutching in her hot little hand the unhemmed duster on which she was to learn to sew. The thread approached the needle's eye; it was nearly in, when the arm-chair gave a very little shake, apparently of its own accord; the old lady missed her aim, and the needle and the thread were as far apart as ever, while the small imp sitting quiet at her side was unsuspected. Not once nor twice only was this little game successfully played. It used to enliven the hot, sleepy afternoon, while the bars of light were crawling slowly—oh! so slowly—across the floor. He knew school would be over when the outer edge of sunlight touched the corner of the box-bed against the wall, where the little girl that lived there and called the dame "Granny" was put to sleep of a night.

His school experience was short, consisting, indeed, of but six bright summer weeks, after which it had become his business to mind the baby, while his mother went out to work. But the most vivid of the impressions of his childhood were connected with that brief school career. Distinct above the rest stood out the memory of one afternoon, when sitting on his low stool he had seen dark smudges of shadow come straying, curling, whirling across the squares of sunlight; when shouts had arisen in the yard, and just as the dame had made Effie May hold out her hand for dropping her thimble the third time, the back-door was burst open by Ebenezer, the milkman, who cried out that the Dame's cow-house was on fire. He could see the old lady now, with the child's shrinking fingers firmly gripped in hers, her horny old hand arrested in the act of descending on the little pink palm (which escaped scot-free in the confusion) while she gazed for a moment, open-mouthed, at the speaker, as though she had come to a word which *she* couldn't spell, then jumped up with surprising quickness and hobbled across the floor without her stick, the point of her mob-cap nodding to every part of the room, while she moved the whole of herself first to one side and then to the other as she walked, like one of the geese waddling across the common.

"Goo back and mind yerr book!" cried the old lady to the sharp-eyed little boy, who was peeping

round her skirts. But he did not go back. Who could, when they saw those tongues of flame shooting up, and the volumes of smoke darkening the summer sky, as the wooden shed and the palings near it caught and smoked and crackled, and heard the cries of men and boys shouting for water and more water, which old Jack Foster, and idiot Tom, and some women, with baskets hastily deposited by the roadside, and even boys not much bigger than himself, were toiling to bring as fast as possible in pails from the brook, before the flames should spread to the row of cottages so perilously near? No earthly power could have kept the mite out of the fray. Before the old dame knew where he was, his little hands were clenched round the handle of a heavy iron pail, and he was struggling up the yard to where the men were tearing down the connecting fences, in a desperate endeavour to stay the onrush, of the flames. To and fro, to and fro, the child toiled, begrimed by falling blacks, scorched by the blaze, his whole mind intent on one thing—to stop the burning of that charred and tottering mass.

It was done at last, and the cottages were saved. The rescue party dispersed, and the dirty, tired boy strayed slowly homeward down the village street. He could see himself now arriving soot-covered, and well-nigh speechless with fatigue, at his mother's door, could hear the cries and exclamations that arose at the sight of him, could feel the tender hands that removed the clothes from his hot little body, and washed him, and put him to bed. It took him several days to recover from the fever into which he had put himself, and it was then he had begun to mind the baby instead of going to school. Praise was liberally bestowed in the county paper on Mr. Ebenezer Rooke and his assistants, who by their energy and forethought had saved the village from destruction but no one had noticed the efforts of the tiny child, working beyond his strength; and, indeed, he himself had had no idea of being noticed.

As he sat now on the stool in the sunny doorway, and looked up the mountain-valley, to which he had been brought in his declining years to share his married daughter's home, the detail in that tragedy of his childhood, which pictured itself in his mind's eye more clearly than any other, was the shadow of the spreading, coiling puffs of smoke, which had first caught his childish attention, blurring the bars of sunlight on the floor of the Dame's kitchen. Perhaps it was on account of the likeness to the pattern now made by the sun, as it shone through the casement between him and the baby's cradle. For the gentle, domestic old man was often now, as in his docile childhood, charged to "mind the baby," and one of the quiet pleasures of his latter days was the sight of the little floweret, that grew so sweetly beside his sere and withered life. An uncultured sense of beauty within him was appealed to by the rounded limbs, the silent, dimpled laugh, the tottering feet feeling their unknown way, and all the sweet curves and softnesses, the innocent surprises and *naïve* desires, which made up for him the image of "the baby." He would have said she was "prutty," implying much by the word.

As he gazed at his precious charge, and watched the sunlight pattern slowly but surely creeping towards the foot of the cradle, he had an odd feeling that school would soon be over. A moment after he rubbed his eyes and looked again. Was it true, or was he dreaming? Were those shadowy whirls of smoke, dimming the sunshine, a vision of the past, or did he actually see them before him, as of old, coiling about and around the bars of light on the floor? It was certainly there, the shadow of smoke, and came he could not tell whence; for in all the unpeopled valley there were, of human beings, as far as he knew at that moment, only himself and the baby. To his mind, so full of the past, it seemed the herald of another danger.

He raised himself with difficulty from his stool, and moved his stiff limbs to the threshold. As he did so, he noticed that the smoke was within the room as well as without; it was festooning about the baby's cradle, it was filling the place, there was scarcely air to breathe. His first idea, as he smelt the soot, and saw the blacks showering on the hearth, was that the chimney was on fire. He went straight to the baby in its cradle, and, his limbs forgetting their stiffness, lifted her in his arms to carry her to a place of safety; when that was done he would take off the embers from the grate, and sprinkle salt on the hearth to quench the fire.

Not till he reached the door did he notice a sound that filled the valley. A strange, high-pitched note, like a hundred curry-fowl crying at once—a wail, as of spirits in hell. Now from one direction, now from another; now rising, now falling, the weird, unearthly shriek seemed everywhere at once, increasing each moment in force and shrillness. As the old man, holding the baby close to him, looked up and listened, fear struck his lips with a sudden trembling. Opposite to him he saw a strange sight. Halfway up the mountain, on the other side of the valley, not a leaf on the trees was stirring: the lower slopes lay basking in the sunshine, and the shadows of fleeting clouds only added to the peaceful beauty of the scene; while the trees above were raging bacchanals, whirling, swaying, tossing their long arms in futile agony, as though possessed by some unseen demoniacal power.

In a moment the old man knew what had befallen him. The bewitched smoke, the shrieking spirits of the air, the motionless valley, and the maddened trees, of all these he had heard before, for he had listened to tales of the tornado in the valley, and knew what it meant to the defenceless dwellers on the upper slopes. The skirts of the fury were touching him even now; a sudden gust swept by; to draw breath for the moment was impossible, and his unsteady balance would soon have been overthrown; he was forced to cling to the doorpost, still holding the baby close. But the quiet, comprehending expression never left his face; he knew what was to be done, and he meant to do it; there might be time.

He set down the baby in the cradle, took off his coat, grasped a spade in his shaking hand, and hobbled across the patch of open ground to a spot as far distant as possible both from the cottage

and from the borders of the wood; the maddened wind was wailing itself away in the distance, and happily for a few minutes there was a lull in the air. He could hear the baby crying, left alone in the cottage. He never looked off from his work, but went on digging a hole in the form of a little grave. The surface of the ground was hard, and the old man was short-winded; he could hardly gather enough force to drive the spade in. Before long, however, a few inches of the upper crust were removed from a space about three feet in length. The digging in the softer earth would now be easier and more rapid. As he worked on, a few heavy drops of rain fell. He looked up and saw the whole sky, lately full of sunlight, a mass of driving, ink-black clouds, while the shriek of the hurricane was heard again in the distance. The baby's cry was drowned by it. The hole was as yet only half a foot deep. At the next thrust the spade struck on a slanting ledge of slaty rock. No further progress could be made there; the trench must be dug in a different direction. Once more the old man, panting heavily, drove the spade into the hard ground, and in two or three minutes had so far altered the position of the hole that the rock was avoided. The gale was increasing every moment, and at times he could hardly keep his feet.

Suddenly, through the roar of the wind, was heard another sound, a rattling and rushing, as of loosened stones and of earth. All his senses on the alert, the old man glanced swiftly up, and saw a row of four tall fir trees, which stood out like sentinels, on a ridge of the mountain, in the very path of the storm, turn over like nine-pins, one after the other, and tearing up the soil with their roots, slip down the mountain-side, dragging with them an avalanche of earth. His eye darted to the cottage with a sudden fear. Even as he looked, the wind was lifting some of the slates on the roof, rattling them, loosening them, and in a few moments would scatter them around like chaff, chaff that would bring death to any on whom it should chance to light. With an odd, calculating look, the old man turned again to his digging, and, breathless as before, shovelled out the earth from the hole, with a speed of which his stiff and feeble frame would have been thought incapable; while now and again, without ceasing his work, he darted a backward glance at the doomed cottage. It ought to stand until the hole was dug; and at least in the digging there was a chance of safety: in going back to fetch the baby now, there was none.

After about five minutes, with a hideous yell, the demon tore in such fury across the mountain-side, that the old man would have been carried off his feet in a moment, and swept with the rest of the *débris* into the valley, but that he threw himself on the ground, clutching tightly with his fingers the edge of the hole he had dug. In the bottom of the hole a thistle-down lay unmoved. When the lull came, and he could raise his head, having escaped injury or death from falling stocks and stones, he darted over his shoulder a glance of awful anxiety at the cottage—of such anxiety as a strong man may reach to the depths of but once or twice in his prime. The roof of the cottage was gone; there were no fragments, for the wind was a clean sweeper; it had bodily vanished. The walls stood. He dragged himself unsteadily to his feet, and looked about for his spade. It was nowhere to be seen; the besom of the gale had whirled it to some unknown limbo.

The hole was still not quite a foot and a half deep, and would not preserve the cradle, if placed therein, from the destroyer. He shuffled back to the cottage with awkward, hasty steps. The baby had cried itself to sleep, and lay in its cradle in the corner, unconscious of the ruin of its home. The old man went to the hearth, on which the fire had been blown out, and from under the ashes dragged out a battered fire-shovel, its edge worn away, its handle loose. It was the nearest approach to a spade that was left him. Just as he got back to the hole another blast carried him off his feet, and he fell prostrate, this time clutching his substitute spade beneath him. He rose again, stepped into the hole, crouching down as low as possible, and rapidly raised out of it one shovelful of earth after another; it was no sooner on the surface than it was whisked away like dust. In the wood, a furlong to the right, some dozen trees were prostrated between one thrust of the shovel and the next; dark straight firs and silver birches, that slipped downwards to the valley like stiff, gleaming snakes.

Meanwhile the shovel had struck on a layer of stones, the remains of some past landslip, since buried under flowering earth. With its turned-back edge, it was hard to insert it below them, and again and again it came up having raised nothing but a little gravel; but the old man worked on still with his docile, child-like look, intent upon his task. Presently the infirm handle came off, and the shovel dopped into the bottom of the hole. At the same moment, with a wilder shriek and a fiercer on-rush, the fury came tearing again along the mountain side; the whole of the trees that yet remained in the patch of forest nearest to the cottage were swept away at once, and the slope was left bare. The old man crouched down in his hole, with his anxious eye fixed on the four walls within which the baby was sheltered; they still stood, the only object which the demon had not yet swept from his path. And even as the old man looked, he saw the upper part of the back wall begin to loosen, to totter, and give way. The baby was in the front room, but was under the windward wall. In the teeth of the gale the old man crawled out of the hole, extended his length on the ground, and began to drag his stiff and trembling frame, with hands, elbows and knees, across the fifty feet or so of barren soil that lay between the hole and the cottage. He heard the crash of bricks before he had accomplished half the distance; without pausing to look he crawled rapidly on till he crossed the threshold, and saw the babe still sleeping safely in its wooden cradle. There were two large iron dogs in the grate; he drew them out and placed them—panting painfully with the effort, for they were almost beyond his strength to lift—in the cradle, under the little mattress, one at each end. The baby, disturbed in its slumber, stretched its little limbs, smiled at him, and went to sleep again. He doubled a sack over the coverlet, tied a rope round the cradle, fastened it by a slip-knot underneath, pulled out the end at the back, and tightened it till it dragged against the hood. The cradle went on its wheels well enough to the door. Then the old man summoned his remaining strength, and having knotted the rope round his waist, threw

himself on the ground again, and emerged with his precious charge into the roaring hurricane. Across the barren mountain slope, far above the ken of any fellow-being, in the teeth of death, the old man crept with the sleeping babe. Another threatening of the deluge of rain, which would surely accompany the tornado, added to the misery of the painful journey; the sudden downpour of heavy drops drenched the grandfather to the skin, but the grandchild was protected under the sacking.

They reached the hole at length, and raising himself to his knees, the wind being somewhat less boisterous while the rain was falling, the old man clutched the heavily-weighted cradle in both arms, and attempted to force it into the haven of safety he had spent his strength in forming. Alas! there was not room. The cradle was wider across than he had calculated. To take the child out and place it with the bedding in the hole would be leaving it to drown. Should the expected deluge descend, the trench he had dug would but form a reservoir for water. He seized the shovel, working it as well as he could without a handle, and attempted to break down and widen the edges. Pushing, stamping, driving with his make-shift spade, now clutching at the edges with his fingers and loosening the stones, now forcing them in with his heel, he succeeded in working through the hard upper surface; then breathless, dizzy, spent, with hands that could scarce grasp the shovel, and stumbling feet that each moment threatened to fail him, he spaded out the softer earth below and scraped and tore at the sides, till the hole was wide enough to contain the cradle, and deep enough to ensure its safety.

The last shovelful was raised, and the old man was stooping down to lift the cradle in, when the wildest war-cry yet uttered by the raging elements rang round the mountain side; all the former blasts seemed to have been but forerunners or skirmishers heralding the approach of the elemental forces; but now with awful ferocity and determination advanced the very centre of the fiendish host; while the horns were blown from mountain to mountain, announcing utter destruction to whatsoever should venture to obstruct the path of the army of the winds. In the shrieking solitude it seemed as if chaos and the end of the world were come. The poor old man crouched down, keeping his body between the gale and the baby's cradle, while the last remaining wall of the cottage fell flat before his eyes. But he felt himself being urged slowly but surely away from the refuge of the trench, downwards, downwards. The cradle, in spite of its iron ballast, was just overturning, when, with the strength of despair, he threw his body across it, digging his feet into the ground, and once more knotted the loose end of rope around his waist. The downward slip was stayed. Pushing the cradle with knees and arms, clutching the soil with hands and feet, he crept with his precious charge nearer and nearer the widened hole. Once over the edge the baby would be safe. The windy fiend seemed to be pursuing him with vindictive hate. It shrieked and tore around that bare strip of mountain side, as though the whole purpose of its fury was to destroy the old man and the babe. With a superhuman effort he grasped the cradle in both arms and lifted it in, then fell senseless across the opening.

Gradually the demon horns ceased to blow, the great guns died into silence, and the army of the air dispersed. The rain fell in torrents, but the old man never moved.

When the storm was over, and anxious steps hastened up the mountain path, and horror-stricken faces gazed at the ruined home and the havoc all around, there was broken-hearted lamentation for the old man and the child, supposed to have perished in the tornado. At last the mother's searching eye discerned in the sunshine that lay across the still mountain-side an unfamiliar object; and hastening towards it with the lingering hope of learning some news of her darling, she perceived the old man lying in his last sleep, with the eternal Peace in his child-like face, still stretched as if in protection across a trench, in which the baby lay safe in its cradle, sleeping as peacefully as he.

THE ROAD BY THE SEA.

PART I.



From East to West there stretched a long, straight road, glimmering white across the grey evening landscape: silently conscious, it seemed, of the countless human feet, that for ages had trodden it and gone their way—their way for good, or their way for evil, while the road remained. Coming as an alien from unknown scenes, the one thing in the country that spoke of change, yet itself more lasting than any, it seemed to be ever pursuing some secret purpose: persistent, relentless: a very

Nemesis of a road.

On either side of it were barren "dunes," grudgingly covered by straggling heather and gorse, and to the South, at a little distance, rolled the dark-blue sea.

On the edge of the dune, near to a cluster of sweet-scented pines, stood two or three cottages built of grey stone, after the Breton manner, with high-pitched roofs of dove-coloured slate, and arched stone doorways, around which scratched pigs and hens, on equal terms with barefooted children. One of the cottages had "Buvette" inscribed over it in large, white letters, and a bench outside under a little awning; and opposite to this, a rough pathway led out of the road over the waste land to a hamlet on the dune, of which the grey, clustering cottages, crowning a rising ground about half a mile off, stood distinct against the opal sky of early evening.

Framed in the stone doorway of the Buvette, was the figure of a girl in a snow-white coiffe, of which the lappets waved in the wind, a short blue skirt, and sabots. She had a curious, inexpressive face, with the patient look of a dumb creature, and an odd little curl in her upper lip, which, with her mute expression, made her seem to be continually deprecating disapproval. She stood shading her eyes from the slanting sunbeams, as she looked up the road to the West. A little before her, out on the road, stood two other women, elderly, both white-capped, one leaning on a stick: they addressed brief sentences to one another now and again, in the disconnected manner of those who are expecting something: and they also stood looking up the road to the West.

And not they only, but a group of peasants belonging to the hamlet on the hill; free-stepping, strong-limbed Breton women, returning from the cliffs with bundles of dried sea-weed on their backs: a woman and two young lads from the furthestmost cottage, with hoes in their hands, who had stepped out on to the road from their work of weeding the sorry piece of ground they had fenced in from the dune, and which yielded, at the best, more stones than vegetables: a couple of fishermen, who were tramping along the road with a basket of mackerel: and even old lame Jacques, who had risen from the bench on which he usually sat as though he had taken root there, and leant tottering on his stick, as he strained his bleary eyes against the sunbeams: all stopped as if by one impulse: all seemed absorbed by one expectation, and stood gazing up the long, white road to the West.

The road was like a sensitive thing to ears long familiar with its various sounds, and vibrated at a mile's distance with the gallop of unwonted hoofs, or the haste of a rider that told of strange news. Moreover, all hearts were open to the touch of fear that October evening, when at any hour word might be brought of the fishing fleet that should now be returning from its long absence in distant seas: and one dare hardly think whether Jean and Pierre and little André would all be restored safely to the vacant places around the cottage fire: one dared not think: one could only pray to the Saints, and wait.

The girl with the mute, patient face had been the first to catch the sounds of galloping hoofs. She had from birth been almost speechless, with a paralysed tongue, but as if to compensate for this, her senses of touch and hearing were extraordinarily acute. The daughter of the aubergiste, she knew all who came and went along the road: the sights and sounds of the road were her interest the life of it was her life. She had heard in the faint, faint distance the galloping hoofs to the West: off the great rocks to the West the fleet should first be sighted: towards the West all one's senses seemed strained, on the alert for signals of danger, or hope: and at the sound, the heart within Annette's breast leaped with a sudden certainty of disaster.

Annette had never thought of love and marriage as possible for herself, but Paul Gignol had gone with the fleet for the first time this summer, and, for Annette, danger to the fleet meant danger to Paul. Paul and Annette were kin on her mother's side, and he being an orphan and adopted by her father, they had been brought up together like brother and sister. This summer had separated them for the first time, and when he bade her good-bye and sailed away, Annette felt like an uprooted piece of heather cast loose on the roadside, and belonging nowhere. And the first faint sounds of the hoofs on the road had struck on her ear as a signal from Paul. She made no sign, only stood still with a beating heart. And when the neighbours saw the dumb girl listening, they too came out into the road, and heard the galloping, now growing more and more distinct; and waited for the rider to appear on the ridge of the hill, which, some half mile off, raised its purple outline against the western sky.

They came out when they saw the dumb girl listening: for the keenness of the perceptions with which her fragile body was endowed, was well known among them, and was attributed to the direct agency of the unseen powers; with whom indeed she had been acknowledged from her birth to have closer relations than is the lot of ordinary mortals. For there could be no doubt that Annette's mother had received an intimation of some sort from the other world, the night before her child was born. She had been found lying senseless in the moonlight on the hill-top, and had never spoken from that hour till her death a week afterwards. As to what she had met or seen, there were various rumours: some of the shrewder gossips declaring that it was nothing but old Marie Gourdon, the sorceress, who had frightened her by predicting in her mysterious wisdom, which not the shrewdest of them dared altogether disregard, that some strange calamity would attend the life of the child she was about to bring forth; a child that had indeed turned out speechless, and of so sickly a constitution that from year to year one hardly expected her to live. Moreover, was it not the ill-omened figure of the old witch-woman, that had hobbled into the auberge with the news that Christine Leroux was lying like one dead by the roadside? On the other hand, however, it was asserted with equal assurance, that she had seen in the moonlight, with her own eyes, the evil spirit of the dunes: him of whom all travellers by night must beware; for it was his pleasure to delude them by showing lights as if of cottage windows on the waste land, where no cottage was: while twice within living memory, he had kindled false fires on the great rock out at sea, which they called Le Géant, luring mariners to their death: and woe betide the solitary wayfarer whose path he crossed!

Annette's father knew what his wife had seen: and one winter evening beside the peat-fire, as Annette was busy with her distaff, and he sat smoking and watching the glowing embers, he told her her mother's story. She and Paul's father, the elder Paul Gignol, had been betrothed in their youth; but his fishing-smack had struck on the rocks one foggy night, and gone down, and with it all his worldly wealth. And Christine's father had broken off the match; for he had never been favourable to it, and how was Paul to keep her now with nothing to look to, but what might be

picked up in the harbour? And Paul was like one mad, and threatened to do her a bodily mischief, so that she was afraid to walk out at night by herself: and her father offered him money to go away: and he refused the money: but he went off at last, hiring himself out on a cargo-boat, and declaring as he went, that one day yet, he would meet Christine in the way, and have his revenge. And he was abroad for years, and wedded some English woman in one of the British sea-port towns, and at last was lost at sea on the very night on which Annette was born.

"And his spirit it was, Annette, that appeared to your mother in the road that night, the very hour that he died. For it was borne in on me that he had met her in the way, as he had said, and I asked her, as she lay a-dying, if it was Paul that she had seen; and she looked at me with eyes that spoke as plain as the speech that she had lost: and said that it was he."

Jules was ordinarily a silent man: he told the story slowly, with long pauses between the sentences: and when he had once told it, he never spoke of it again.

Now Annette thought of many things in her quiet, clear-sighted way. She knew that her mother had been found senseless at the foot of the menhir, which they called Jean of Kerdual, just beyond the crest of the hill: and she had often noticed the shadow which the great, weird stone threw across the road, and thought how like it was (especially by moonlight) to the figure of a fisherman with his peaked cap and blouse. She believed there was more in this than a chance resemblance; for to a Breton girl the supernatural world is very real: and she had no doubt that the spirit of Paul's father haunted the stone that was so like his bodily form, and that on the night when he was drowned, the dumb menhir had found voice, and had spoken to her mother in his name. Annette always avoided Jean of Kerdual, if it was possible to do so, and would never let his shadow fall upon her. She felt that the solemn, world-old stone was in some way hostile to her, and attributed her dumbness to its influence.

She often wished that she and her father did not live so near the stone. It had come to be like a nightmare to her. She would dream that it stood threateningly over her, enveloping her in its shadow: that she was struggling to speak, and that it reached forth a hand, heavy as stone, and laid it on her mouth, stifling utterance. Then the paralysis that had fettered her tongue from her birth, would creep over the rest of her senses and over all her limbs, till she lay motionless and helpless under the hand of the menhir, like a stone herself, only alive and conscious. This dream had come more frequently since Paul had been away, and Annette would often look up and down the road—that road which was her only link with the world beyond—in the vague hope that it might one day bring her some deliverance.

And now, as she stood listening to the galloping hoofs, she had an odd feeling that Jean of Kerdual was threatening once more to render her powerless, but that this time he would not prevail: for that something was coming along the road, nearer—nearer—with every gallop, to free her from him for ever. Then suddenly the sounds changed: the horseman was ascending the hill on the other side, and the galloping grew laboured and slower. Would he never come into sight? It seemed to Annette that she could bear it no longer: she set off and ran along the road and up the hill, to meet the unseen rider. The slow-thoughted, simple-minded peasants looked after her, wondering. She had nearly reached the top, when, silhouetted against the sky on the crest of the hill, appeared the figure of a man on horse-back, his Breton tunic and long hat-ribbons flying loose in the wind, as he reined in his chafing steed. He rose a moment in his stirrups, pointed out to sea with his whip, and shouted something inaudible: at the same instant his horse shied violently, as it seemed, at some object by the roadside, and threw his rider to the ground.

The man, the bringer of tidings, lay motionless in the road, the horse galloped wildly on: the dumb girl stood, half way up the hill: the dumb girl, who alone had heard the message. The next moment she threw her arms convulsively above her head, turned towards the group below, and cried in a loud, clear voice, "Le Géant brûle!"

The words fell on the ears of the listening crowd as if with an electric shock. As they repeated them to each other with fear and amazement, and scattered hither and thither to saddle a horse, or to catch the runaway steed, that they might carry the news in time over the two miles that lay between them and the harbour, the fact that the dumb had spoken, seemed for the moment hardly noticed by them. For might not the fishing-fleet even now be rounding the point, with darkness coming on, and the misleading light burning on the giant rock to lure them to destruction? A light which, as they knew too well, was not visible from the harbour, and which might be shewing its fatal signal unguessed the whole night through, unless as now, by favour of the saints, and doubtless by the quick eyes of some fisherman of the neighbouring village, who had chanced to be far enough out to sea at the time, it were perceived before darkness should fall.

The girl turned back again, and went up to the top of the hill to tend the fallen rider. The sun was sinking, and threw the shadow of the menhir, enlarged to a monstrous size, across her path. A few yards further on lay the senseless form of the Breton horseman, and it was clear to Annette that Jean of Kerdual had purposely stayed the rider by throwing the shadow across the road to startle his horse.

But a new exhilaration had taken possession of Annette's whole body and mind. She feared the menhir no longer: its power over her was gone. She kept repeating the words that had come to her at the crisis, the first she had spoken articulately all her life, "Le Géant brûle—Le Géant brûle," with a confidence in herself and the future, which was like new wine to her. The fleet would come safe home now, and by her means: for the Saints had helped her: the Saints were on

her side.

PART II.

When Annette brought the fallen man (who was already recovering consciousness when she reached him) safe back in the cart to the auberge, she found a little crowd of peasants, men and women, gathered there, talking loud and eagerly over the news, who looked at her with a reverent curiosity as she entered. The injured man was assisted to a bed, but none spoke to Annette: only silent, awe-struck glances were turned on her: for they had gradually realized the fact that a voice had been given to the dumb girl, and Annette's quiet, familiar presence had become charged with mystery for them. They had no doubt that the blessed St. Yvon, the patron saint of mariners, had himself uttered the warning through her, at the moment when the safety of the fishing fleet depended on a spoken word: and the miracle now occupied their attention almost to the exclusion of the false lights and the return of the boats.

But Annette observed their whisperings and glances with a slight touch of contempt: she knew that her own voice had been restored to her, and that she was now like any of the other women in the village; which, in her own simple presentment of things, must be interpreted as meaning that she might look to have a husband and a home of her own. It was as though she had for the first time become a real woman. She saddled the horse and rode off to fetch a doctor to attend to the sick man, thinking all the while that the fleet would be in before morning, that Paul would come home, and that he would hear her voice. She made little childish plans of pretending to be still dumb when she first saw him, so that she might surprise him the more when she should speak.

Darkness was fast gathering now, but the old horse knew every stone in the road: he carried her with his steady jog-trot safely enough over the two miles that lay between the auberge and the fishing village where the doctor lived, in a house overlooking the *rade* and the harbour. As she passed along, the dark quays were full of moving lights and figures; active women with short skirts and sabots, mingling in the groups of fishermen; while a buzz of harsh Breton speech resounded on all sides. She caught words about a gang of wreckers that had lately infested the coast: and the names of one or two "*mauvais sujets*" in the village, who were supposed to be their confederates. She saw a moving light at the mouth of the harbour, and from a low-breathed murmur that ran below the noisier speech of the crowd, she gathered that it was a boat's crew going out in the darkness, to scale the precipitous rock, and extinguish the light.

All her faculties seemed quickened, and she kept repeating aloud to herself the words she heard in the crowd, to make sure that she could articulate as clearly as she had done in the first moment that her voice was given to her.

When she arrived at the doctor's gate, and dismounted to pull the great iron bell-rope that hung outside, she was trembling violently, and could hardly steady her hands to tie up the horse. Jeanne, the cook's sister, took her into the kitchen, while some one fetched the doctor, and she was so anxious that her speech should seem plain to them, that for the few first moments, from sheer nervousness, she could not utter a word. Then the doctor entered, a tall, well-built man, with stiff, iron-grey hair and imperial, and an expression of genial contentment with himself and the rest of the world.

"Mais, Mademoiselle Annette," he exclaimed the moment he saw her, "What are you doing then? You must return home and go to bed at once. Why did you not send me word before, instead of putting it off till you got so ill?"

He did not wait for her to reply, believing her to be speechless as usual, but placed her in a chair and began to feel her pulse. She was trying to speak all the time, but from excitement and a strange dizziness that had come over her, she could not at once use her new faculty. At last she got out the words, that it was not for herself she had come; that a *fermier* who had ridden fast from the village of St. Jean, further up the coast, to bring the news of the false light on the Géant, had been thrown from his horse—but before she had finished the sentence, the doctor, still absorbed in the contemplation of her own case, interrupted her, exclaiming with astonishment at her new power of speech, and demanding to know by what means it had come, and how long she had possessed it.

But to recall the experience of that moment on the hill, when at the thought of the danger menacing the fishing boats, her tongue had been loosened, and the unaccustomed words had come forth, was too much for Annette. She trembled so, and made such painful efforts to speak, that it seemed as though she were again losing the power of utterance; and the doctor bade her remain perfectly quiet, gave her some soothing medicine, and directed a bed to be prepared for her in the kitchen, as he said she was not fit to return home that night: then he himself took the old horse from the gate where he stood, and set off for the auberge with what haste he might.

For three or four minutes after he was gone, Annette remained motionless in her seat, wearing her patient, deprecatory expression, while her eyes rested on the window, without apparently seeing the lights and dimly outlined figures that were visible on the *rade* outside. Then her glance seemed to concentrate itself on something: the nervous, trembling lips closed rigidly, and before they saw what she was about to do, she had risen from her chair, and darted from the room and out into the night.

"Our Lady guard her! It was the boats she caught sight of," said Victorine, the cook. "There are the lights off the bay. Go, stop her, Jeanne! Monsieur will be angry with us if anything befall her."

"Dame! I will not go," said her sister. "Can you not see that Annette is bewitched? If she must go, she must. I will have nought to do with it."

Victorine, however, scouted her younger sister's reasoning, and hurried out across the small court-yard, through the gate and on to the road.

The whole village seemed gathered at the harbour-side; children and old men, lads and women, eager, yet with the patient quietness that is the way with the Breton folk. Here a demure group of white-coiffed girls stood waiting with scarce a word passing among them, waiting at the quay-side for the fathers, brothers, or sweethearts, that for months had been facing the perils of the northern seas. There a dark-eyed, loose-limbed Breton peasant, the wildness of whose look bewrayed the gentleness of his nature, was arguing with a white-haired patriarch about the probable value of this year's haul: while quaint-looking children in little tight-fitting bonnets and clattering sabots clung patiently to their mother's skirts, their mothers, who could remember many a home-coming of the boats, and knew that it would be well if to some of those now waiting at the harbour, grief were not brought instead of joy.

The vanguard of the fleet had been sighted some half-hour ago, and the two or three boats whose lights could now be seen approaching, one of which was recognized as Paul Gignol's "Annette," would, if all was well, anchor in the harbour that night: for the tide was high, so that the harbour basin was full; and the light of the torches and lanterns that were carried to and fro among the crowd, was reflected from its surface in distorted and broken flashes; while the regular plashing of the water against the quay-side accompanied the low murmur of the crowd.

Victorine sought in vain for Annette in the darkness, dressed, as she was, like all the other peasant girls; but her eye lighted on the tall, powerful figure of Jules Leroux, Annette's father, standing at the door of the *bureau du port*, where he and some others were discussing the signals.

Victorine approached the group, and announced in her emphatic way that Annette was ill, very ill, and had gone out alone into the crowd, when the doctor had bidden her not leave her bed. Jules, who had been down at the harbour since midday, and had heard nothing of Annette's recovered voice, or of her riding to the village, started off without waiting for more, along the quay and on to the very end of the mole, where the light guarded the entrance to the harbour, saying to himself, "It is there she will be—if she have feet to carry her—it is there she will be—when the boat comes in."

Victorine looked after him, murmuring, "Surely the child Annette is the apple of her father's eye."

The outline of the foremost fishing-smack was growing more and more distinct on the water, as he reached the end of the quay. Moving figures on board flashed into uncertain light for a moment, then disappeared into darkness again. A girl darted out from the crowd as he approached, and clung to his arm. "Annette, my little one," said Jules, "never fear. The Saints will bring him safe home."

"He is there: it is the 'Annette' that comes. I have seen him!" she cried.

Her father drew back almost in alarm. "What! Thy tongue is loosened, my child?"

She drew down his head, and whispered eagerly in his ear. "The blessed St. Yvon made me speak. I will tell you afterwards: it was to save Paul. Is it not true now that he is mine?"

At that moment a clamour of welcome ran along the quay-side, as the boat glided silently through the harbour mouth, and into the light of the torches that flashed from the quay.

Women's voices called upon Paul and his mate Jean, and the name of the 'Annette' (the vessel that had been christened after his foster-father's dumb child) was passed from mouth to mouth, while the fishermen silently got out the boat that was to carry the mooring cable to the shore.

Annette clung convulsively to her father during the few minutes' delay, and once, as he saw the light flash on her face, he suddenly remembered something Victorine had said about the doctor. He watched her with a pang of alarm, and at the same time felt that she was stringing herself up for some effort. Everyone was greeting Jean, the first of the boat's crew that appeared, as he clambered up the quay-side, but Annette did not stir; then the second dark, sea-beaten figure emerged from below, and Annette darted forward. She clasped both Paul's hands and gazed into his face, while she seemed to be struggling with herself for something a spasm passed over her face, which was as white as her coiffe: her father and the others gathered round, but some instinct bade them be silent. Annette's lips opened more than once as if she were about to speak, but no sound came forth: then she turned to her father with a look of despairing entreaty, and at the same moment tottered and would have fallen, had he not darted forward and caught her in his arms.

"She is dead! God help me," he cried.

"Chut! Chut!" said the voice of Victorine in the crowd. "It is but the nerves. Did not you see she was striving to say the word of greeting, and it was a cruel blow to find her speech had gone from her again. Surely it is but a crisis of the nerves."

But Jules, bending his tangled beard over her, groaned "The hand of God is heavy on me."

He and Paul raised her between them, and carried her to the doctor's, stepping softly for fear of

doing her a mischief: while the story of her recovered speech, and the danger which had threatened the fleet, was told to the returned fisherman in breathless, awe-struck accents. He listened, full of wonder, and as he saw her safely tucked into her box-bed in the doctor's kitchen, said in his light-hearted Celtic way, that it was not for nothing she had got her voice back, and no fear but she would soon be well, and would speak to him in the morning.

But her father, who sat watching her unconscious face, and holding her hand in both his, as though he feared she would slip away from him, shook his head and said, "She will not see another dawn."

They tried their utmost to restore her consciousness, but with that ignorance of the simplest remedies which is sometimes found among the Breton peasants, they had so far failed: and though someone had been sent to fetch back the doctor from the auberge, Victorine and the other women shook their heads, as Jules had done, and said to each other, "It is in vain; she will never waken more."

But when the fainting fit had lasted nearly an hour, and in the wild eyes of Paul, who stood leaning on the foot of the bed, a gleam of fear was beginning to show itself; there was a stir in the lifeless form, a struggle of the breath, a flicker of the eyelids: they opened, and a glance, in which all Annette's pure and loving spirit seemed to shine forth, fell direct on Paul's face at the end of the bed. She smiled brightly, and said distinctly "Au revoir:" then turned on her side, and died.

Jules and Paul, in their simple peasant fashion, went about seeing to what had to be done before morning; but Annette's father spoke not a word. Paul, to cheer him, told him of the wife he had wedded on the other side of the sea, and who would come home to be a daughter to him: and Jules nodded silently, without betraying a shadow of surprise: having art enough, in the midst of his grief, to keep Annette's secret loyally.

Along the straight, white road there came, in the early dawn, a little silent procession: the silent road, that was ever bringing tidings, good or evil, to the auberge: though now no white-coiffed girl with a patient face was waiting at the door. All the road was deserted, for the villagers were still asleep, as the little procession wound its way along: wrapped in the same silence in which Annette's own young life had been passed. A cart with a plain coffin in it, was drawn by the old horse that had carried Annette to the harbour the night before, and who stepped as though he knew what burden he was bringing: Paul led the horse; and beside the cart, with his head bowed on his breast, walked Annette's father.

After the funeral rites were over, the smooth current of existence by the roadside and the harbour flowed on, apparently in complete oblivion of the fragile blossom of a girl's life, that had appeared for a little while on its surface, and then been swept away for ever.



THE HALTING STEP.

CHAPTER I.



In the Western coast of one of the islands in the Channel group is a level reach of salt marshes, to which the sea rises only at the highest spring tides, and which at other times extends as far as the eye can see, a dreary waste of salt pools, low rocks, and stretches of sand, yielding its meagre product of shell-fish, samphire, and sea-weed to the patient toil of the fisher-folk that dwell in scattered huts along the shore. One arm of the bay, at the time of which I am writing, extended inland to the left, being nearly cut off from the sea by a rocky headland, behind which it had spread itself, so as almost to present the appearance of an isolated pond or lake, encircled by low black rocks, within which the water rose and sank at regular intervals, as if under the influence of some strange, unknown power. On the borders of the lake stood a low, one-roomed cabin, such as the island fishermen in the wilder districts inhabit; and in the plot of ground beside the cabin, one September evening, in the mellow, westering light, a woman might have been seen busying herself by tying up into bundles the sea-weed that had been spread out to dry in the sun. She wore a shade bonnet with a large projecting peak and an enveloping curtain round the neck, quite concealing her face, as she bent over her work. Presently, although no sound had been heard, she looked up, with that apparently intuitive sense of what is happening at sea, which sea-folk seem to possess, and perceived an orange-sailed fishing boat just rounding the headland and making for the open sea. The face that appeared under the bonnet, as she looked up, had the colourless and haggard look frequently seen among fisher-women, and which is perhaps due to too much sea-air, added to hard living. But one was prevented from noticing the rest of the face by the expression of the two grey eyes, peering out from under the shade of the bonnet-peak;

they were eyes that seemed always expecting: they seemed to have nothing to do with the pallid face, and the sea-weed, and the hut: they belonged to a different life. As she looked out over the sea, their glance was almost stern, as though demanding something which the sea did not give. But she only remarked to herself, in the island patois:—"I suppose the fish have gone over to the south-west again, and he'll make a night of it. Mackerel is such an aggravating fish, one day here, t'other there—you never know where you'll find them."

Presently, as it grew dark, she warmed up some herb-broth for her supper, and when she had finished it, and had fastened up the dog and the donkey, knowing that her husband would not return till the morning, she put out the glimmering oil-lamp, and was just going to bed, when a sound struck her ear. For two miles round the cabin not another human-being lived, and it was the rarest thing for any one to come in that direction after dark, as the rocks were slippery and dangerous, and a solitary bit of open country had to be crossed between the cabin and the nearest houses inland. Yet this sound was distinctly that of a human footstep, which halted in its gait.

The woman started up and listened: there was silence for a minute: then the limping step was heard again: again it ceased. The woman went to the door and looked out. Over the sandy, wind-swept common to the left the darkness brooded, the outlines of a broken bit of sea-wall, and of some giant boulders, said to be remains of a dolmen, emerging dimly therefrom like threatening phantoms; to the right moaned the long, grey sea, and in front was the waste of salt marshes and rocks, with the windlass of a ship once wrecked in the bay, projecting its huge outline among the uncertain shadows. Not a living thing was visible. She stood for several minutes peering out into the darkness and listening; no sound was to be heard but the lapping of the waves, and the sigh of the wind through the bent-grass on the common.

Suddenly Josef, the dog, started up in his corner, and barked. He was a large mastiff, with a dangerous temper, who was chained up at night in the rough lean-to that was built against the side of the cabin. He barked again furiously, dragging at his chain with all his might, and quivering in every nerve of his body. The woman lighted a torch at the dying embers on the hearth, and unfastening the dog, waited to see what would happen. He dashed forward furiously a few steps, then suddenly stopped, sniffed the air, made one or two uncertain darts hither and thither, and stood still, evidently puzzled. She called to him to encourage him, but he dropped his tail and returned to his shed, where he curled himself up in a comfortable corner, like a dog that was not going to be troubled by womanish fancies. The woman went round the cabin, and the pig-stye, and the patch of meagre gooseberry-bushes, throwing the uncertain torch-light on every dark hole or corner; but no one was to be seen. She was none the less convinced that someone had approached the cottage, for the dog was not likely to have been deceived as well as herself; so she kept the light burning, called Josef to lie down at the foot of the bed, barred the door, and went to sleep.

The sun was high the next morning when the fisherman returned. He stood in the stream of light in the open doorway, in his blue, knitted jersey and jack-boots; and with the beaming smile which overspread his whole countenance, and his big, powerful limbs, he might well have been taken for an impersonation of the sun shining in his strength.

It was as great a pleasure to him to greet his Louise now, as it had been in the days of their early courtship; for he had courted her twice, his sunny boyhood's lovemaking having been overclouded by the advent of a stranger from the mainland, who, with his smooth tongue and new-fangled ways, had gained such an influence over Louise during a four months' absence of Peter's on a fishing cruise, that she forgot her first love, and wedded this new settler; who took her to the town a few miles inland, where he carried on a retail fishmonger's business, knowing but little of fishing himself, either deep-sea or along-shore. But Providence had not blessed their union, for not a child had been born to them, and after but three years of married life, when Fauchon, the husband, was out one day in a fishing smack, which he had just bought to carry on business for himself with men under him, the boat capsized in a sudden squall, and neither he nor the two other men were ever seen or heard of again. Then to Louise, in her sudden poverty and despair (for all the savings had been put into the fishing smack) came Peter once more, and with his frank, whole-hearted love, and his strength and confidence, fairly carried her off her feet, making her happy with or without her own consent, in such shelter and comfort as his fisherman's home could supply. They had been married seven years now, and had on the whole been happy together; and as she answered his "Well, my child, how goes it with thee to-day?" her own face lighted up with a reflection of the beam on his.

After she had heard of the haul of mackerel, and had got Peter his breakfast, she stood with her arms akimbo looking at him, as he gulped down his bouillon with huge satisfaction.

The expectant look had not left her eyes, as, fixing them upon his, she said, "I had a fright last night, my friend."

"Hein! How was that?" said he, with the spoon in his mouth.

"I heard a step outside, and Josef heard it too and barked; and we went all round with a torch, but there was nobody."

"Ho! ho!" cried Peter, with his hearty laugh, "she will always hear a step, or the wing of a sea-swallow flying overhead, or perhaps a crab crawling in the bay, if Peter is not at home to take care of her."

"But indeed," said Louise, "it is the truth I am telling thee: it was the step of a man, and of one that halted in his gait."

"Did Josef hear it—this step that halted?"

"Yes, he barked till I set him free: then all in a moment he stopped, and would not search."

"Pou-ouf," crowed Peter, in jovial scorn. "Surely it was Josef that was the wisest." Then, as she still seemed unsatisfied, he added, "May-be 'twas the water in the smuggler's cave. Many's the time that I've thought somebody was coming along, sort of limping—cluck—chu—cluck—chu—when the tide was half-way up in the cave over there. And the wind was blowing west last night: 'tis with a west wind it sounds the plainest."

"May-be 'twas that, my friend," said the woman, taking up the pail to fetch the water from the well across the common. But she kept looking around her, with a half-frightened, half-expectant glance, all the way.

CHAPTER II.

For several days the halting step was not heard again, and Louise had nearly forgotten her fright, when one morning, about six o'clock, when Peter was out getting up his lobster pots, Louise, with her head still buried in the bed-clothes, suddenly heard—or thought she heard—the sound again. She started up and listened: there could be no doubt about it; someone was approaching the cottage at the back—some one who was lame. She hurried on some clothes and looked out of the door (the cabin had no window). In the glittering morning light, the expanse of level shore and common was as desolate as ever. She turned the corner of the cottage to the left, where Jenny and the pigs were. There was no one there; then she went round to the right, and, as she did so, distinctly perceived a shadow vanishing swiftly round the corner of the stack of sea-weed. She uttered a cry, and for a moment seemed like one paralysed; then moved forward hastily a few steps; stopped again, listening with a strange expression on her countenance to the sound of the limp, as it grew fainter and fainter; then advanced, as if unwillingly, to the back of the cottage, whence no one was visible. A corner of rock, round which wound the path that ascended to the top of the cliff, projected at no great distance from the cottage. She stood and looked at the rock, half as if it were a threatening, monster, half as if it were the door of hope: then she went slowly back to the cottage.

She did not tell Peter this time about the step.

A week or two afterwards, when Peter Girard was returning from the rocks with a basketful of crabs, he was joined on the way by his mate, Mesurier.

The two fishermen trudged along in silence for some time, one a little in front of the other, after the manner of their kind; then Mesurier remarked, "We shall be wanting some new line before we go out for mackerel again." (Mackerel are caught by lines in those parts, where the sea-bottom is too rocky for trawling).

Peter turned round and stood still to consider the question.

"I've got some strands knotted, if you and I set to work we can plait it before night."

"I must go up to Jean's for some bait first; there won't be more than three hours left before dark, and how are we to get it done in that time? I'd better get some in the village when I'm up there."

"Hout, man! pay eight shillings for a line," said the economical Peter, "and a pound of horsehair will make six. I'll send Louise for the bait, and you come along with me—we'll soon reckon out the plait."

Mesurier, a thick-set, vigorous-looking man, shorter than Peter, stood still a moment, looking at him rather queerly out of his keen, grey eyes.

"Been up to Jean's much of late?" he asked, trudging on again.

"No, not I," said Peter. "Hangin' round in the village isn't much after my mind."

"Best send Louise instead, hey?"

Peter wheeled his huge frame round in a moment.

"What do you mean, man?" he demanded, in a voice that seemed to come from his feet.

Mesurier's face was devoid of expression, as he replied, "Nothing, to be sure. Of course Louise will be going to the shop now and again."

Peter laid his hand, like a lion's paw, on Mesurier's shoulder, as if he would rend the truth out of him.

"And what's the matter with her going to the shop?" said Peter, so rapidly and thickly as to be hardly articulate.

"None that I know of," said the other uneasily, shrugging off Peter's hand, with an attempted laugh.

"Now you understand," said Peter, with blazing eyes, "you've either got to swear that you've heard nothing at all about Louise which you oughtn't to have heard, or else you'll tell me who said it, and let him know he's got me to reckon with," and Peter clenched his fist in a way that would have made most people swear whatever he might have happened to wish.

"Well, mate," said the other man. "You go and see Jean, and ask him what company he's had of late." Then seeing Peter's face becoming livid, he added briefly, "There's been a queer-looking fish staying with him the last three weeks—walks all on one side—and Louise was talking to him t'other evening under the church wall. 'Twas my wife saw her. That's the truth. Nobody else has said nought about her."

Peter swung round without a word, and marched off in the direction of the village. Mesurier watched him a moment, then called after him, "I say, mate! mind what you're doing: the man's a poor blighted creature, more like a monkey than a Christian."

Peter said something in his throat while he handed the crabs to Mesurier: his hand shook so violently as he did so that the basket nearly fell to the ground. Then he strode on again. Mesurier had glanced at his face, and did not follow.

It took Peter less than an hour, at the pace at which he was walking, to reach the next village along the coast where Jean lived. The mellow afternoon sunshine was lighting up the cottage wall, and the long strip of gaily flowering garden, as he approached. He entered the front room, which was fitted up as a sort of shop, in which fishermen's requisites were sold. There was no one there. He pushed the door open into the inner room: it was also empty. He felt as if he could not breathe within the cottage walls, and went out again. The cliff overhung the sea a few yards in front of the cottage. He went to the edge and was scanning the shore for a sign of Jean, when below, on a narrow, zigzag path which led down the cliff to the beach, he perceived his wife. She stood at a turn in the path, looking downwards. There was something about her that to Peter made her seem different from what she had ever seemed before. He looked at Louise, and he saw a woman with a shadow of guilt upon her. The path below her was concealed from Peter's sight by an over-hanging piece of rock, but she seemed to be watching someone coming slowing up it. Then she glanced fearfully round, and saw Peter standing on the top of the cliff. She made a hasty sign to the person below, but already a man's hand leaning on a stick was visible beyond the edge of the rock. Peter strode straight down the face of the cliff to the turning in the path. Louise screamed. Peter seized by the collar a puny, crooked creature, whom he scarcely stopped to look at, and held him, as one might a cat, over the cliff-side.

"Swear you'll quit the island to-night, or I'll drop you," he thundered.

The creature merely screamed for mercy, and seemed unable to articulate a sentence; while Louise knelt, clasping Peter's knees in an agony of entreaty. Meanwhile, the screaming ceased; the creature had fainted in Peter's grasp. He flung him down on the path, said sternly to Louise, "Come with me," and they went up the cliff-side together.

They walked home without a word, Louise crying and moaning a little, but not daring to speak. When they got inside the cabin, he stood and faced her.

"Woman," he said, in a low, shaken voice, "What hast thou done?"

She fell upon her knees, crying. "Forgive me, Peter," she entreated. "Thou art such a strong man; forgive me."

"Tell me the whole truth. What is this man to thee?"

She knelt in silence, shaken with sobs.

"Who is he?" said Peter, his voice getting deeper and hoarser.

She only kept moaning, "Forgive me." Presently she said between her sobs, "I only went this morning to tell him to go away. I wanted him to go away; I have prayed him to go again and again."

"Since when hast thou known him?"

Again she made no answer, but inarticulate moans.

Peter stood looking at her for a few seconds with an indescribable expression of sorrow and aversion.

"I loved thee," he said; and turning away, left her.

CHAPTER III.

Peter went out in the evening without speaking to Louise again, and was not seen till the following afternoon, when he called his mate to go mackerel-fishing, and they were absent two days getting a great haul. He came back and slept at Mesurier's, and did not go near his own home for a week, though he sent money to Louise, when he sold the fish.

At the end of that time he went over to Jean's. The stranger had gone, but Peter sat down on a stool opposite Jean, and began to enter into conversation with him, with a more settled look in his hollow eyes than had been there since the catastrophe of the week before. The meeting on the

cliff had been seen by more than one passerby, and the report had spread that Peter had nearly murdered the stranger for intriguing with his wife. Jean told Peter all he knew of the man, but he neither knew his business nor whence he came. He said his name was Jacques, and would give no other. He had gone to the nearest inland town, where he said that a relation of his kept an "auberge." He had gone in a hurry, and had left some bottles and things behind, containing the stuff he rubbed his leg with, Jean thought; and Jean meant to take them to him when next he went to the town.

"By the way," he said, taking a little book from the shelf, "I believe this belonged to him too. I remember to have seen him more than once poring over it with them close-seeing eyes of his. The man was a rare scholar, and no mistake."

Peter took the little book from him, and opened it. Jean, glancing at him as he did so, uttered an exclamation. A deadly paleness had overspread Peter's face, and he clutched with his hand in the air, as though for something to steady himself with. Then he staggered to his feet, still tightly grasping the little book, and saying something unintelligible, went out.

He went down the cliff to the place where, a week ago, he had found his wife and the stranger, and stood under the rock, and looked at the book. He looked at it still closed in his hand, as if it were some venomous creature, which might, the next moment, dart forth a poisoned fang to sting him. From the cover it appeared to be a little, much-worn prayer-book. Presently he opened it gingerly, and read something written on the fly-leaf. He spelled it out with some difficulty and slowly, and yet he looked at it as if the page were a familiar vision to him. Then he remained immovable for a long time, gazing out to sea, with the little book crunched to a shapeless mass in his huge fist. When at last he turned to ascend the cliff again, his face was ashen pale, and his step was that of an old man. He trudged heavily across the common and along the road inland, five or six miles, till he reached the town, inquired for a certain auberge, entered the kitchen, and found himself face to face with the man he sought. A spasm of fear passed swiftly over the face of Jacques, as he beheld Peter, and he instinctively started up from the bench on which he was sitting, and shrank backwards. As he did so, he showed himself a disfigured paralytic, one side of his face being partly drawn, and one leg crooked. He was an undersized man, with sandy hair, quick, intelligent, grey eyes, and a well-cut profile.

"Jacques Fauchon," said Peter, "have no fear of me."

Jacques kept his eyes on him, still distrustfully.

"I did not know," continued Peter, speaking thickly and slowly, "the other day, what I know now. I had never seen you but once—and you have changed."

"It is not my wish to cause trouble," said Jacques, still glancing furtively round. "Things being as they are, to my thinking, there's nought for it but to let 'em be."

"I have not said yet," said Peter, "what it is I've come to say. This little prayer-book with her name writ in it, and yours below,—'tis the one she always took to church, as a girl—has shown me the path I've got to take. How you came back from the dead, I don't know: 'twas the hand of the Lord. But here you are, and you are her husband, and not I." He stopped.

"Well, Mr. Girard, I know my legal rights," began Jacques, "but considering—and I've no wish to cause unpleasantness, of that you may be sure. 'Tis why I never wrote, not knowing how the land might lie, and for four years I was helpless on my back."

"Never mind the past, man," interrupted Peter, "It's the future that's to be thought of. What you've got to do is to take her away to a distance, and settle in some place where nobody knows what's gone by."

Fauchon considered for a moment, a slight, deprecatory smile stealing over his face.

"I suppose," he remarked, "she hasn't got any little purse of her own by this time; considering, I mean, that she's been of use with the lines and the nets and so on."

"Do you mean," said Peter, "that you can't support her?"

"Well, you see, I worked my passage from New Zealand as cook—that's what I waited so long for. If she could pay her passage, the same captain would take us again, when he starts to go back next week. And if she had a little in hand, when we got there, we could set up a store, may-be, and make shift to get on. I only thought, may-be, she having been of use—"

"I'll sell the cottage and the bits of things," said Peter, "and there's a trifle put by to add to it. But tell me this; when you're out there, can you support her, or can't you?"

"Well, there's Mr. Boucher, that took me on as house-servant at first in New Zealand, he being in the sailing ship when I was picked up. And when the paralytics came on, resulting from the injury I got in the wreck, he never let me want for nothing, the four years that I lay helpless. He's got money to spare, you see"—with a wink—"he's well off, and he's what I call easy-going; and if we could manage to get the right side of him"—with another wink—"I reckon he'd help us a bit."

"Man," said Peter, letting his hand fall heavily on Fauchon's shoulder, "tell me plain that you've got honest work as'll feed and clothe her out there, else, by God, you shan't have her!" and his grip on Fauchon's shoulder tightened, so that a flash of terror passed over the man's face, and he tried to edge away, saying deprecatingly, "I've no wish, Mr. Girard, you understand—I've no wish

to offend. In fact, my whole intention was not to cause any trouble. On my honour, I was going to leave the island to-morrow, when I found how things were—'tis the truth I speak."

"You are her husband," said Peter, "and she loves you, and she shall go with you. But if you let her want, God do so unto you, and more also!"

And he let go of him, and strode away again.

When he got back it was dark, and he stood at his cottage door and looked in. Louise was sitting by the hearth, with her back to him, and her hands in her lap, rocking herself gently on her stool, and gazing into the glowing ash on the hearthstone. Opposite, on the other side of the hearth, Peter's own stool stood empty, and on the shelf beside it were the two yellow porringers, out of which he and Louise used always to sup together. His jersey, the one she had knitted for him when they were married, hung in the corner, with the bright blue patch in it, that she had been mending it with the last time he was at home. Louise was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear his approach, and stepping softly, he passed in and stood before her; she started back, and immediately began to whimper a little, putting up her hands to her face.

"Louise," said Peter, "wilt thou forgive me?"

She looked up perplexed, only half believing what she heard.

"I know everything. I have seen Jacques. I was harsh to thee, mon enfant."

"I meant no harm," said Louise. "I begged him not to come. I knew thou wouldest be angered."

"I am not angered. He is thy husband."

She glanced up with an irrepressible start of eagerness.

"Thou meanest—" Her very desire seemed to take away her speech.

Peter laid his hand on her wrist, as gently as a woman.

"Louise," he said, "thou lovest him?"

She gazed at him in silence; the piercing question in her eyes her only answer.

"Thou shalt go with him," he said. "I only came to say goodbye."

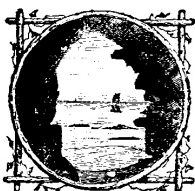
He went to the door: then stood and looked back, with a world of yearning and tenderness in his face. He stretched out his arms. "Kiss me, Louise," he said.

She rose, still half frightened, and kissed him as she was told.

He held her tightly in his arms for a minute, then put her silently from him, and turned away.

Peter was not seen in those parts again. It was understood that he and his wife had emigrated to New Zealand, and the cottage was sold, and the furniture and things dispersed.

In a fishing village on the coast of Brittany, there appeared, not long afterwards, a tall Englishman, speaking the Channel Island patois, who settled down to make a home among the Breton folk, adopting their ways and language, and eking out, like them, a livelihood by hard toil early and late among the rocks and sand-banks, or by long months of fishing on the high seas; a man on whom the simple-minded villagers looked with a certain respect, mingled with awe, as on one who seemed to them marked out by heaven for some special fate; who lived alone in his cottage, attending to his own wants, no woman being ever allowed to enter it; and about whose past nothing was known, and no one dared to ask.



TABITHA'S AUNT.



From the very hour that Tabitha set foot in my house, I conceived a dislike for her Aunt. In the first place I did not see why she should have an Aunt. Tabitha was going to belong to me: and why an old, invalid lady, whose sons were scattered over the face of the earth, and who had never had a daughter of her own: who had been clever enough to discover a distant relationship to Tabitha, and had promptly matured a plan by which Tabitha was to remain always with her; to take the vacant chair opposite and pour out tea, and be coddled and kissed and looked after—why she might not have Tabitha herself for her whole and sole property, I could not understand. But this Aunt was always turning up: not visibly, I mean, but in conversation. I could never say which way I liked

Tabitha's veil to be fastened but I was told Aunt Rennie's opinion on the matter—(Tabitha always absurdly shortened her Aunt's surname, which was Rensworth). I never could mention a book I liked but Aunt Rennie had either read it or not read it. It did not matter which to me, the least. But the climax came when Aunt Rennie sent Tabitha a bicycle. Now I know that young women bicycle nowadays; but that is no reason why Tabitha should. I always turn away my eyes when I see a young girl pass the window on one of those ugly, muddy, dangerous machines, with her knees working like pumps, her skirt I don't know where, and an expression of self-satisfied determination on her face. I don't think I am old-fashioned, but I am sure my own dear little girl, if she had ever come to me, would not have bicycled; and though I had no wish to put any unfair restraint on Tabitha, still I did not want her to have a bicycle. And that this Aunt Rennie, as Tabitha would call her, without a word of warning, should send her one of those hideous things, as if it was *her* business to arrange for Tabitha's exercise—I do think it was rather uncalled for.

When Tabitha came into the room to tell me about it, with that bright, affectionate smile she has, and her dear, plain, pale face—only that nobody would think her plain who knew her, for everybody loves her—she saw quickly enough that I did not like it: and then she was so sweet, looking so disappointed, and yet ready to give up the horrid thing if I wished, that I hardly knew what to do. Tabitha works on one in a way that I believe nobody else can. She has such a generous, warm heart, and is so responsive, and so quick to understand, and then she is so easily pleased, and so free from self-consciousness, you seem to know her all at once, and you feel as if it would be wicked to hurt her. So I don't know how it was exactly, but I began to give in about the bicycle; though I could not help mentioning that it was rather unnecessary for Aunt Rennie to have taken the trouble: for Tabitha might have told me if she wanted a bicycle so much. And Tabitha said that Aunt Rennie thought bicycling was good for her, and, when she lived with her, a year ago, her Aunt used to take her on her tours round the villages, distributing, what she called "political literature." This did make me shudder, I confess. Fancy Tabitha turning into one of those canvassing women, with their uncivilised energy, their irritating superiority, and their entire want of decent respect for you and your own opinions! I knew that Aunt Rennie belonged to a Woman Suffrage Committee, but I did think she had left the child uncontaminated. It made me more thankful than ever that I had rescued her from the hands of such a person. However, as you see, I could not refuse to let Tabitha ride that bicycle; but I always knew that harm would come of it.

And it came just in the way of which my inner consciousness had warned me. Now, of course, I never really expected to have Tabitha with me all her life: but I did want just for a little while to make-believe, as it were, that I had a daughter, and to feel as if she were happy and content with me. So it was rather hard that such a thing should happen, only the second time that she went out on that hideous machine. I can see her telling me about it now, kneeling down in her affectionate way by my sofa, all flushed and dishevelled after her ride, and with quite a new expression on her face. It seemed that she had punctured her bicycle (whatever that means) and could not get on: and then an "awfully nice man" (she will use the modern slang; in my days we should merely have said "a gentleman") came up with his tools and things, and put it right for her: and ended by claiming acquaintance and proposing to call, "Because, Mammy dear," said Tabitha, "isn't it funny, but he knows Aunt Rennie!"

Now, kind reader, I must confess that this was a little too much for me. To have Aunt Rennie (in spirit) perpetually between me and Tabitha was bad enough: to have her demoralising Tabitha by sending her bicycles was still worse: but to have her introducing, (I had nearly said intruding) young men into the privacy of my home, and into dangerous proximity with Tabitha was, for a moment, more than I could stand.

"Well, my child," said I, "No doubt Miss Rensworth and her friends were more amusing than your poor sick Mammy. I suppose it was selfish of me to want to have you all to myself. If you would like to go back to your Aunt Rennie again, dear child." I added, "you have only to say so."

What Tabitha said in reply I shall never forget; but neither, friendly reader, shall I tell it to you. So you must be content with knowing that we were friends again; and that the end of it was that I gave in about John Chambers—as his name turned out to be—just as I had given in about the bicycle.

He came in just as we were having tea the next day, and the worst of it was, I had to admit at once that he *was* nice. Of course this proved nothing in regard to Aunt Rennie and her friends: and it was just as unreasonable that I should be expected to receive whoever happened to know her, as if he had turned out to be vulgar or odious. But, as it was, he introduced himself in a sensible, straightforward way, looked one straight in the face when he spoke, had a deep, hearty laugh that sounded manly and true, and evidently entertained the friendliest sentiments for Tabitha.

Well, as you will imagine, kind reader, that tea was not the last he had with us. He fell into our ways with delightful readiness; indeed, he was rather "old-fashioned," as I call it. He would pour out my second cup of tea, if Tabitha happened to be out of the room, as nicely as she herself could have done, carefully washing the tea-leaves out of the cup first; and he would tell Tabitha if a piece of braid were hanging down from her skirt, when they were going bicycling together. We got quite used to being kept in order by him in all kinds of little ways, and he grew to be so associated with the idea of Tabitha in my mind, that my affection for her became in a sort of way an affection for them both. The only thing was that, as the months went on, I began to wonder why more did not come of it. Sometimes I fancied I noted a reflection of my own perplexed

doubts crossing Tabitha's sweet, expressive face, and I questioned within myself whether I ought (like the fathers in books) to ask the young man about his "intentions," and imply that he could not expect an unlimited supply of my cups of tea, unless they were made clear: but I think that my own delicacy as well as common sense prevented my taking such a course, and things were still *in statu quo*, when one morning, as I was peacefully mending Tabitha's gloves (she *will* go out with holes in them) a ring at the front door bell was followed by the advance of someone in rustling silk garments up the stairs: the drawing-room door was opened, and there appeared a young-looking, fair lady, who advanced brightly to greet me, with a finished society manner, and an expression in her kind, blue eyes of unmixed pleasure at the meeting. The name murmured at the door had not reached my ears, and I was still wondering which of my child-friends had developed into this charming and fashionable young lady, when Tabitha burst into the room, flung her arms round the new-comer's neck, and exclaimed, "You darling, who would have expected you to turn up so charmingly, just when we didn't expect you!"

The light slowly dawned on my amazed intelligence. Could *this—this* be the formidable, grey-haired woman, with whom I had been expecting, and somewhat dreading, sooner or later, an encounter? Could *this* be the spectacled Committee-woman—the rampant bicyclist—the corrupter of the youth of Tabitha? I looked at her immaculate dress, and pretty, neat hair; I noted the winning expression of her eyes, and her sweetness of manner; and instead of entrenching myself in the firm, though unspoken hostility, which I had secretly cherished towards the idea of Aunt Rennie, I felt myself yielding to the charm of a personality, whose richness and sweetness were to me like a new experience of life.

I thought I had grasped the outlines of that personality in the first interview, as we often do on forming a new acquaintance; but surprises were yet in store for me. Aunt Rennie needed but little pressing to stay the night, and then to add a second and a third day to her visit: she was staying with some friends in the neighbourhood, and, it appeared, could easily transfer herself to us. And as the time went on, I began to feel that she had some secondary object in coming and in staying: I thought I perceived a kind of diplomatic worldliness in Aunt Rennie, which jarred with my first impression of her. I felt sure that her purpose was in some way connected with Tabitha and John. She had, of course, heard of Tabitha's friendship for him from her own letters, and John she had known before we did. Well, it was on the fourth day that Aunt Rennie, sitting cosily beside me, startled me by suddenly and lightly remarking, that if I would consent, she wished to take Tabitha back with her, at any rate for a time, to her home in the South of England; she was almost necessary to her in her work at the present juncture: no one could act as her Secretary so efficiently as Tabitha could.

"Besides, to tell you a little secret," she added, with a charming air of confidence and humour, "there is someone besides me that wants Tabitha back: there is an excellent prospect for her, if she could only turn her thoughts in that direction. You have heard of Horace Wetherell, my second cousin—a rising barrister? Ah, well, a little bird has whispered things to me. His prospects are now very different from what they were when she was with me before, or I don't think she would ever have come to you, to say the truth! We must not let her get involved in anything doubtful. As you know, I have been acquainted with this John Chambers and his family all my life. He is a good fellow enough, but will never set the Thames on fire. She is exactly suited to my cousin, who is a man of the highest and noblest character, and could not fail to make her happy. It is only to take her away for a time, and I feel sure all will be well. I knew, my dear friend, that a word to you was enough, for Tabitha's sake: and so we will settle it between us."

I said little in reply, for I was suffering keenly. I felt as if this fair, clever woman had struck a deliberate blow at my happiness, and in a way to leave me resistless. I could not deny that it might be for Tabitha's good to go away. Certainly John was poor, and in fact I had thought lately that that might be the reason the engagement was delayed. Tabitha was only twenty-two, and she might change her mind. I murmured that I would leave it to Tabitha to decide; and as Aunt Rennie turned away, I remember thinking that she was rather young to decide another woman's destiny in such a matter. She was only six years older than Tabitha.

Tabitha often says that she owes her present happiness to Aunt Rennie, for if it had not been for the misery of the approaching separation, John, oppressed by the sense of his poverty and humble prospects, would never have had courage to tell her of his love. And I have sometimes amused myself by reflecting how Aunt Rennie's shrewdness, intelligence and determination, instead of working out her own ends, were all the time furthering the thing that was most opposed to her wishes.

When, after those few days that followed—days for me of heart-breaking conflict of feeling, and for my two children of tears, silent misery and struggling passion, culminating at last, when the storm burst, in complete mutual understanding, and a joint determination that carried all before it—when, I say, Aunt Rennie, defeated, prepared to take her leave, she said a word to me which I often thought of afterwards. "She is choosing blindfold, tinsel for gold." I thought of it, not on account of the expression, but of Aunt Rennie herself. There was something in the pallor of her face, and in her tone, that made me ask myself whether there could be anything in this matter that concerned Aunt Rennie herself more closely than we thought—and, for the moment, a new and motherly feeling rose up in my heart towards her.

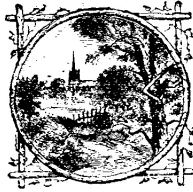
Well, she has left me my two children, and though John is only "in business," and they live on three hundred a year, they are very happy, and I am happy in their happiness.

It was a year after their marriage, that the news came that Aunt Rennie was engaged to be

married to her cousin. Horace Wetherell. And, as I pondered on it. I doubted whether I had, after all, quite understood the nobility of Aunt Rennie's character.

Horace Wetherell has become an M.P., and he and his wife write books together on social problems.

Poor John will never be an M.P., but I am glad that Tabitha loved him.



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