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Author: R. D. Blackmore

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRIDA; OR, THE LOVER'S LEAP: A LEGEND OF THE WEST COUNTRY ***

FRIDA; OR, THE LOVER'S LEAP, A LEGEND OF THE WEST COUNTRY.

By R. D. Blackmore

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CHAPTER I.

On the very day when Charles I. was crowned with due rejoicings—Candlemasday, in the year of our Lord 1626—a loyalty, quite as deep and perhaps even more lasting, was having its beer at Ley Manor in the north of Devon. A loyalty not to the king, for the old West-country folk knew little and cared less about the house that came over the Border; but to a lord who had won their hearts by dwelling among them, and dealing kindly, and paying his way every Saturday night. When this has been done for three generations general and genial respect may almost be relied upon.

The present Baron de Wichehalse was fourth in descent from that Hugh de Wichehalse, the head of an old and wealthy race, who had sacrificed his comfort to his resolve to have a will of his own in matters of religion. That Hugh de Wichehalse, having an eye to this, as well as the other world, contrived to sell his large estates before they were confiscated, and to escape with all the money, from very sharp measures then enforced, by order of King Philip II., in the unhappy Low Countries. Landing in England, with all his effects and a score of trusty followers, he bought a fine property, settled, and died, and left a good name behind him. And that good name had been well kept up, and the property had increased and thriven, so that the present lord was loved and admired by all the neighbourhood.

In one thing, however, he had been unlucky, at least in his own opinion. Ten years of married life had not found issue in parental life. All his beautiful rocks and hills, lovely streams and glorious woods, green meadows and golden corn lands, must pass to his nephew and not to his child, because he had not gained one. Being a good man, he did his best to see this thing in its proper light. Children, after all, are a plague, a risk, and a deep anxiety. His nephew was a very worthy boy, and his rights should be respected. Nevertheless, the baron often longed to supersede them. Of this there was every prospect now. The lady of the house had intrusted her case to a highly celebrated simple-woman, who lived among rocks and scanty vegetation at Heddon's Mouth, gathering wisdom from the earth and from the sea tranquillity. De Wichehalse was naturally vexed a little when all this accumulated wisdom culminated in nothing grander than a somewhat undersized, and unhappily female child—one, moreover, whose presence cost him that of his faithful and loving wife. So that the heiress of Ley Manor was greeted, after all, with a very brief and sorry welcome. "Jennyfried," for so they named her, soon began to grow into a fair esteem and good liking. Her father, after a year or two, plucked up his courage and played with her; and the more he played the more pleased he was, both with her and his own kind self. Unhappily, there were at that time no shops in the neighbourhood; unhappily, now there are too many. Nevertheless, upon the whole, she had all the toys that were good for her; and her teeth had a fair chance of fitting themselves for life's chief operation in the absence of sugared allurements.

A brief and meagre account is this of the birth, and growth, and condition of a maiden whose beauty and goodness still linger in the winter tales of many a simple homestead. For, sharing her father's genial nature, she went about among the people in her soft and playful way; knowing all their cares, and gifted with a kindly wonder at them, which is very soothing. All the simple folk expected condescension from her; and she would have let them have it, if she had possessed it.

At last she was come to a time of life when maidens really must begin to consider their responsibilities—a time when it does matter how the dress sits and what it is made of, and whether the hair is well arranged for dancing in the sunshine and for fluttering in the moonlight; also that the eyes convey not from that roguish nook the heart any betrayal of "hide and seek"; neither must the risk of blushing tremble on perpetual brinks; neither must—but, in a word, 'twas the seventeenth year of a maiden's life.

More and more such matters gained on her motherless necessity. Strictly anxious as she was to do the right thing always, she felt more and more upon every occasion (unless it was something particular) that her cousin need not so impress his cousinly salutation.

Albert de Wichehalse (who received that name before it became so inevitable) was that same worthy boy grown up as to whom the baron had felt compunctions, highly honourable to either party, touching his defeasance; or rather, perhaps, as to interception of his presumptive heirship by the said Albert, or at least by his mother contemplated. And Albert's father had entrusted him to his uncle's special care and love, having comfortably made up his mind, before he left this evil world, that his son should have a good slice of it.

Now, therefore, the baron's chief desire was to heal all breaches and make things pleasant, and to keep all the family property snug by marrying his fair Jennyfried (or "Frida," as she was called at home) to her cousin Albert, now a fine young fellow of five-and-twenty. De Wichehalse was strongly attached to his nephew, and failed to see any good reason why a certain large farm near Martinhoe, quite a huge cantle from the Ley estates, which by a prior devise must fall to Albert upon his own demise, should be allowed to depart in that way from his posthumous control.

However, like most of our fallible race, he went the worst possible way to work in pursuit of his favourite purpose. He threw the young people together daily, and dinned into the ears of each perpetual praise of the other. This seemed to answer well enough in the case of the simple Albert. He could never have too much of his lively cousin's company, neither could he weary of sounding her sweet excellence. But with the young maid it was not so. She liked the good Albert well enough, and never got out of his way at all. Moreover, sometimes his curly hair and bright moustache, when they came too near, would raise not a positive flutter, perhaps, but a sense of some fugitive movement in the unexplored distances of the heart. Still, this might go on for years, and nothing more to come of it. Frida loved her father best of all the world, at present.

CHAPTER II.

There happened to be at this time an old foggy—of course it is most distressing to speak of anyone disrespectfully; but when one thinks of the trouble he caused, and not only that, but he was an old foggy, essentially and pre-eminently—and his name was Sir Maunder Meddleby. This worthy baronet, one of the first of a newly invented order, came in his sled stuffed with goose-feathers (because he was too fat to ride, and no wheels were yet known on the hill tracks) to talk about some exchange of land with his old friend, our De Wichehalse. The baron and the baronet had been making a happy day of it. Each knew pretty well exactly what his neighbour's little rashness might be hoped to lead to, and each in his mind was pretty sure of having the upper hand of it. Therefore both their hearts were open—business being now dismissed, and dinner over—to one another. They sat in a beautiful place, and drew refreshment of mind through their outward lips by means of long reeden tubes with bowls at their ends, and something burning.

Clouds of delicate vapour wandered round and betwixt them and the sea; and each was well content to wonder whether the time need ever come when he must have to think again. Suddenly a light form flitted over the rocks, as the shadows flit; and though Frida ran away for fear of interrupting them, they knew who it was, and both, of course, began to think about her.

The baron gave a puff of his pipe, and left the baronet to begin. In course of time Sir Maunder spoke, with all that breadth and beauty of the vowels and the other things which a Devonshire man commands, from the lord lieutenant downward.

"If so be that 'ee gooth vor to ax me, ai can zay wan thing, and wan oney."

"What one thing is it, good neighbour? I am well content with her as she is."

"Laikely enough. And 'e wad be zo till 'e zeed a zummut fainer."

"I want to see nothing finer or better than what we have seen just now, sir."

"There, you be like all varthers, a'most! No zort o' oose to advise 'un."

"Nay, nay! Far otherwise. I am not by any means of that nature. Sir Maunder Meddleby, I have the honour of craving your opinion."

Sir Maunder Meddleby thought for a while, or, at any rate, meant to be thinking, ere ever he dared to deliver himself of all his weighty judgment.

"I've a-knowed she, my Lord Witcher, ever since her wore that haigh. A purty wanch, and a peart one. But her wanteth the vinish of the coort. Never do no good wi'out un, whan a coomth, as her must, to coorting."

This was the very thing De Wichehalse was afraid to hear of. He had lived so mild a life among the folk who loved him that any fear of worry in great places was too much for him. And yet sometimes he could not help a little prick of thought about his duty to his daughter. Hence it came that common sense was driven wild by conscience, as forever happens with the few who keep that gadfly. Six great horses, who knew no conscience but had more fleshly tormentors, were ordered out, and the journey began, and at last it ended.

Everything in London now was going almost anyhow. Kind and worthy people scarcely knew the way to look at things. They desired to respect the king and all his privilege, and yet they found his mind so wayward that they had no hold of him.

The court, however, was doing its best, from place to place in its wanderings, to despise the uproar and enjoy itself as it used to do. Bright and beautiful ladies gathered round the king, when the queen was gone, persuading him and one another that they must have their own way.

Of the lords who helped these ladies to their strong opinions there was none in higher favour with the queen and the king himself than the young Lord Auberley. His dress was like a sweet enchantment, and his tongue was finer still, and his grace and beauty were as if no earth existed. Frida was a new thing to him, in her pure simplicity. He to her was such a marvel, such a mirror of the skies, as a maid can only dream of in the full moon of St. John.

Little dainty glance, and flushing, and the fear to look too much, and the stealthy joy of feeling that there must be something meant, yet the terror of believing anything in earnest and the hope that, after all, there may be nought to come of it; and when this hope seems over true, the hollow of the heart behind it, and the longing to be at home with anyone to love oneself—time is wasted in recounting this that always must be.

Enough that Frida loved this gallant from the depths of her pure heart, while he admired and loved her to the best of his ability.

CHAPTER III.

The worthy baron was not of a versatile complexion. When his mind was quite made up he carried out the whole of it. But he could not now make up his mind upon either of two questions. Of these questions one was this—should he fight for the king or against him, in the struggle now begun? By hereditary instincts he was stanch for liberty, for letting people have their own opinions who could pay for them. And about religious matters and the royal view of them, he fell under sore misgiving that his grandfather on high would have a bone to pick with him.

His other difficulty was what to say, or what to think, about Lord Auberley. To his own plain way of judging,

and that human instinct which, when highly cultivated, equals that of the weaker dogs, also to his recollection of what used to be expected in the time when he was young, Viscount Auberley did not give perfect satisfaction.

Nevertheless, being governed as strong folk are by the gentle ones, the worthy baron winked at little things which did not please him, and went so far as to ask that noble spark to flash upon the natives of benighted Devon. Lord Auberley was glad enough to retire for a season, both for other reasons and because he saw that bitter fighting must be soon expected. Hence it happened that the six great Flemish horses were buckled to, early in September of the first year of the civil war, while the king was on his westward march collecting men and money. The queen was not expected back from the Continent for another month; there had scarcely been for all the summer even the semblance of a court fit to teach a maiden lofty carriage and cold dignity; so that Lord de Wichehalse thought Sir Maunder Meddleby an oaf for sending him to London.

But there was someone who had tasted strong delight and shuddering fear, glowing hope and chill despair, triumph, shame, and all confusion of the heart and mind and will, such as simple maidens hug into their blushing chastity by the moonlight of first love. Frida de Wichehalse knew for certain, and forever felt it settled, that in all the world of worlds never had been any body, any mind, or even soul, fit to think of twice when once you had beheld Lord Auberley.

His young lordship, on the whole, was much of the same opinion. Low fellows must not have the honour to discharge their guns at him. He liked the king, and really meant no harm whatever to his peace of mind concerning his Henrietta; and, if the worst came to the worst, everyone knew that out of France there was no swordsman fit to meet, even with a rapier, the foil of Aubyn Auberley. Neither was it any slur upon his loyalty or courage that he was now going westward from the world of camps and war. It was important to secure the wavering De Wichehalse, the leading man of all the coast, from Mine-head down to Hartland; so that, with the full consent of all the king's advisers, Lord Auberley left court and camp to press his own suit peacefully. What a difference he found it to be here in mid-September, far away from any knowledge of the world and every care; only to behold the manner of the trees disrobing, blushing with a trembling wonder at the freedom of the winds, or in the wealth of deep wood browning into rich defiance; only to observe the colour of the hills, and cliffs, and glens, and the glory of the sea underneath the peace of heaven, when the balanced sun was striking level light all over them! And if this were not enough to make a man contented with his littleness and largeness, then to see the freshened Pleiads, after their long dip of night, over the eastern waters twinkling, glad to see us all once more and sparkling to be counted.

These things, and a thousand others, which (without a waft of knowledge or of thought on our part) enter into and become our sweetest recollections, for the gay young lord possessed no charm, nor even interest. "Dull, dull, how dull it is!" was all he thought when he thought at all; and he vexed his host by asking how he could live in such a hole as that. And he would have vexed his young love, too, if young love were not so large of heart, by asking what the foreign tongue was which "her people" tried to speak. "Their native tongue and mine, my lord!" cried Frida, with the sweetness of her smile less true than usual, because she loved her people and the air of her nativity.

However, take it altogether, this was a golden time for her. Golden trust and reliance are the well-spring of our nature, and that man is the happiest who is cheated every day almost. The pleasure is tenfold as great in being cheated as to cheat. Therefore Frida was as happy as the day and night are long. Though the trees were striped with autumn, and the green of the fields was waning, and the puce of the heath was faded into dingy cinnamon; though the tint of the rocks was darkened by the nightly rain and damp, and the clear brooks were beginning to be hoarse with shivering floods, and the only flowers left were but widows of the sun, yet she had the sovereign comfort and the cheer of trustful love. Lord Auberley, though he cared nought for the Valley of Rocks or Watersmeet, for beetling majesty of the cliffs or mantled curves of Woody Bay, and though he accounted the land a wilderness and the inhabitants savages, had taken a favourable view of the ample spread of the inland farms and the loyalty of the tenants, which naturally suggested the raising of the rental. Therefore he grew more attentive to young Mistress Frida; even sitting in shady places, which it made him damp to think of when he turned his eyes from her. Also he was moved a little by her growing beauty, for now the return to her native hills, the presence of her lover, and the home-made bread and forest mutton, combining with her dainty years, were making her look wonderful. If Aubyn Auberley had not been despoiled of all true manliness, by the petting and the froward wit of many a foreign lady, he might have won the pure salvation of an earnest love. But, when judged by that French standard which was now supreme at court, this poor Frida was a rustic, only fit to go to school. There was another fine young fellow who thought wholly otherwise. To him, in his simple power of judging for himself, and seldom budging from that judgment, there was no one fit to dream of in comparison with her. Often, in this state of mind, he longed to come forward and let them know what he thought concerning the whole of it. But Albert could not see his way toward doing any good with it, and being of a bashful mind, he kept his heart in order.

CHAPTER IV.

The stir of the general rising of the kingdom against the king had not disturbed these places yet beyond what might be borne with. Everybody liked to talk, and everybody else was ready to put in a word or two; broken heads, however, were as yet the only issue. So that when there came great news of a real battle fought, and lost by Englishmen against Englishmen, the indignation of all the country ran against both parties.

Baron de Wichehalse had been thinking, after his crop of hay was in,—for such a faithful hay they have that it will not go from root to rick by less than two months of worrying,—from time to time, and even in the middle of his haycocks, this good lord had not been able to perceive his proper course. Arguments there were

that sounded quite as if a baby must be perfectly convinced by them; and then there would be quite a different line of reason taken by someone who knew all about it and despised the opposite. So that many of a less decided way of thinking every day embraced whatever had been last confuted.

This most manly view of matters and desire to give fair play was scorned, of course, by the fairer (and unfairer) half of men. Frida counted all as traitors who opposed their liege the king.

"Go forth, my lord; go forth and fight," she cried to Viscount Auberley, when the doubtful combat of Edgehill was firing new pugnacity; "if I were a man, think you that I would let them do so?"

"Alas, fair mistress! it will take a many men to help it. But since you bid me thus away—hi, Dixon! get my trunks packed!" And then, of course, her blushing roses faded to a lily white; and then, of course, it was his duty to support her slender form; neither were those dulcet murmurs absent which forever must be present when the female kind begin to have the best of it.

So they went on once or twice, and would have gone on fifty times if fortune had allowed them thus to hang on one another. All the world was fair around them; and themselves, as fair as any, vouched the whole world to attest their everlasting constancy.

But one soft November evening, when the trees were full of drops, and gentle mists were creeping up the channels of the moorlands, and snipes (come home from foreign parts) were cheeping at their borings, and every weary man was gladdened by the glance of a bright wood fire, and smell of what was over it, there happened to come, on a jaded horse, a man, all hat, and cape, and boots, and mud, and sweat, and grumbling. All the people saw at once that it was quite impossible to make at all too much of him, because he must be full of news, which (after victuals) is the greatest need of human nature. So he had his own way as to everything he ordered; and, having ridden into much experience of women, kept himself as warm as could be, without any jealousy.

This stern man bore urgent order for the Viscount Auberley to join the king at once at Oxford, and bring with him all his gathering. Having gathered no men yet, but spent the time in plucking roses and the wild myrtles of Devonshire love, the young lord was for once a little taken aback at this order. Moreover, though he had been grumbling, half a dozen times a day—to make himself more precious—about the place, and the people, and the way they cooked his meals, he really meant it less and less as he came to know the neighbourhood. These are things which nobody can understand without seeing them.

"I grieve, my lord," said the worthy baron, "that you must leave us in this high haste." On the whole, however, this excellent man was partly glad to be quit of him.

"And I am deeply indebted to your lordship for the grievance; but it must be so. *Que voulez-vous?* You talk the French, *mon baron?*"

"With a Frenchman, my lord; but not when I have the honour to speak with an Englishman."

"Ah, there Foreign again! My lord, you will never speak English."

De Wichehalse could never be quite sure, though his race had been long in this country, whether he or they could speak born English as it ought to be.

"Perhaps you will find," he said at last, with grief as well as courtesy, "many who speak one language Striving to silence one another."

"He fights best who fights the longest. You will come with us, my lord?"

"Not a foot, not half an inch," the baron answered sturdily. "I've a-laboured hard to zee my best, and 'a can't zee head nor tail to it."

Thus he spoke in imitation of what his leading tenant said, smiling brightly at himself, but sadly at his subject.

"Even so!" the young man answered; "I will forth and pay my duty. The rusty-weathercock, my lord, is often too late for the oiling."

With this conceit he left De Wichehalse, and, while his grooms were making ready, sauntered down the zigzag path, which, through rocks and stubbed oaks, made toward the rugged headland known, far up and down the Channel, by the name of Duty Point. Near the end of this walk there lurked a soft and silent bower, made by Nature, and with all of Nature's art secluded. The ledge that wound along the rock-front widened, and the rock fell back and left a little cove, retiring into moss and ferny shade. Here the maid was well accustomed every day to sit and think, gazing down at the calm, gray sea, and filled with rich content and deep capacity of dreaming.

Here she was, at the present moment, resting in her pure love-dream, believing all the world as good, and true, and kind as her own young self. Round her all was calm and lovely; and the soft brown hand of autumn, with the sun's approval, tempered every mellow mood of leaves.

Aubyn Auberley was not of a sentimental cast of mind. He liked the poets of the day, whenever he deigned to read them; nor was he at all above accepting the dedication of a book. But it was not the fashion now—as had been in the noble time of Watson, Raleigh, and Shakspeare—for men to look around and love the greater things they grow among.

Frida was surprised to see her dainty lord so early. She came here in the morning always, when it did not rain too hard, to let her mind have pasture on the landscape of sweet memory. And even sweeter hope was always fluttering in the distance, on the sea, or clouds, or flitting vapour of the morning. Even so she now was looking at the mounting glory of the sun above the sea-clouds, the sun that lay along the land, and made the distance roll away.

"Hard and bitter is my task," the gallant lord began with her, "to say farewell to all I love. But so it ever must be."

Frida looked at his riding-dress, and cold fear seized her suddenly, and then warm hope that he might only be riding after the bustards.

"My lord," she said, "will you never grant me that one little prayer of mine—to spare poor birds, and make those cruel gaze-hounds run down one another?"

"I shall never see the gaze-hounds more," he answered petulantly; "my time for sport is over. I must set forth for the war to-day."

"To-day!" she cried; and then tried to say a little more for pride's sake; "to go to the war to-day, my lord!"

"Alas! it is too true. Either I must go, or be a traitor and a dastard."

Her soft blue eyes lay full on his, and tears that had not time to flow began to spread a hazy veil between her and the one she loved.

He saw it, and he saw the rise and sinking of her wounded heart, and how the words she tried to utter fell away and died within her for the want of courage; and light and hard, and mainly selfish as his nature was, the strength, and depth, and truth of love came nigh to scare him for the moment even of his vanities.

"Frida!" he said, with her hand in his, and bending one knee on the moss; "only tell me that I must stay; then stay I will; the rest of the world may scorn if you approve me."

This, of course, sounded very well and pleased her, as it was meant to do; still, it did not satisfy her—so exacting are young maidens, and so keen is the ear of love.

"Aubyn, you are good and true. How very good and true you are! But even by your dear voice now I know what you are thinking."

Lord Auberley, by this time, was as well within himself again as he generally found himself; so that he began to balance chances very knowingly. If the king should win the warfare and be paramount again, this bright star of the court must rise to something infinitely higher than a Devonshire squire's child. A fine young widow of a duke, of the royal blood of France itself, was not far from being quite determined to accept him, if she only could be certain how these things would end themselves. Many other ladies were determined quite as bravely to wait the course of events, and let him have them, if convenient. On the other hand, if the kingdom should succeed in keeping the king in order—which was the utmost then intended—Aubyn Auberley might be only too glad to fall back upon Frida.

Thinking it wiser, upon the whole, to make sure of this little lamb, with nobler game in prospect, Lord Auberley heaved a sigh as the size of his chest could compass. After which he spoke as follows, in a most delicious tone:

"Sweetest, and my only hope, the one star of my wanderings; although you send me forth to battle, where my arm is needed, give me one dear pledge that ever you will live and die my own."

This was just what Frida wanted, having trust (as our free-traders, by vast amplitude of vision, have in reciprocity) that if a man gets the best of a woman he is sure to give it back. Therefore these two sealed and delivered certain treaties (all unwritten, but forever engraven upon the best and tenderest feelings of the lofty human nature) that nothing less than death, or even greater, should divide them.

Is there one, among the many who survive such process, unable to imagine or remember how they parted? The fierce and even desperate anguish, nursed and made the most of; the pride and self-control that keep such things for comfort afterward; the falling of the heart that feels itself the true thing after all. Let it be so, since it must be; and no sympathy can heal it, since in every case it never, never, was so bad before!

CHAPTER V.

Lovers come, and lovers go; ecstasies of joy and anguish have their proper intervals; and good young folk, who know no better, revel in high misery. But the sun ascends the heavens at the same hour of the day, by himself dictated; and if we see him not, it is our earth that spreads the curtain. Nevertheless, these lovers, being out of rule with everything, heap their own faults on his head, and want him to be setting always, that they may behold the moon.

Therefore it was useless for the wisest man in the north of Devon, or even the wisest woman, to reason with young Frida now, or even to let her have the reason upon her side, and be sure of it. She, for her part, was astray from all the bounds of reason, soaring on the wings of faith, and hope, and high delusion. Though the winter-time was coming, and the wind was damp and raw, and the beauty of the valleys lay down to recover itself; yet with her the spring was breaking, and the world was lifting with the glory underneath it. Because it had been firmly pledged—and who could ever doubt it?—that the best and noblest lover in this world of noble love would come and grandly claim and win his bride on her next birthday.

At Christmas she had further pledge of her noble lover's constancy. In spite of difficulties, dangers, and the pressing need of men, he contrived to send her by some very valiant messengers (none of whom would ride alone) a beautiful portrait of himself, set round with sparkling diamonds; also a necklace of large pearls, as white and pure as the neck whose grace was to enhance their beauty.

Hereupon such pride and pleasure mounted into her cheeks and eyes, and flushed her with young gaiety, that all who loved her, being grafted with good superstition, nearly spoiled their Christmas-time by serious sagacity. She, however, in the wealth of all she had to think of, heeded none who trod the line of prudence and cold certainty.

"It is more than I can tell," she used to say, most prettily, to anybody who made bold to ask her about anything; "all things go so in and out that I am sure of nothing else except that I am happy."

The baron now began to take a narrow, perhaps a natural, view of all the things around him. In all the world there was for him no sign or semblance of any being whose desires or strictest rights could be thought of more than once when set against his daughter's. This, of course, was very bad for Frida's own improvement. It could not make her selfish yet, but it really made her wayward. The very best girls ever seen are sure to have their failings; and Frida, though one of the very best, was not above all nature. People made too much of this, when she could no more defend herself.

Whoever may have been to blame, one thing at least is certain—the father, though he could not follow all his child's precipitance, yet was well contented now to stoop his gray head to bright lips, and do his best toward believing some of their soft eloquence. The child, on the other hand, was full of pride, and rose on tiptoe, lest anybody might suppose her still too young for anything. Thus between them they looked forward to a pleasant time to come, hoping for the best, and judging everyone with charity.

The thing that vexed them most (for always there must, of course, be something) was the behaviour of Albert, nephew to the baron, and most loving cousin of Frida. Nothing they could do might bring him to spend his Christmas with them; and this would be the first time ever since his long-clothed babyhood that he had failed to be among them, and to lead or follow, just as might be required of him. Such a guest has no small value in a lonely neighbourhood, and years of usage mar the circle of the year without him.

Christmas passed, and New Year's Day, and so did many other days. The baron saw to his proper work, and took his turn of hunting, and entertained his neighbours, and pleased almost everybody. Much against his will, he had consented to the marriage of his daughter with Lord Auberley—to make the best of a bad job, as he told Sir Maunder Meddleby. Still, this kind and crafty father had his own ideas; for the moment he was swimming with the tide to please his daughter, even as for her dear sake he was ready to sink beneath it. Yet, these fathers have a right to form their own opinions; and for the most part they believe that they have more experience. Frida laughed at this, of course, and her father was glad to see her laugh. Nevertheless, he could not escape some respect for his own opinion, having so rarely found it wrong; and his own opinion was that something was very likely to happen.

In this he proved to be quite right. For many things began to happen, some on the-right and some on the left hand of the-baron's auguries. All of them, however, might be reconciled exactly with the very thing he had predicted. He noticed this, and it pleased him well, and inspired him so that he started anew for even truer prophecies. And everybody round the place was-born so to respect him that, if he missed the mark a little, they could hit it for him.

Things stood thus at the old Ley Manor—and folk were content to have them so, for fear of getting worse, perhaps—toward the end of January, a. d. 1643. De Wichehalse had vowed that his only child—although so clever for her age, and prompt of mind and body—should not enter into marriage until she was in her eighteenth year. Otherwise, it would, no doubt, have all been settled long ago; for Aubyn Auberley sometimes had been in the greatest hurry. However, hither he must come now, as everybody argued, even though the fate of England hung on his stirrup-leather. Because he had even sent again, with his very best intentions, fashionable things for Frida, and the hottest messages; so that, if they did not mean him to be quite beside himself, everything must be smoking for his wedding at the Candlemas.

But when everything and even everybody else—save Albert and the baron, and a few other obstinate people—was and were quite ready and rejoicing for a grand affair, to be celebrated with well-springs of wine and delightfully cordial Watersmeet, rocks of beef hewn into valleys, and conglomerate cliffs of pudding; when ruddy dame and rosy damsel were absorbed in “what to wear,” and even steady farmers were in “practice for the back step”; in a word, when all the country was gone wild about Frida's wedding—one night there happened to come a man.

This man tied his horse to a gate and sneaked into the back yard, and listened in a quiet corner, knowing, as he did, the ins and outs and ways of the kitchen. Because he was that very same man who understood the women so, and made himself at home, by long experience, in new places. It had befallen this man, as it always befell any man of perception, to be smitten with the kindly loveliness of Frida. Therefore, now, although he was as hungry as ever he had been, his heart was such that he heard the sound of dishes, yet drew no nearer. Experience of human nature does not always spoil it.

CHAPTER VI.

When the baron at last received the letter which this rider had been so abashed to deliver, slow but lasting wrath began to gather in his gray-lashed eyes. It was the inborn anger of an honest man at villany mixed with lofty scorn and traversed by a dear anxiety. Withal he found himself so helpless that he scarce knew what to do. He had been to Frida both a father and a mother, as she often used to tell him when she wanted something; but now he felt that no man could administer the velvet touches of the female sympathy.

Moreover, although he was so kind, and had tried to think what his daughter thought, he found himself in a most ungenial mood for sweet condolment. Any but the best of fathers would have been delighted with the proof of all his prophecies and the riddance of a rogue. So that even he, though dwelling in his child's heart as his own, read this letter (when the first emotions had exploded) with a real hope that things, in the long run, would come round again.

“To my most esteemed and honoured friend, the Lord de Wichehalse, these from his most observant and most grateful Aubya Auberley,—Under command of his Majesty, our most Royal Lord and King, I have this day been joined in bands of holy marriage with her Highness, the Duchess of B—, in France. At one time I had hope of favour with your good Lordship's daughter, neither could I have desired more complete promotion. But the service of the kingdom and the doubt of my own desert have forced me, in these troublous times, to forego mine own ambition. Our lord the King enjoins you with his Royal commendation, to bring your forces toward Bristowe by the day of St. Valentine. There shall I be in hope to meet your Lordship, and again find pleasure in such goodly company. Until then I am

Lord de Wichehalse made his mind up not to let his daughter know until the following morning what a heavy blow had fallen on her faith and fealty. But, as evil chance would have it, the damsels of the house—and most of all the gentle cook-maid—could not but observe the rider's state of mind toward them. He managed to eat his supper in a dark state of parenthesis; but after that they plied him with some sentimental mixtures, and, being only a man at best, although a very trusty one, he could not help the rise of manly wrath at every tumbler. So, in spite of dry experience and careworn discretion, at last he let the woman know the whole of what himself knew. Nine good females crowded round him, and, of course, in their kind bosoms every word of all his story germinated ninety-fold.

Hence it came to pass that, after floods of tears in council and stronger language than had right to come from under aprons, Frida's nurse (the old herb-woman, now called "Mother Eyebright") was appointed to let her know that very night the whole of it. Because my lord might go on mooning for a month about it, betwixt his love of his daughter and his quiet way of taking things; and all that while the dresses might be cut, and trimmed, and fitted to a size and fashion all gone by before there came a wedding.

Mother Eyebright so was called both from the brightness of her eyes and her faith in that little simple flower, the euphrasia. Though her own love-tide was over, and the romance of life had long relapsed into the old allegiance to the hour of dinner, yet her heart was not grown tough to the troubles of the young ones; therefore all that she could do was done, but it was little.

Frida, being almost tired with the blissful cares of dress, happened to go up that evening earlier than her wont to bed. She sat by herself in the firelight, with many gorgeous things around her—wedding presents from great people, and (what touched her more) the humble offerings of her cottage friends. As she looked on these and thought of all the good will they expressed, and how a little kindness gathers such a heap of gratitude, glad tears shone in her bright eyes, and she only wished that all the world could be as blessed as she was.

To her entered Mother Eyebright, now unworthy of her name; and sobbing, writhing, crushing anguish is a thing which even Frida, simple and open-hearted one, would rather keep to her own poor self.

CHAPTER VII.

Upon the following day she was not half so wretched and lamentable as was expected of her. She even showed a brisk and pleasant air to the chief seamstress, and bade her keep some pretty things for the time of her own wedding. Even to her father she behaved as if there had been nothing more than happens every day. The worthy baron went to fold her in his arms, and let her cry there; but she only gave him a kiss, and asked the maid for some salt butter. Lord de Wichehalse, being disappointed of his outlet, thought (as all his life he had been forced to think continually) that any sort of woman, whether young or old, is wonderful. And so she carried on, and no one well could understand her.

She, however, in her own heart, knew the ups and downs of it. She alone could feel the want of any faith remaining, the ache of ever stretching forth and laying hold on nothing. Her mind had never been encouraged—as with maidens nowadays—to magnify itself, and soar, and scorn the heart that victuals it. All the deeper was her trouble, being less to be explained.

For a day or two the story is that she contrived to keep her distance, and her own opinion of what had been done to her. Child and almost baby as her father had considered her, even he was awed from asking what she meant to do about it. Something seemed to keep her back from speaking of her trouble, or bearing to have it spoken of. Only to her faithful hound, with whom she now began again to wander in the oak-wood, to him alone had she the comfort of declaring anything. This was a dog of fine old English breed and high connections, his great-grandmother having owned a kennel at Whitehall itself—a very large and well-conducted dog, and now an old one, going down into his grave without a stain upon him. Only he had shown such foul contempt of Aubyn Auberley, proceeding to extremes of ill-behaviour toward his raiment, that for months young Frida had been forced to keep him chained, and take her favourite walks without him.

"Ah, Lear!" now she cried, with sense of long injustice toward him; "you were right, and I was wrong; at least—at least it seems so."

"Lear," so called whether by some man who had heard of Shakspeare, or (as seems more likely) from his peculiar way of contemplating the world at his own angle, shook his ears when thus addressed, and looked too wise for any dog to even sniff his wisdom.

Frida now allowed this dog to lead the way, and she would follow, careless of whatever mischief might be in the road for them. So he led her, without care or even thought on her part, to a hut upon the beach of Woody Bay; where Albert had set up his staff, to think of her and watch her. This, her cousin and true lover, had been grieving for her sorrow to the utmost power of a man who wanted her himself. It may have been beyond his power to help saying to himself sometimes, "How this serves her right, for making such a laughing-stock of me!" Nevertheless, he did his utmost to be truly sorrowful.

And now, as he came forth to meet her, in his fishing dress and boots (as different a figure as could be from Aubyn Auberley), memories of childish troubles and of strong protection thrilled her with a helpless hope of something to be done for her. So she looked at him, and let him see the state her eyes were in with constant crying, when there was not anyone to notice it. Also, she allowed him to be certain what her hands were like, and to be surprised how much she had fallen away in her figure. Neither was she quite as proud as might

have been expected, to keep her voice from trembling or her plundered heart from sobbing. Only, let not anybody say a word to comfort her. Anything but that she now could bear, as she bore everything. It was, of course, the proper thing for everyone to scorn her. That, of course, she had fully earned, and met it, therefore, with disdain. Only, she could almost hate anybody who tried to comfort her.

Albert de Wichehalse, with a sudden start of intuition, saw what her father had been unable to descry or even dream. The worthy baron's time of life for fervid thoughts was over; for him despairing love was but a poet's fiction, or a joke against a pale young lady. But Albert felt from his own case, from burning jealousy suppressed, and cold neglect put up with, and all the other many-pointed aches of vain devotion, how sad must be the state of things when plighted faith was shattered also, and great ridicule left behind, with only a young girl to face it, motherless, and having none to stroke dishevelled hair, and coax the troubles by the firelight. However, this good fellow did the utmost he could do for her. Love and pity led him into dainty loving kindness; and when he could not find his way to say the right thing, he did better—he left her to say it. And so well did he move her courage, in his old protective way, without a word that could offend her or depreciate her love, that she for the moment, like a woman, wondered at her own despair. Also, like a woman, glancing into this and that, instead of any steadfast gazing, she had wholesome change of view, winning sudden insight into Albert's thoughts concerning her. Of course, she made up her mind at once, although her heart was aching so for want of any tenant, in a moment to extinguish any such presumption. Still, she would have liked to have it made a little clearer, if it were for nothing else than to be sure of something.

Albert saw her safely climb the steep and shaly walk that led, among retentive oak trees, or around the naked gully, all the way from his lonely cottage to the light, and warmth, and comfort of the peopled Manor House. And within himself he thought, the more from contrast of his own cold comfort and untended state:

"Ah! she will forget it soon; she is so young. She will soon get over that gay frippard's fickleness. Tomorrow I will start upon my little errand cheerfully. After that she will come round; they cannot feel as we do."

Full of these fond hopes, he started on the following morning with set purpose to compel the man whom he had once disliked, and now despised unspeakably, to render some account of despite done to such a family. For, after all, the dainty viscount was the grandson of a goldsmith, who by brokerage for the Crown had earned the balls of his coronet. In quest of this gay fellow went the stern and solid Albert, leaving not a word about his purpose there behind him, but allowing everybody to believe what all found out. All found out, as he expected, that he was gone to sell his hay, perhaps as far as Taunton; and all the parish, looking forward to great rise of forage, felt indignant that he had not doubled his price, and let them think.

Alack-a-day and all the year round! that men perceive not how the women differ from them in the very source of thought Albert never dreamed that his cousin, after doing so long without him, had now relapsed quite suddenly into her childish dependence upon him. And when she heard, on the following day, that he was gone for the lofty purpose of selling his seven ricks of hay, she said not a word, but only felt her cold heart so much colder.

CHAPTER VIII.

She had nothing now to do, and nobody to speak to; though her father did his utmost, in his kind and clumsy way, to draw his darling close to him. But she knew that all along he had disliked her idol, and she fancied, now and then, that this dislike had had something perhaps to do with what had befallen her. This, of course, was wrong on her part. But when youth and faith are wronged, the hurt is very apt to fly to all the tender places. Even the weather also seemed to have taken a turn against her. No wholesome frost set in to brace the slackened joints and make her walk until she began to tingle; neither was there any snow to spread a new cast on the rocks and gift the trees with airiness; nor even what mild winters, for the most part, bring in counterpoise—soft, obedient skies, and trembling pleasure of the air and earth. But—as over her own love—over all the country hung just enough of mist and chill to shut out cheerful prospect, and not enough to shut folk in to the hearth of their own comfort.

In her dull, forlorn condition, Frida still, through force of habit or the love of solitude, made her daily round of wood and rock, seashore and moorland. Things seemed to come across her now, instead of her going to them, and her spirit failed at every rise of the hilly road against her. In that dreary way she lingered, hoping nothing, fearing nothing, showing neither sigh nor tear, only seeking to go somewhere and be lost from self and sorrow in the cloudy and dark day.

Often thus the soft, low moaning of the sea encompassed her, where she stood, in forgotten beauty, careless of the wind and wave. The short, uneasy heave of waters in among the kelpy rocks, flowing from no swell or furrow on the misty glass of sea, but like a pulse of discontent, and longing to go further; after the turn, the little rattle of invaded pebbles, the lithe relapse and soft, shampooing lambency of oarweed, then the laved boulders pouring gritty runnels back again, and every basined outlet wavering toward another inlet; these, and every phase of each innumerable to-and-fro, made or met their impress in her fluctuating misery.

"It is the only rest," she said; "the only chance of being quiet, after all that I have done, and all that people say of me."

None had been dastard enough to say a syllable against her; neither had she, in the warmest faith of love, forgotten truth; but her own dejection drove her, not to revile the world (as sour natures do consistently), but to shrink from sight, and fancy that the world was reviling her.

While she fluttered thus and hovered over the cold verge of death, with her sore distempered spirit, scarcely sure of anything, tidings came of another trouble, and turned the scale against her. Albert de

Wichehalse, her trusty cousin and true lover, had fallen in a duel with that recreant and miscreant Lord Auberley. The strictest orders were given that this should be kept for the present from Frida's ears; but what is the use of the strictest orders when a widowed mother raves? Albert's mother vowed that "the shameless jilt" should hear it out, and slipped her guards and waylaid Frida on the morn of Candlemas, and overbore her with such words as may be well imagined.

"Auntie!" said the poor thing at last, shaking her beautiful curls, and laying one little hand to her empty heart, "don't be cross with me to-day. I am going home to be married, auntie. It is the day my Aubyn always fixed, and he never fails me."

"Little fool!" her aunt exclaimed, as Frida kissed her hand and courtesied, and ran round the corner; "one comfort is to know that she is as mad as a mole, at any rate."

CHAPTER IX.

Frida, knowing—perhaps more deeply than that violent woman thought—the mischief thus put into her, stole back to her bedroom, and, without a word to anyone, tired her hair in the Grecian snood which her lover used to admire so, and arrayed her soft and delicate form in all the bridal finery. Perhaps, that day, no bride in England—certainly none of her youth and beauty—treated her favourite looking-glass with such contempt and ingratitude. She did not care to examine herself, through some reluctant sense of havoc, and a bitter fear that someone might be disappointed in her. Then at the last, when all was ready, she snatched up her lover's portrait (which for days had been cast aside and cold), and, laying it on her bosom, took a snatch of a glance at her lovely self.

After some wonder she fetched a deep sigh—not from clearly thinking anything, but as an act of nature—and said, "Good-by!" forever, with a little smile of irony, to her looking-glass, and all the many pretty things that knew her.

It was her bad luck, as some people thought thereafter—or her good luck, as herself beheld it—to get down the stairs and out of the house without anyone being the wiser. For the widow De Wichehalse, Albert's mother, had not been content with sealing the doom of this poor maiden, but in that highly excited state, which was to be expected, hurried into the house, to beard the worthy baron in his den. There she found him; and, although he said and did all sympathy, the strain of parental feelings could not yield without "hysterics."

All the servants, and especially Mother Eyebright (whose chief duty now was to watch Frida), were called by the terrified baron, and with one unanimous rush replied; so that the daughter of the house left it without notice, and before any glances was out of sight, in the rough ground where the deer were feeding, and the umber oak-leaves hung.

It was the dainty time when first the year begins to have a little hope of meaning kindly—when in the quiet places often, free from any haste of wind, or hindrances of pattering thaw, small and unimportant flowers have a little knack of dreaming that the world expects them. Therefore neither do they wait for leaves to introduce them, nor much weather to encourage, but in shelfy corners come, in a day, or in a night—no man knows quite which it is; and there they are, as if by magic, asking, "Am I welcome?" And if anybody sees them, he is sure to answer "Yes."

Frida, in the sheltered corners and the sunny nooks of rock, saw a few of these little things delicately trespassing upon the petulance of spring. Also, though her troubles wrapped her with an icy mantle, softer breath of Nature came, and sighed for her to listen to it, and to make the best of all that is not past the sighing. More than once she stopped to listen, in the hush of the timid south wind creeping through the dishevelled wood; and once, but only once, she was glad to see her first primrose and last, and stooped to pluck, but, on second thoughts, left it to outblossom her.

So, past many a briered rock, and dingle buff with littered fern, green holly copse where lurked the woodcock, and arcades of zigzag oak, Frida kept her bridal robe from spot, or rent, or blemish. Passing all these little pleadings of the life she had always loved, at last she turned the craggy corner into the ledge of the windy cliff.

Now below her there was nothing but repose from shallow thought; rest from all the little troubles she had made so much of; deep, eternal satisfaction in the arms of something vast. But all the same, she did not feel quite ready for the great jump yet.

The tide was in, and she must wait at least until it began to turn, otherwise her white satin velvet would have all its pile set wrong, if ever anybody found her. There could be no worse luck than that for any bride on her wedding-day; therefore up the rock-walk Frida kept very close to the landward side.

All this way she thought of pretty little things said to her in the early days of love. Many things that made her smile because they had gone so otherwise, and one or two that would have fetched her tears, if she had any. Filled with vain remembrance thus, and counting up the many presents sent to her for this occasion, but remaining safe at home, Frida came to the little coving bower just inside the Point, where she could go no further. Here she had received the pledges, and the plight, and honour; and here her light head led her on to look for something faithful.

"When the tide turns I shall know it. If he does not come by that time, there will be no more to do. It will be too late for weddings, for the tide turns at twelve o'clock. How calm and peaceful is the sea! How happy are the sea gulls, and how true to one another!"

She stood where, if she had cared for life, it would have been certain death to stand, so giddy was the height, and the rock beneath her feet so slippery. The craggy headland, Duty Point, well known to every navigator of that rock-bound coast, commands the Channel for many a league, facing eastward the Castle Rock and Countisbury Foreland, and westward High-veer Point, across the secluded cove of Leymouth. With

one sheer fall of a hundred fathoms the stern cliff meets the baffled sea—or met it then, but now the level of the tide is lowering. Air and sea were still and quiet; the murmur of the multitudinous wavelets could not climb the cliff; but loops and curves of snowy braiding on the dark gray water showed the set of tide and shift of current in and out the buried rocks.

Standing in the void of fear, and gazing into the deep of death, Frida loved the pair of sea gulls hovering halfway between her and the soft gray sea. These good birds had found a place well suited for their nesting, and sweetly screamed to one another that it was a contract. Frida watched how proud they were, and how they kept their strong wings sailing and their gray backs flat and quivering, while with buoyant bosom each made circles round the other.

As she watched, she saw the turning of the tide below them. The streaky bends of curdled water, lately true as fairy-rings, stopped and wavered, and drew inward on their flowing curves, and outward on the side toward the ebb. Then the south wind brought the distant toll of her father's turret-clock, striking noon with slow deliberation and dead certainty.

Frida made one little turn toward her bower behind the cliff, where the many sweet words spoken drew her to this last of hope. All was silent. There was no one Now was the time to go home at last.

Suddenly she felt a heavy drag upon her velvet skirt. Ancient Lear had escaped from the chain she had put on him, and, more trusty than mankind, was come to keep his faith with her.

“You fine old dog, it is too late! The clock has struck. The tide has turned. There is no one left to care for me; and I have ruined everyone. Good-by, you only true one!”

Submissive as he always was, the ancient dog lay down when touched, and drew his grizzled eyelids meekly over his dim and sunken eyes. Before he lifted them again Frida was below the sea gulls, and beneath the waves they fished.

Lear, with a puzzled sniff, arose and shook his head, and peered, with his old eyes full of wistful wonder, down the fearful precipice. Seeing something, he made his mind, up, gave one long re-echoed howl, then tossed his mane, like a tawny wave, and followed down the death-leap.

Neither body was ever found; and the whole of this might not have been known so clearly as it is known, unless it had happened that Mother Eyebright, growing uneasy, came round the corner just in time to be too late. She, like a sensible woman, never dreamed of jumping after them, but ran home so fast that she could not walk to church for three months afterward; and when her breath came back was enabled to tell tenfold of all she had seen.

One of the strangest things in life is the way in which we mortals take the great and fatal blows of life.

For instance, the baron was suddenly told, while waiting for Frida to sit beside him, at his one o'clock dinner:

“Plaize, my lard, your lardship's darter hath a been and jumped off Duty Point.”

“What an undutiful thing to do!” was the first thing Lord de Wichehalse said; and those who knew no better thought that this was how he took it.

Aubyn Auberley, however, took a different measure of a broken-hearted father's strength. For the baron buckled on the armour of a century ago, which had served his grandsire through hard blows in foreign battles, and, with a few of his trusty servants, rode to join the Parliament. It happened so that he could not make redress of his ruined life until the middle of the summer. Then, at last, his chance came to him, and he did not waste it. Viscount Auberley, who had so often slipped away and laughed at him, was brought to bay beneath a tree in the famous fight of Lansdowne.

The young man offered to hold parley, but the old man had no words. His snowy hair and rugged forehead, hard-set mouth and lifted arm, were enough to show his meaning. The gallant, being so skilled of fence, thought to play with this old man as he had with his daughter; but the Gueldres ax cleft his curly head, and split what little brain it takes to fool a trusting maiden.

So, in early life, deceiver and deceived were quit of harm; and may ere now have both found out whether it is better to inflict the wrong or suffer it.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRIDA; OR, THE LOVER'S LEAP: A LEGEND OF THE WEST COUNTRY ***

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