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Title: Isla Heron

Author: Laura Elizabeth Howe Richards
Illustrator: Frank T. Merrill

Release date: August 21, 2015 [EBook #49749]

Language: English

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ISLA HERON

BY

LAURA E. RICHARDS

AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN JANUARY," "MELODY," "MARIE," "NAUTILUS,"
"QUEEN HILDEGARDE," ETC.

Illustrated

BY

FRANK T. MERRILL

Fifth Thousand

BOSTON
ESTES AND LAURIAT
PUBLISHERS

Colonial Press:
C. H. Simonds & Co., Boston, Mass., U.S.A.
Electrotyped by Geo. C. Scott & Sons

AFTER TWENTY-FIVE HAPPY YEARS

1871-1896

CONTENTS.

[8]

[9]

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE PREACHER	13
II. THE HERONS	20
III. SPRING AND THE CHILDREN	26
IV. THE SCARLET SORREL	35
V. "LONE, LONE, THOU HAST LEFT ME HERE"	40
VI. THE NEW TEACHING	48
VII. LITTLE JACOB	57
VIII. LOCHABER NO MORE!	64
IX. THE NEW SCHOLARS	71
X. JOE'S TREASURY	79
XI. DISCOVERY	85
XII. THE WILD ROCKS AGAIN	97
XIII. THE LAST	102

CHAPTER I.
THE PREACHER.

THE morning service was over, and the congregation gone home. The preacher was to dine with Captain Maynard, but there was an hour and more to dinner-time, and she had begged permission to stroll about for half an hour, promising to find her way to the comfortable white cottage, perched on a point of rock overlooking the little bay.

Now she was standing on the lower rocks, looking about her; a trim, quiet figure in a black gown, with a close straw bonnet set on her smooth brown hair. She "didn't handsome much," the people decided, but she had a taking way with her, and preached good, sound Advent doctrine. They were glad she had come, and would be sorry when the schooner should take her on her way the next day, to preach at other places along the coast.

The young woman seemed to be looking for some one, for she shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed earnestly up and down the line of rocks. So absorbed was she, that she almost stumbled over a figure sitting on the rocks, which now rose and confronted her. A strange figure enough; so rough and gray and battered that it was hardly to be wondered at that she had not distinguished it from the rock itself. The face it turned upon her was red and brown in patches, as if the skin were moth-eaten; the mouth was huge and misshapen; only the blue eyes, bright and kindly, redeemed, in some degree, the hideousness of the other features.

[14]

"Mornin', preacher!" said this strange being. "You preached good this mornin'. Joe heard you; you might not have seen him, for he stood in the doorway, but Joe heard you, and it done him good."

"I am glad to hear that!" said the preacher, smiling. "No, I did not see you. What is your other name, beside Joe? I could hardly call you by that, could I?"

"Brazybone; Joe Brazybone. Sculpin Joe, the boys call me. They don't think Joe's handsome, round here; but he's got an uglier one to home, he tells 'em. Ma'am Brazybone, she beats Joe, preacher, I tell you."

"Your—your wife?" asked the preacher, hardly knowing what to say.

"Brother's wife," said Joe. "Widder, I should say. Brother died ten year ago, effects of lookin' at her too much. He was tender, Joe's tough. I hope to wear her out fust, lookin' at me, but ther's no sayin'. There she is now, out searchin' for me. Don't you say a word, preacher, don't you say a word! She can't see none too well, and I ain't goin' in yet for a spell."

He crouched down against the rock, and again seemed almost a part of it. The preacher, half amused, half embarrassed, stood still, as a woman came out of a tiny hut near by, and peered about her with angry, short-sighted eyes. Mrs. Brazybone was a vast woman, with a face like a comic nightmare, and a set of misfit features that might have been picked up at a rag and bottle shop. Her hair was untidy, her dress awry, and her little eyes gleamed with ill-humour. "Decidedly," thought the preacher, "Joe is right, and she is the worse of the two."

[15]

"Joe Brazybone!" called the sister-in-law. "Joseph! you comin' in to dinner?"

There was no answer.

"Joe Brazybone, will you speak to me? I know you are there somewheres, if I can't see you. Now you come in, or you won't get no dinner this day. Skulkin' round those rocks, as if you was a seal! I wish 't you was!"

She went into the house and shut the door with a bang.

"Is this wise?" asked the preacher, looking down at Joe, who was shaking with silent laughter. "Why do you want to make her angry, Joseph? and you will be hungry presently, if you are not now."

"Joe cooks his own dinner, whenever he gets a chance, preacher. He's a good cook, Joe is, and Mother Brazybone ain't, you see. She'll go off a-visitin' pretty soon, and then Joe'll get him some dinner. What was you lookin' for, preacher, when you come out here on my rocks? You was lookin' for some one, and it wasn't Joe."

"You are right," said the preacher, "I saw a young girl in the hall,—or rather, she stood outside, leaning in at the window,—whose face interested me greatly. She disappeared before the service was over, and I wondered if I might see her somewhere. I—I hardly know why I came down here to look for her. She was a beautiful girl, about fourteen, I should think, with long hair of a strange colour, and very brilliant eyes."

[16]

She paused, for Joe Brazybone was nodding and blinking with every appearance of delight.

"You saw her, did you?" he said. "Yes! yes! anybody would notice Isly. She'd be queen of this hull island, if folks had their rights, and if other folks knowed a queen when they saw her. Not

governor, I don't mean, nor yet anything of that sort, but a real queen, with a crown on her head, and all the folks down on their marrer-bones every time she set her foot out-o'-doors."

"I don't understand you," said the preacher. "Do you mean that the island belongs by right to that young girl?"

Joe nodded like a mandarin.

"It does, by the rights of it. Every step and foot of land belongs to the Herons, and she's the only Heron left alive, save and except the boy, as he don't count, bein' deaf-dummy. But Isly Heron she's the born queen, and you may believe what Joseph says about that, preacher. I knowed Herons all my life. Herons was master folks over on the main, before ever they come here. When they come over, they brought Brazybones with 'em, to clean their fish and wash out their boats. Long ago thet was, way back among the gret-grets, and 't hes been so ever since, till it come down to Giles and Joe. Joe done it, too, as long as Giles would let him. Old Joe would ha' done it to the last, but Giles sent him away. He was sick and sufferin', Giles was, and he didn't want old Joe to know it, but Joe did know. Joe would have died when Giles did, preacher, if it hadn't ha' been for Isly and the boy."

[17]

The strange creature was brushing his ragged gray sleeve across his eyes, and his voice quavered curiously.

"You never saw Giles?" he said, looking up presently.

"Giles was Isly's father, but he's dead now. You might never have seen him formerly, when he was over on the main some time?"

The preacher shook her head.

"He was another!" Joe went on, half to himself. "Like a king, Giles was, for all his smilin', pleasant ways. Most folks didn't know it, but Joe knowed it. Many's the time I've hid down against the rock, after Giles wouldn't see me no more, and waited so I could touch him when he went by. It done me good to touch his coat; I felt good come out to me, every time I done it."

He stared at the preacher, and she stared back at him, thinking him out of his wits. Probably he was, or, more likely still, he had never had his full share of intelligence. Yet, if the preacher had been a seer—if she had had powers of vision that could pierce the veil of past as of future years—she might have called up scenes and figures that from century to century should seem to justify some of Joe Brazybone's ideas, fantastic as they were. She might see, in generation after generation, two figures side by side, one masterful, dominant, the other crouching, serving, loving, coming to heel when called, like a dog, springing like a man to action at the master's word. One might almost, even now, fancy a dim scene, half hidden by rolling clouds of dust and smoke. A battle-field. Gilles Tête d'Airain, the fair-haired Norman, stands wiping his bloody sword, and calls back his men from the pursuit, for the enemy is scattered beyond redemption. The half-savage soldiers come trooping back with wild gestures, with great shouts of triumph. Among them the chief singles out one, an ugly fellow of enormous strength, who twice, since the bloody morning, has stood between his master and death. He kneels, a serf, bound for life and for death; he is bidden to rise a free man, with henceforth a name and a station of his own.

[18]

"Brave et bon tu t'es montré; Brave-et-Bon sera ton nom, d'ici à jamais!"

The clouds roll forward, the vision is gone. But was this true? and has Tête d'Airain sunk to mere Heron, and has Brave-et-Bon, good and brave, drawled itself away into Brazybone? If this were so, it might account for poor Joe's attitude, at which all the villagers laugh.

"You'd like to see Isly, preacher? You was meanin' to speak to her?"

"I—yes, if you think she would like to see me. Her face interested me greatly; I should like to see her nearer, and make her acquaintance."

"This way, preacher! this way! you're the right sort; a lady yourself, and knowin' a lady when you see one. Mother Brazybone, she would have taken Isly home, when her mother died; but I wouldn't hear to it. I know'd how 'twould be. She'd ha' set her to work, and tried to make a servant of her; Isly Heron doin' Mother Brazybone's work! Guess the solid rocks would ha' come down to do the cookin' fust, 'fore they allowed any such doin's. These rocks know Herons, I tell you, most as well as old Joe does. They laid soft under Giles, that day he was up yonder." He nodded upward, toward a huge mass of rock that towered across the narrow bay, the younger sister of the Island of the Wild Rocks.

[19]

The preacher, more and more puzzled, followed her strange guide, as he led the way toward a point of rock not far distant.

"She'll be here, likely!" he said. "She often stops here on her way home, Isly does, to look about her, and see the lay of the land. She thinks, too, Isly does! A power of thinkin' she keeps up! Wonderful, for one of her size, if she warn't a Heron, and thinkin' natural to 'em all,—wonderful!"

They turned the point of rock, and came directly upon the person of whom they were in search. She was standing still, with her hands folded, looking out to sea; a slender, youthful figure, lonely as the rocks around her. This was Isla Heron. And while Joe Brazybone, in his clumsy way, is presenting the preacher to her, as if the crown he fancied were shining in actual gold on her

head, let us go back a little, and see who the child is, and who her father was, the Giles Heron who was so faithfully loved, and who is now gone to his own place.

CHAPTER II. THE HERONS.

[20]

THE child Isla might have been twelve years old when her father died. Giles Heron was the last man of his people, unless you counted the boy, and no one did count him. The Herons had owned the whole island once, but, bit by bit, it had passed away from the name, if not from the blood; they had no gift for keeping, it was said. A roving people, the Herons mostly died at sea, or, if women, married into families on the main, as we call the shore that on fine days can be dimly seen from the Island of the Wild Rocks. Giles had been a wild lad, and held himself, as all his people had done, above the fishing-folk in the village at the north end. Few of them knew him well; there was only Joe Brazybone, Sculpin Joe, who from babyhood had been his humble and loving servant, and who still clung to him, until that strange affair of the marriage. To most of the villagers it seemed "all of a piece," and "Heron doings," when Giles brought home from some foreign port a handsome deaf-mute, a "dummy," as a wife. Joe would have been her servant, too, gladly enough; but, when he came shambling along the rocks to make his first visit, the young woman turned and ran from him; and Giles laughed, and told him he would best keep away for a time. Poor Joe did not come again.

[21]

Giles built a house,—you might look long for it now,—at the wild south end of the island, which still belonged to him. Neither Joe nor any one else would visit him there, he knew, for it was considered an unlucky place, and no one knew what things might be met with there. But Giles loved it, and as for his wife, the Wild Rocks bounded the world for her, once Giles told her it was her home. Here their two children were born. The first was a daughter, and Giles named her Isla, in fanciful remembrance of the savage island which was her birthplace and his. When the boy came, four years later, the dumb wife would have given him his father's name; but Giles said "No!" It was no chancy name, and the boy should be called Jacob, after a grandfather over on the main, who had no Heron blood in him. "See if we can't make him a farmer," he said, laughing. "There's good farming land here; and the sea is hungry for folks named Giles Heron." Mary Heron yielded, as she would yield to anything that Giles wished. She was passionately loving, in her silent way. Her husband would have filled her world full enough, had there been no children; she had hardly the mother look in her eyes; but the children were his, and she loved and cared for them; most for the boy, who should have borne his father's name, and whom she still called "little Giles," in her heart.

Alas! but he bore his mother's curse. Isla learned speech readily from her father; but little Jacob was mute from birth. No sound came into his quiet world, but he missed nothing; the sign language spoke for his every need, and his eyes were filled with beauty all day long.

[22]

It was a black day for Giles Heron when he found the boy was deaf. For the first time his heart hardened toward the woman he had chosen. She felt the chill of his averted face, of the eyes that would not meet hers; felt it, and cried to God in her dumbness, that He would take her and her stricken child away, out of sight of her husband's changed face.

But Heron was a kind man. He had wedded his wife for her wild beauty; he had grown to love her simple goodness and truth. He smiled again, but neither forgot; do people ever forget? He set himself busily to teach the girl all he knew,—not much, perhaps, reading and writing, ciphering, odd scraps of history and geography. He had a few tattered books by him,—there were not many books on the Island in those days, but Giles had picked them up here and there in his wanderings,—and the two pored over these hour by hour. The dumb mother sat near, nursing her dumb child, and longing for death; but not to her was death coming.

It was Giles Heron who, still in mid-prime, felt his strength going from him. His people had never had the sturdy, four-square constitution that was the birthright of most of the islanders. They were slender, the Herons, wiry and tough as a rule, but with here and there a narrow chest that could not answer year after year to the call for struggle against the icy winds of winter. One March the north wind raged for a week without ceasing. Heron never thought of staying within doors, but he felt the cold strike deeper and deeper, till it had him by the heart; a cough fastened upon him, and fatalism did the rest.

[23]

"I've got my call!" he said. "If they'll let me stay till spring, I'd as lief go as not."

He turned with feverish earnestness to Isla's lessons, and racked his brains for forgotten rules of his school-days. Hour after hour they sat in the still sunny cove which was their schoolroom, and he mapped the globe and the different countries on the fine, white sand,—he had always been a fair draughtsman,—and told her how he had visited this city and that, and how the people looked and spoke and moved.

"I like Greece best!" said the child. "Shall we go there, Giles, when I am big, and live in one of those white things—temples—where the roof is broken, and the sky comes through? I hate roofs!"

"Greece is a good way off," said Giles. "Bellton is nearer, little girl; you shall go to Bellton. See! here it would be, not three days' sail. I was there a couple of times; there was a place with trees, and a pond, might be the size of this cove here. Like to go there?"

"Are there rocks?" asked the child. "Can you see the sky?"

"Well, no; not much. The people live in brick houses, joined together in rows, this way," and he drew a street, with neat sidewalks, and people passing up and down.

"I'll never go there!" said Isla with decision. "It's like the jail you told me of, over on the main." [24]

"Just!" said her father, nodding. "Only folks build these jails and live in them, because they like 'em. Some stay in 'em all winter, I believe, and never go out from October to May. And call that living! I'll take my way every time, thank you, if it is shorter."

"Are they white folks?"

"White? yes, child! white as anybody is; whiter, too, like a cellar-plant, because they get no sun."

"I didn't know!" said Isla. "I thought maybe they turned black. But I'll never go there."

Her father mused; then he drew a larger building at the end of the street, with towers and pinnacles.

"Here'd be a church!" he said. "You'd like that, Isla. There'd be music, an organ, likely, and lots of singing. The windows are coloured red and blue, and the light comes in like sunset all day."

"That's pretty!" the child nodded, approvingly. "What do they do there, Giles?"

"Like a meeting-house; say prayers, and preach, and sing hymns and things."

"Oh!" she paused, and the brightness passed from her face.

"Do you think He likes that, Giles?"

She nodded upward. Her father made no reply. He was not a religious man, but had thought it right to tell the child that there was some one called God, who lived above the sky, and who knew when people did wrong.

"He has all outdoors," Isla went on. "I should think He would hate a house, even if it was big. Do you suppose they try to fool Him with the coloured windows, Giles?" [25]

Giles thought this unlikely; perhaps they supposed He might feel more at home where 'twas coloured and pretty, he added, trying to fall into the child's mood.

The girl was silent. "Is He dumb, Giles, do you think?" she asked presently.

"I don't know," said Giles. "He never spoke to me. What are you thinking of, Isla Heron?"

"Oh—only I hear like voices sometimes in the wind, and down by the shore more times; and I wondered, that was all. Do you suppose ever He would speak to a girl, Giles?"

"Sooner than any one else!" said Giles Heron.

"He's good, you're sure?"

"Yes, they all say He's good."

Then Giles made the sign for silence, for his heart seemed to lie cold and beat heavily; and Isla fell a-dreaming, feeling the stillness as home.

CHAPTER III. SPRING AND THE CHILDREN.

[26]

SPRING came at last, waking slowly, as it does on the rocks out at sea. Giles Heron, from his doorway, watched the green creeping slowly through the dry, russet grass, and felt a faint stirring at his heart; this was his last spring on the pleasant earth, and he could think of nothing homelike that he might look forward to. God was good, probably, and 'twas likely things were going as they should; but it looked cold and dark ahead. He liked to feel the bones of the rocks warming through, as the sun rose higher, and the yellow beams grew stronger. He hailed every waking smell of leaves, of new grass, of wet, softening mould. His chief delight was to lie down on the dense carpet of trailing yew that spread a few yards from his cottage door, and feel it curl and close round him thick and fragrant; he smiled as he remembered the island legend of the yew's closing so once round a man who had landed on the south rocks with some evil intent,—Giles, in his weakness, could not remember what evil,—closing round him and holding him so a prisoner, till the fishermen heard his starving cries, and rescued him, and carried him over to the main with a warning, scarcely needed, never to set foot on the island again.

Such tales they told, such foolery! He supposed it was the wind got into their heads, when it blew all winter, and beat their brains about. One tale brought another, however, and he found himself thinking of a story they told of his own people. What was it about the scarlet sorrel over on Toluma? Toluma is the sister island, a huge rock, bare and gray for the most part, but with a great mantle of sorrel flung over one shoulder, which blossoms blood-red in the season. What was the story Giles had heard when he was a boy, about the red sorrel taking its colour from the blood of the Herons? He had not thought of all these old stories for years, but now they came back to him, vague and dim, yet homelike as nothing else was. The first Heron, he who came over to the island because he could not stay on the main, having slain his enemy there; that first Giles Heron of whom any record remained, had taken his life, over there on the high shoulder of Toluma. It was in June, when the sorrel was blossoming, and ever since then, the colour of it had not been tawny-red, as in most places, but blood-red. That was what they used to say, when he was a boy; and surely the sorrel was redder there than he had ever seen it elsewhere. Was it the colour of blood, however? It would be curious to see now. Suppose when one got a little weaker,—seeing that even now it was hard to get about, hard to get down to the boat and push her out, so that he had to lie for some time half faint, floating about, before he could gather up the oars and pull a little way out from the shore,—suppose that, while he still could move, he should pull over to the other rock, and climb up,—taking plenty of time, one ought to be able to do it,—and take a last rest on the red sorrel. And,—if one should help oneself a little, seeing the end was so near anyway, and breathing so hard as it was,—why, then one would know just whether there was any truth in the story, and if it was the same colour. And it was not likely it would be laid up against a fellow, so tired as he was, and not good for anything in this place.

[27]

[28]

These dreams floated through the mind of the dying man, as he lay in his boat, sometimes for hours at a time, in the soft spring days. He always took his lines and bait with him, but no one looked for him to bring in fish. He had to keep away, that was all. He could not bear the pain in his wife's eyes; he fancied she would suffer less while he was away; at least she would not shiver every time he coughed. She heard nothing, but each paroxysm shook her with anguish. Isla had never seen sickness, and knew not what ailed her father, but she grew anxious, and asked why he did not eat, and why he was so thin. In animated talk with her mother, hands flying too swift for common eyes to follow, she besought for new dishes, this or that that might tempt his palate; she hunted the young wintergreen leaves, that he liked for flavouring. And the dumb woman would nod and smile at the child, and would make this dish or that, knowing it would not be tasted.

And so the spring ran on towards summer, and the sunshine lay broad and strong over the island; only in one spot the shadow still lay, and crept darker and thicker every day.

But little Jacob saw no shadow, only the light that turned the world to green and gold, and made the rocks grow hot to the touch. He was a pretty little fellow, fair-haired and blue-eyed like the Herons; he might be eight years old at this time, and Isla twelve. It was pretty to see the two playing together. Hand in hand they strayed over the Wild Rocks, talking their silent talk, gathering berries or shells. It was all their own, the south end of the island; the people of the village near the farther end never came here. They were superstitious folk, and had their own ideas about the Wild Rocks, and the dumb woman who dwelt there. Some held it was no mortal wife that Giles Heron had brought home with him those years ago; and they whispered that the first Heron had been banished for witchcraft from parts further south, before he came to our main, and that he had come to escape the burning in Massachusetts. Then he had taken another life and his own, and was it likely such a race as that would go down peacefully like other folks? So there was no one to interfere with Isla and Jacob, and they could be happy in their own way. They had a castle in every rock, a watch-tower in every gnarled and stunted tree. They had playmates, too, in the wild sheep that scampered about the rocky hill-pastures, leaving their shaggy fleece on bush and briar as they ran. Many of these sheep belonged to the people in the fishing village, and were caught once a year and sheared, and let loose again; but some were wholly wild, and could never be caught; and their fleece hung heavy and broad, blackened with wind and weather. Now they knew, these sheep, that the Heron children carried no shears, and that they never tried to drive a sheep except in play, and for play they themselves were quite ready. So many a game went on in the deep, little, green valleys among the Wild Rocks, where the buttercups hide like fairy gold, and the ferns curl and uncurl year by year, unbroken and

[29]

[30]

uncrushed. Jacob might ride on the back of the old black ram, the leader of the wild flock, and Isla could pull his horns, and lead him about, and dress him up with flowers, as if he were a cosset lamb, instead of a fierce old fellow who would knock down a tame sheep as soon as look at him, and whom no other human being save these two had ever dared approach.

There were other friends, too. Sometimes, as the children were sitting at their play on the rocks, there would rise, from the ragged crest of an old fir-tree hard by, a great black bird; would hover an instant, uttering a hoarse croak, which yet had a friendly sound, as of greeting; then, beating his broad wings, would sail out over the water. A second followed him, and the two circled and swung together above the playing children, above the waking, laughing sea. Two ancient ravens, living apart from the noisy crows and the song-sparrows. They knew Isla Heron well, in their age-long wisdom, and loved her in their way. She was not of the same mould as the boys who now and then strayed to the south end of the island, half timid, half defiant; who called them crows, and dared one another to throw stones at them. No stone was ever thrown, however. There was a story on the island of a boy who had once stoned the ravens,—these very birds, or their forbears, and had been set upon by them, and driven backward, shrieking, over the verge of Black Head, to be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. The ravens had taken note of this child since her babyhood, and found her ways much like their own. Sometimes they would sit on a rock near by and watch her, with bright eyes cocked aside, as she strung berries or shells, or plaited garlands of seaweed. Once or twice they had brushed her hair, floating past on outspread wing; and she rightly interpreted this as a token of friendship.

[31]

“You might tame them,” her father said when she told him. “Ravens are easy tamed; I read a book once about one.”

“They would not like me any more if I did,” said Isla. “I should hate any one who tried to tame me.” And Giles laughed, and thought it would be no easy task.

Other moods and hours took the children down to the shore; this was especially their delight in the morning, when the simple housework was done, and the mother sat at the spinning by the door (for wherever she came from, she brought her wheel with her, and was a thrifty, hard-working housewife), and the father out in his boat.

Their bathing-place was such as no king ever had. Among the rocks by the water’s edge was one of enormous size and strange form. One might think that some mammoth of forgotten ages had been overtaken by the tide as he lay asleep; had slept into death, and so turned to stone. Seen from a distance, he looked all smooth and gray; but, when one came to climb his vast flanks they were rent and seamed and scarred, and by his shoulder there was tough climbing enough. Near by, a huge, formless mass of rock had fallen off into the sea, and between this and the side of the sleeping monster was a pool of clear shining water. Brown tresses of rockweed, long ribbons of kelp, swung gently to and fro; sprays of emerald green floated through the water; the rocks could be seen at the bottom, and they were green and crimson, with here and there fringes of delicate rose-colour. In and out among the rockweed darted brown shrimps and tiny fish; on the rocks the barnacles opened, waved a plume of fairy feathers, and closed again.

[32]

Here the children came to bathe, swimming about as free and gracefully as the fishes that hardly feared them, or lying at length in the shallows that stretched gold and crystal in the sun, caressed by soft fingers, swept by long, brown tresses; only weeds, were they? who could tell?

Isla loved to lie so, in the summer heat, when the water seemed warm to her hardy limbs, though a landsman might still think it cold. She would tether little Jacob to a rock with a long kelp-ribbon, and he would play contentedly at being a horse, that creature he had never seen save in a picture. There are no horses on the Island of the Wild Rocks.

There the girl would float and dream, her body at rest, her mind out and away with the clouds, or the sea-gulls that hovered and wheeled above the blue sparkling water, till there came a low murmur on the outer reef, a white break against the seaward side of the rock, and she knew that the tide was rising. Then, taking the child by the hand, she would leave the water, and climb up to a great boulder, where the barnacles lay dry in the sun. Only the great spring tides came here; and she would lie on the warm rock, one hand supporting her chin, the other holding Jacob’s hand, and watch the ancient miracle that was always new.

[33]

With a swing and a swirl the waters rushed into their pool of peace; the foam sprang high, then fell, and crept up the rock, up, up. Now back, strongly, with a wrench that tugged at the streaming locks, scattering them loose, unrolling the kelp-ribbons to their utmost length. It was gone, and for an instant there was stillness again; then once more came the roar, the inward rush, the snowy column tossed aloft, the white seeking hands creeping up along the rock, till now all the water was a white churn of foam, all the air was filled with driving spray, and the reef thundered with wild artillery. The seas hove bodily over it, and broke only in the cove itself; the place where the children had paused and lingered in their upward climb now boiled like a pot, and even on the top of the great boulder the spray beat in their faces, stinging, burning. A black wing struck athwart the white smoke, and a raven floated past on the wind, one eye cast aside on the children. Isla cried out with glee, and shook her wet hair, and broke into a chant, such as she loved to croon to the wind; but Jacob was timid, and did not like the spray in his face, and, though he heard no sound, shivered at every vibration of the rock as the seas dashed themselves at it; he pulled his sister’s hand, and begged to be gone; so home they went over the mammoth’s back, and left the raven to his own.

[34]

CHAPTER IV. THE SCARLET SORREL.

[35]

AND now June was come, and Giles Heron still lived. He had watched passionately for the blossoming of the scarlet sorrel. "That'll be my time!" he said, talking to himself as he lay rocking in his boat. "I've got to wait till then. Some person seems to hold me back from helping myself before then; maybe I've got to know what it's like all along the line; maybe it'll be some help to some one over yonder, and I hope it may, for it's small comfort to me. Like as if my mother held me back. But, when the sorrel is red, I guess they'll give me my pass; they'd be hard folks if they wouldn't. And the sooner over for Mary and the children; poor Mary, she'll burn right up and come along, too, most likely."

And now, at last, the sorrel was in bloom. It clothed the dark-gray rock like a holiday garment; it flamed in the sunlight; when the sky was overcast it took a darker shade. Certainly, it had the colour of blood; or was it still a little lighter?

One morning Giles kissed his wife and children before he went down to the shore; he held Isla in his arms for a moment with a wistful look, as if he would have spoken; but at last he nodded, and went his usual way. Isla looked after him with a vague pain, she knew not what; but her mother gave a dreadful sob, pressed her hands together, and then flung them apart, with a gesture of almost savage anguish. Isla would have tried to comfort her, but the dumb woman would not meet her eyes, and turned away to her work, and worked all the morning as one works in a fever-dream.

[36]

Life was ebbing very low for Giles. Slowly, slowly, he crawled down to the beach; it was only a few paces from the cabin, but a corner, rounded, took him out of sight, and he had of late sternly forbidden the children to come with him even as far as the corner. Till he passed it he made some poor pretence of holding his head up, and walking straight; but, once round that friendly rock, he could cling to it, and drag his tired body along, and make no one wince but himself.

The boat was ready; good old boat! she would miss him, he thought. He fell across the thwart, and lay there dozing for a time; then crept to a sitting posture, and, with short, faltering strokes, pulled himself across to Toluma. The distance was small, but once there he must lie down again in the boat, at the foot of the towering cliff, and wait painfully till the faint breath should come back to him. One last effort, now, and then—rest!

Could he do it? Had he rowed so far, miles and miles, for nothing? His slight, worn body seemed a mass of lead, his hands and feet were turned to water, as he climbed up, wearily, wearily. Many times he paused, clutching the naked stone, while he struggled for breath, racked by the terrible cough. Once his grasp loosened, and he had almost fallen, and felt already the shock on the reef below; but something drifted through his mind—a saying of his father's, was it? "Hold on, Heron! a good bird and a rare un!" His muscles crisped again, the mist lifted a little from his eyes, and he climbed on; till now the top was reached, and the scarlet upland which his eyes had sought so yearningly these many weeks. With a long, sighing breath the tired man laid himself at full length on the glowing sod. He felt life go from him with that breath; the rest was mere detail.

[37]

He lay still, looking now across at the main island, now down and around him. A few paces away the rock broke sheer off, two hundred feet down to the water, that danced and dimpled in the sun. Between the highest crest of the rock and the sorrel-meadow where he lay was a tiny hollow brimming over with white violets, the scentless kind that blossom as late as June here. Heron looked at them and smiled, as bits of a nursery tale came back to the confusion of his mind.

"White as snow, red as blood,—what a pity the ravens never come over here! The rock is all gray and orange, no black."

He dozed a little; then repeated drowsily, "Red as blood! only blood is a little darker, I think. Maybe 't has faded out, all these years. Anyway, I shall be able to see."

The light seemed dim, though he felt the sun striking fiercely on his head and shoulders. He pulled the scarlet sorrel blossoms, and let a stream of them run slowly through his hand. Yes, darker, surely.

[38]

He had forgotten by this time about Isla, about his wife and little Jacob, and all his doubts and fears. He seemed a boy again, only curiously weak, and with all sorts of creatures,—bees, were they?—buzzing about his head,—or inside it; he was not sure, and it did not matter.

The knife, now! he was tired, and rest was very near; and he did not think it would be laid up against him. Something in his head said it was cowardly, but he explained that it was only his body, that could not get about any longer, and that it would be a pity to let the folks see him die, because that would make them feel badly. He drew out the long, sharp knife, and made the light play along the blade, as he always loved to do at school, and smiled to himself.

"The same dear old Giles!" he said. "Good-by, old fellow, if we don't meet again!"

He felt above his heart; this was where it should be. One stroke, now for rest and freedom—

What was that? What sound broke the stillness? A voice? Far away, faint yet clear, ringing

sweet round the gray rock:

“Giles! Father Giles! where are you, father?”

Giles Heron gathered his wasted muscles together, and with a last effort threw the knife from him; it glittered a moment, unstained, in the sun; then dropped without sound, and the red blossoms closed over it. He raised himself and tried to answer the call, but his voice was choked. The day turned black, and, as he sank down, the blood burst from his mouth and streamed out over the scarlet sorrel. Yes, it was darker. [39]

"LONE, LONE, THOU HAST LEFT ME HERE."

HERE begins the true story of Isla Heron's life. She had been a simple creature till now, living the life of half-savage freedom that was the only life she knew, playing among the black rocks, singing with the wind and the sea, loving her parents and her little Jacob almost fiercely. Her thinking life began when her father was brought back to the home-cabin, cold and silent, and laid on his bed by the pitying villagers. One man came first, bringing the bad news; it was Joe Brazybone. He had been hovering about in his boat, as he often did, fishing now and then, but keeping an eye on Giles; had not dared to follow him up the rocks, for Giles had been strange for a long time now, and had kept off the old friend; but after a time Joe grew alarmed, and climbed up, and found him already cold. He came now, and tried in some awkward fashion to break the news. Isla took little note of the strange figure at the time, though she knew it well enough afterward.

"Giles ain't very well," said Joe, edging round the corner of the house.

"You tell your ma that, little Heron lady, and I'll keep out o' sight, for she don't like old Joe, your ma don't. You tell her Giles ain't very well. And—see here, little lady! When you've a-told her that, foller it up, you know! foller it up! tell her he's bad, and then, kind o' easy, tell her he's mortal bad, and they're fetchin' of him home."

[41]

Here he broke off short, with a glance behind him; and thrusting the child gently forward, with an earnest gesture, he slunk out of sight as Mary Heron came to the door. Next moment the men were there.

They spoke in whispers, and cast strange glances at the dumb woman, with her gray face and wild eyes of pain. There was no surprise for her; it was only the Thing that lurked so long in corners of her hut, now come out into the light and known for what it was. A kind, white-haired fisherman stayed behind the rest, who were in haste to be gone; he spoke gently to Isla, and she interpreted his words to her mother. There was no minister on the island at that time, but Captain Maynard was used to filling the place of one, and the simple arrangements were made for saying a prayer and laying the tired body to rest.

When the stranger was gone, Isla went to the bed and put her face down by her father's. She called him, putting forth all the power of her strong young voice; it seemed as if he must hear her. But he gave no sign, and the lids lay white and heavy over his eyes, and when she touched his cheek it was cold, cold. She looked at little Jacob, playing with his shells on the floor; then at her mother. But there was no mother now, only the wife who had seen her child loved better than herself, and who would now guard her sorrow jealously, admitting no sharer in it; and Isla knew that she was alone.

[42]

She made no resistance when, after days of brooding, the dumb woman took her by the hand and led her over the rocks, across the brown hill-pastures, to the village school. A little gray building stood apart on a stony hill, and here the children were taught by a young woman who came over from the main for certain months of the year.

Standing in the doorway, Mary Heron beckoned to the school-mistress, who came trembling, afraid of the tall, gipsy figure and the burning eyes; laid the child's hand in hers, and, with a gesture of grave dignity, turned away. Isla, standing with her hand still in the teacher's, watched the stately woman as she took her way down the hill and back through the crooked street; her heart yearned to her mother, but Mary Heron never looked back, and soon passed out of sight.



The young teacher was kind, and her fear of the wild girl soon wore away when she found her readiness to learn. Isla pounced upon the simple school-books and studied them fiercely. The children kept their dread of her longer, and huddled together in the play-hour, looking askance at her long russet locks, like tawny rockweed, and her dusky, jewel-like eyes. She had no beauty according to their standard (which was pink and white, and had yellow curls), but all the remoteness of her sea-bound home was in her face and look. Her dress was strange, too, for the homely brown print was sure to be looped and decked with fringes of kelp and weed, and she had long strings of shells, sometimes bound round her head, sometimes twined about her wrists.

[43]
[44]
[45]

Soon, however, the children learned to love her, for her heart was gentle, and she loved all little creatures. She brought them sea-urchin shells, delicately cleaned, and showing all their beauty of green and pale purple; chains of gold-shells, or of dried sea-bladders. The children took the gifts eagerly, and at length grew familiar, and questioned Isla about her life at the south end of the island.

"What makes you live there, Isla? Why don't you never come up to the street, and live in a house like other folks? My mother says decent folks wouldn't live there in those boggy rocks. What makes you stay there?"

Then Isla would throw her head back, and draw a long breath as she looked about her at the bare, dingy walls of the little schoolroom.

"It isn't living, here!" she would say. "It's—I don't know what it is! there's no air to breathe. Where I live, the wind blows in from the sea, and it comes from all across the world; and I don't have to be under a roof,—I hate roofs,—only just at night and in the winter; and I have the rocks, and the sheep, and my little Jacob, and all the things in the woods. Don't you go in the woods? But what makes you live here, in these houses all near each other? That's the strange way, not mine; mine is the real way. What makes you do it?"

"Cause it's near the boats!" said one.

"Cause the school's here, and the store!" said another.

"Cause there's folks, and folks like to be where there's other folks!" said a third; and the rest chimed in, as this sentiment voiced the feelings of all.

[46]

"Yes, folks like to be where there's other folks."

Then Isla would shake her long locks, and laugh, and begin to sing one of her strange songs, or tell them of the wonderful things in her home, which stretched miles and miles, all her own, all a playground for her and Jacob.

So things went on well enough for a time; but one day Isla took some of the children off, at their urgent request, and kept them a day and a night in some familiar haunt of hers among the hills. Their parents were frantic, and searching parties were sent out in all directions. The dumb woman could or would tell them nothing; she only shrugged her shoulders, and showed them that her own little boy was gone with his sister and the rest. They were ready to burn her cabin over

her head, when down the hill came Isla singing, a child in either hand, another leaping and singing beside her. She was seized, threatened with punishment, and warned never to come to the school again.

The little teacher sighed for her best scholar, the only one who had made teaching anything but drudgery; the children looked longingly for the wild girl who spoke so kindly, and sang so sweetly, and told them such beautiful stories; but Isla came no more. Only the boldest of the children, venturing rarely a little way down the beach toward the south end, would hear her song, echoing clear and sweet among the Wild Rocks.

ISLA'S SONG.

[47]

The wind sang to the falling tide,
"Coo sha coo! coo sha coo!
Now I fold my wings wide,
Coo sha coo sha coo!
Sleep beneath the folded wing,
Dream and murmur while I sing,
Coo sha coo sha coo sha!
Coo sha coo sha coo!"

The wind sang to the rising sea,
"U la hu! u la hu!
Come and fly abroad with me,
U la hu la hu!
Toss your hair so wild and gray,
Beat the rocks with hands of spray,
U la hu la hu la!
U la hu la hu!"

CHAPTER VI. THE NEW TEACHING.

[48]

AND now, this Sunday morning, Isla stood on the rocks, and looked at the young preacher, as she came toward her.

"Good morning!" said the preacher, feeling curiously embarrassed under the quiet, straightforward gaze of the island girl. "I saw you at the service this morning; but I missed you when it was over, and your friend here guided me to you." She turned to look at Joe, but he had disappeared.

"Yes," said Isla Heron, "I was there. I was coming to look for you, too. I wanted to ask you if something you said was true."

The preacher smiled. "I hope I said nothing that was untrue," she said.

Isla looked up with a startled glance. "Oh, yes!" she said. "Things that are not true here, anyhow. I don't know how it may be over on the main. But—what I wanted to ask you—you read something from the Bible,—'The tongue of the dumb shall sing.' What did you mean by that?"

The preacher repeated, slowly, that she might have time to think a little.

"'Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.' Yes, that is a beautiful passage; you will find it in Isaiah, the thirty-fifth chapter." [49]

"But is it true?" Isla persisted. "Did they do it then, or can they do it now?"

"I do not understand you," the preacher said, gently. "It is a prophecy of the flourishing of Christ's kingdom."

"Will he make dumb people speak? that is all I want to know," said Isla. "My little brother is dumb, and I would do anything in the world to make him speak. If that is true, tell me how it is done."

The preacher looked at her very tenderly.

"Let us sit down here, my dear," she said; "and tell me about your little brother."

They sat down on a warm brown stone, and Isla told the story of her little Jacob; of her father's death two years before, and of her mother's fading away through the year, and following him before another spring came.

"So now there are just the two of us," she said. "Just me and my little Jacob. And if I could make him hear and speak, I would be willing to die myself."

"He can never hear!" the preacher said. "These are not the days of miracles, and we have no assurance that we may look for them, though signs and wonders are all about us. But truly a wonder has been wrought in these very days; and it may be that the child can be taught to speak, and to read by the lips what others say to him."

She told Isla, in a few words, of the new teaching of the deaf, and the girl listened with her whole soul.

"Where is it done?" she asked. "Tell me the name of the place!" [50]

The preacher named Bellton as the nearest city where such teaching could be had. "Have you friends there?" she asked.

Isla's startled eyes gave her answer. "Bellton!" she said. "That was a place Giles showed me on the sand, where the people lived in prisons, and liked it, and turned white for want of sun. I should have to go there, should I, and take my little Jacob? Could a person live there, do you think, who was not used to it?"

"I was there for two or three years," said the preacher. "I lived well enough, Isla. Have you never been away from your island?"

The girl shook her head.

"No! why should I go? I never would go, except to help my little Jacob. It would kill me to live under a roof, and breathe hot air, and have no wind blowing, and no sea."

"Where do you live?" asked the preacher. "You cannot spend the year out-of-doors, in this cold place."

"Come and see!" said Isla Heron.

She led the preacher over the gray rocks, over the high downs, till they came to the little green meadow, set like a jewel in a great ring of stones.

Here was the cabin, looking from the outside not unlike the rock against which it leaned. Inside, it was gay with shells and bright berries, and everything was neat and clean, as Mary Heron had taught her children to keep it. Jacob was sitting by the table, carving a boat, and at Isla's coming he rose, clapping his hands, and ran to throw his arms round her neck; but drew [51]

back in alarm at sight of the stranger. The girl spoke to him with eyes and hands, and led him forward, still hanging back, but smiling now, and ready to make friends. He was nearly ten years old, but so small and delicate that he looked much younger. His face was all sunshine, but there was no line of thought in it yet; he had never had to think for himself. Isla had done all his thinking, and he had lived like a bird so far, taking everything at her hands, rejoicing in the sunshine, and the sea, and the shells and flowers. He knew nothing beyond his own end of the island. Isla was a great traveller in his eyes, because she sometimes went to the village, and was gone for hours. This never made him sad, because he did not know what sadness was; but he had a pride in his sister's journeyings, and looked eagerly in her face when she came back, seeking new light there, since she was so wise always, and probably learned new wisdom every time she went away.

The preacher caressed the child, and sat for a few moments in the little sitting-room, her mind full of new thoughts.

"You live here entirely alone?" she asked, presently; "you two children? Are you happy, Isla? Is it not terribly lonely?"

Isla looked up wondering.

"How should it be lonely?" she said. "It is home. It is the only place where we could live. Some people wanted us to come and live in the village, after mother died. We'd sooner have died, too, both of us. Wouldn't we, Jacob?"

[52]

"Is there no one belonging to you? it seems too—"

"Too dreadful," the preacher would have said, but something seemed to hold back the words. Perhaps it was the perfect quiet in the two faces.

"Of course I miss Giles, all the time," Isla went on, presently. "But he was so tired, poor dear, that he could not stay any longer."

"And your mother?" said the preacher, with some reproach in her tone. "Do you not miss your mother?"

"Jacob did!" said Isla. "Or he would have, at first, if I had let him. But mother,—oh, you could not have kept her. She hated it so, after Giles was gone, she had to go, too. No, we are much better off without mother; she could not bear me after Giles went, and hardly she could bear Jacob; and she tried so hard to die, I was glad when she could. She was dumb, too, you know, and now she isn't, I suppose."

This was strange talk. The preacher felt that she should reprove and exhort, but still the girl's face silenced her.

"Tell me, Isla," she said, after a silence, "what did you mean, when you said, a little while ago, that I had said some things that were not true. You did not mean that, I am sure."

Isla reflected.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Oh, surely I meant it. You spoke of Him,"—she nodded upward with her curious reverent gesture,—"you said He was our Father; I liked that. Giles knew a little, but he did not know that much, then. Now I suppose he does. But then you said that if we did things,—I don't remember what things,—that He would be angry with us always, and never love us any more, and that we should be punished all the time, forever. And that could not be true, because it is nonsense."

[53]

The preacher was startled, and spoke sharply.

"You are not speaking in a proper manner!" she said. "What right have you to speak so to me?"

"You asked me!" said Isla. "What did you want me to say?"

They were both silent for a time.

"Why do you think this?" said the preacher then. "What can you know about these things, living here with no teaching and no light save that of your own heart, which is sinful?"

Isla laughed.

"I had a father!" she said. "Do you suppose that Great One needed Giles to tell Him how to treat His children?"

"What can I know?" she repeated. "I know what the sea tells me all day, all my life; and what the clouds tell me, and the birds; but most of all I know what my little Jacob tells me. Look at him! Is he sinful? If you say that, then I see that you do not know. But my sea knows, and it tells me, all day long. All day long!" the girl repeated; and her eyes grew soft and dreamy as she gazed out over the blue, white-tossing water. The preacher would have answered, for she was shocked and pained at this unseemly talk; but suddenly some words came to her mind, and silenced her.

[54]

"Deep answereth unto deep—"

"I must go!" she said, rising. "I should like to see you again, Isla, and talk with you; your—your thoughts are strange to me, but I feel that your heart is good. I must go now back to the village."

She kissed the little boy, who cooed and smiled in return, and turned to find her way back to the village; but Isla was at her side.

"Let me take you by a shorter way," she said. "It is slow climbing over our rocks when folks are not used to them. I will take you through the Dead Valley, and you will get there quicker. But you will not tell people?" she said, stopping for a moment, and looking up into her companion's face with searching eyes. "It is our own place, Jacob's and mine; we don't want other folks to know about it."

The preacher promised.

"Shut your eyes, then!" cried the girl, her face lightening with pleasure. "Give me your hand, and I will lead you into our Dead Valley. Now! now open your eyes, and look!"

The preacher obeyed, and gave a cry of surprise, so strange a place was this that met her eyes. A valley of rocks; yes! but not rocks like those she had seen elsewhere, not like any rocks that she had seen in her life. A place of desolation, full of the bones of forgotten ages. The girl, watching her companion's face, laughed aloud for pleasure.

"Do you see?" she cried. "Do you see why it is the Dead Valley? Look at them all, the great beasts, lying asleep! Giles told me all about them, when we first found this place; we came together, Giles and I. He said, 'They are mammoths, like elephants, only bigger;' and he had seen the bones of one, somewhere, in some place where they keep such things, so he knew their names and all. And see! They used to play here, and go down to the water to bathe, and just live as they liked. And one day,—we played they had done some dreadful thing, but we never knew just what,—they were all turned into gray stones, and here they have been ever since. There! that is one of the biggest; and he fell down on his side, you see, and just curled his great huge legs under him, and went to sleep so comfortable! And this one,—oh, I love this old fellow. He was kneeling, don't you see, preacher? and he could not get up when the time came, so he went to sleep just that way. And down there by the beach, that one had gone down to drink and take his bath, and he tumbled in, and there he lies. Over the other side of him, that is where Jacob and I go to bathe ourselves. The rockweed grows all over his shoulders, and keeps him warm. And we run over his back, and sit on his great round head, and climb into a hollow place that we call his mouth; but he never stirs, just sleeps and sleeps; and there he will stay, Giles said, till the last call comes. What is the matter, preacher?" [55]

The preacher had started with a little cry of dismay. Two or three aged trees, ragged and twisted and bent, still clung to the rocks in this grim place, and kept some sort of iron-bound life in their veins. There were many others lying beside them, which had given up the fight years,—centuries ago. Only their bones were left, gleaming pallid and slender among the sleeping mammoths; and soon these old soldiers, too, would lay down their arms and join the sleepers. But still there showed some faint tinge of green in their rusty tops; and, as the preacher looked at them, wondering, a great black bird rose from the ragged branches, and almost brushed past them in his flight. [56]

Isla laughed again, and waved her hand with a friendly gesture.

"Those are our ravens," she said. "They are friends of ours, Jacob's and mine. Other folks are afraid of them, but we know them, and they like us. This way, preacher! Step up on this elephant's shoulder; he will not hurt you. There! now it will be smoother; and tell me more about the place where they teach dumb people to speak."

CHAPTER VII. LITTLE JACOB.

[57]

I SLA stood on the shore, with Jacob's hand in hers, and watched the schooner which bore away her new friend. She had seen the preacher several times since that first interview, and they had talked much together. She held now in her hand a precious gift, a letter to the head of the Deaf and Dumb School, which, the preacher felt sure, would insure Jacob's admission. This kind woman had made a little map of the streets, so that Isla might find her way without trouble through the crowded city. She had offered, if Isla could only wait, to be her guide, and take upon herself the task of presenting Jacob; but Isla could not wait. She gave as her reason that the child was already older than most of the beginners, from what the preacher told her; moreover, that now was the time when the schools would soon be opening. Other reasons there were which she did not give, but the preacher accepted these, and gave her the note readily. Now the schooner was out of sight, round the far point of the island, and Isla was her own mistress. As Jacob danced and swung about, holding fast to her loving hand, the girl was thinking hard. Her thoughts flew forward to that strange, dreadful place, the city. Already she felt the stifling air, and saw the walls close around her. It would take months, years, the preacher said, before Jacob would learn to speak. If she could only live so long! She had only half listened when the preacher told her of all the pleasant things she would see and hear. She knew better than that. Herons could not live in cities; Herons like her and Giles. Jacob was so young, he would not know so well, perhaps, and would soon forget—forget! The word went through the girl like a sharp pain. Under all lay the dread, not spoken even to herself, shut out instantly when it forced itself to her mind,—that she might not be allowed to stay with her brother at the school. If all went as she had planned there would be no danger, none at all. They would never know. Silence had become the rule of her life. But there might be some mistake; some emergency might arise that would force her to speak. [58]

Then, if she were sent away from him, would Jacob forget? She grasped the child's hand so hard that he winced, and held up his face with a little moan of pain. She bent down and took him in her arms, soothing him so gently that he forgot the moment's grief, and laughed again. Isla smiled, the rare smile that made her whole face bright with inward light; but she did not laugh. There was no one to hear her laugh, since Giles died.

That afternoon she told Jacob that she must leave him for some hours. He was to be happy, oh, so happy! for he might play on the stretch of white sand where the gold-shells were, taking care not to go below the rope of seaweed that marked their high-tide boundary. He was so careful, she knew she might trust him. And she would bring him an orange from the village, if there was one; sometimes the captain brought a few over from the main, on his weekly trip with the mail-schooner. At least she would bring him something, surely, something good or pretty; and he was to play his best plays, and think of her, and the time would go quickly, quickly, till she came back. [59]

Jacob nodded and laughed, well content. He would never have Isla out of his sight, if that might be; but he knew that these times must come, and he was a patient child, and knew not the sense of being unhappy or forlorn. Taking his clam-shell spade and his pails of birch-bark, he trotted down to the strip of white shell-sand, and there built houses, and rocks, and lighthouses, such as Isla had showed him. He had seen the houses himself, but the tall tower he took on faith; there was no tower in those days on the Wild Rocks. Tiring of his building, he gathered a great heap of gold-shells, and watched the afternoon sunbeams play on their delicate scales and turn them to ruddy gold, where at first they were pale. Then he found a rock-pool, full of brown shrimps; he lay on his stomach, and watched them scuttling in and out of the rockweed fringe. Presently an unwary barnacle opened his shell and put out his plume of feathers. Whisk! he was seized by a crab, torn from his home, enveloped, swept away into the dark caverns. Poor barnacle! Jacob shook his head in compassion; yet, having large sympathies, was glad, too, that the crab had such a good supper. [60]

A little chill struck him. The sand turned from brilliant to dead white, and, turning, he saw that the sun had gone down behind the crest of the sister island across the bay. It was time for Isla to come! The red glow had faded from the gold-shells, too, and they looked pale and cold. Cold! and they must stay out here all night, and then it would be very cold indeed! Isla would make him a little fire, and cook his supper, and they would be warm and comfortable at home, but the poor things on the beach would be cold.

And now a bright thought came to Jacob; a thought that made him clap his hands, and make little sounds of pleasure, such as a bird or a young lamb might make.

Why should not he build a fire? Not in the house, but here, on the shore? Isla would see it on her way back, and it would light up the rocks and make them bright and cheerful, and she would know that he was watching and waiting for her. And then it would last all night, perhaps, and the poor shells and things would be warm for once. It would be fine, fine! He cooed with joy. Isla should see how clever he was, how well he could do things to help! He ran here and there, picking up bits of driftwood, twigs and sticks and shingles. The light faded, but Jacob's face made a little brightness of its own. Soon he had quite a pile collected; then he ran to the house for matches, and soon the fire was leaping and crackling merrily. The warmth and glow were heartening! The happy child bent above it, and spread out his hands, and murmured pure pleasure. How soon would Isla come? Surely she had never stayed so long before. [61]

The tide was rising, and now murmured higher and higher on the stones; but Jacob had no fear of the tide. The rope of seaweed was his boundary, and that lay always dry, and he and his pretty fire were well above it. The fire was very friendly, he thought. It was dancing for him, making all sorts of pretty plays for him. He danced, too, to show that he appreciated the courtesy; but, on the whole he liked best to sit close beside it, with his palms spread to catch all the kindly warmth.

Sitting so, his mind full of happy thoughts, sleep came softly to him. It was past his bedtime, or perhaps it was only the heat, so close at hand, that brought the drowsiness. He tried to brush it away, but it came back. The evening grew dim, and only the fire glowed bright and cheerful. Presently the curly head sank down on the warm seaweed; there was a little sigh or two, of sheer comfort and content, and Jacob was asleep.

The tide still rose quietly, and murmured softly on the stones. A beach bird ran by, and did not fear to brush the child with its wing, he was so still, and looked so gentle. A sea-gull came wheeling in over the beach; hovered a moment on broad wings, then vanished, a white ghost in the deepening gray. The fire smouldered, the brands fell away into soft, gray heaps with a red coal at the centre; and still the child slept, though now the air grew thin and cold, and a fog began to creep in from the sea.

Now was it a thing of his dreams, or was there a flutter of broader wings over the lonely shore? Were they real, the two figures that stood dimly lovely in the waning light? [62]

Surely they were speaking—

“See! he is sleeping, how soundly! He should be mine, not yours. He hears now; he speaks now; and I will but loose him from the little dumb thing that was the prison of him, and he shall hear and speak always, forevermore. If I lay my hand on him, it will be only a touch, and not so cold, only a soft coolness; and then! oh, the waking for him! Why would you keep him from me? for it is to me that the word should come.”

And the other, the flame-winged spirit, could not answer; could only keep her own warm hand on the child’s heart, and breathe on him with her warm breath, and wait and listen in anguish, lest the word should indeed come to her brother and not to her.

And if the word should come a moment late, and she had lost the faint flutter of the little heart?

But how strange for the angel not to know, that there is no “too late!”

Hark! what sound is that?

A moment ago,—unless those shadowy forms were real indeed,—there was only silence and the falling night, and the child asleep on the shingle. But now, though no voice is heard—for who should cry aloud to the deaf child?—yet the air is full of sound; it palpitates with motion. The light shock of pebbles falling beneath hurrying feet, the patter of those feet, hardly touching the sand as they flit past; then round the point a figure flying, swift and silent, with outstretched arms and hair streaming loose. Isla! Isla is coming! [63]

Go thy way, good brother Death! not yet the child needs thee; not yet is he to take thy kind, cold hand and go with thee. And thou, flame-winged spirit, fold him yet closer in thy warm arms, for the night falls chill.

Isla dropped on the beach and clasped the boy to her heart. The little limbs were cold, but the breath came warm on her cheek, as she pressed him close, and kissed and patted him. She dropped the orange beside him. It was this that had made her late; going for it on board a vessel where she heard the fruit might be had, and detained by the churlish skipper, till night began to fall, while she was still at the further end of the island. Would the child wake to see it?

Jacob opened his eyes, slowly, unwillingly, thinking the morning was come too soon; and found night instead of the sun, but he felt his Isla’s arms about him, and her warm face pressed to his, and knew that his joy was come back to him. He nestled in the strong, tender arms, and laughed, now wide-awake, and pointed to the fire, telling, with eloquent gestures, what he had done. There was no doubt that his fire had brought her back; happy Jacob! And Isla, kneeling on the sand, holding him in her arms, promised to herself that never again in this world would she and Jacob part. Alas for thee, Isla! Not for us are the promises.

CHAPTER VIII. LOCHABER NO MORE!

[64]

“YOU was thinkin’ of goin’ to-day, was you, Isly?”

It was Joe Brazybone who spoke. He was standing on the wharf, at a little distance from the two Herons; there was an air of suppressed excitement about the three which told that some great thing was toward.

“Yes, Joe,” said Isla. “You know very well that I am going. Why do you ask me so many times?”

“Nothin’; nothin’ at all!” said Joe, hastily. He stood in a curious attitude, with one hand held behind him; and, whenever Isla turned to look at him, he sidled about in a confused, guilty fashion, keeping his face turned resolutely toward her.

“Was you goin’ that way, Isly?” he persisted. “Without no bunnit on your head? Ain’t you afraid of ketchin’ somethin’?”

Isla laughed.

“Mrs. Maynard tried to make me wear a hat,” she said. “I never wore a hat in my life, Joe. I could not see with straw down over my eyes. And what should I catch?”

Joe looked miserable. Loyalty forbade him to say plainly that she would be stared at in the city if she went about bareheaded. He glanced nervously behind him, his hands twitching; then at the girl again; but Isla had already forgotten him, and was gazing with all her eyes at the schooner, which was evidently nearly ready to sail.

[65]

“Will you take me aboard now, Joe?” she said. “I think it must be time.”

Joe’s red and brown turned to a deep purple; with a desperate effort he mastered his confusion, and brought his hand round to the front. It held a strange object, which he thrust forward to Isla.

“You take this!” he pleaded. “You take this, Isly, and wear it for old Joe. ’Tain’t what I could wish, but ’t will cover your head, and—and keep you from ketchin’ things. Some say ’tis handsome, but I don’t know how that is. Anyway, ’twas the best I could do.”

The thing he held out was a bonnet, of vast size and ancient fashion. The front was filled with crushed and faded muslin flowers; the crumpled ribbons and tarnished silk showed that it had lain for years in its box. Isla gazed at it in amazement.

“’Twas Ma’am’s!” said Joe, hastening to explain. “My own mother’s, I mean, Isly. That’s why it don’t look quite so new-fangled as some. But there’s good stuff in this bunnit. I remember of Ma’am’s sayin’ so, when father brought it home to her over from the main. I was a youngster then, but I remember her very words. “’Tis too gay for my age, Hiram,” she says; ‘but there’s good stuff in it, and I’m obleeged to you for fetchin’ of it.’ You take it now, Isly, and keep it. Many’s the time Mother Brazybone as is has tried to get her hands on to this bunnit, but Joe was too many for her. Old Joe ain’t got many handsome things, but what he has ain’t goin’ to no Brazybone. When my little Heron lady wants any of old Joe’s things, she’s only got to speak for ’em, and there they be. So you take the bunnit, Isly, and ’t will do me good to see ye in it.”

[66]

Isla knew little about bonnets, but her eyes told her that this was a hideous monstrosity. Nevertheless she took it, and smiled at Joe with friendly eyes. “Thank you, Joe!” she said. “It is ever so kind of you to give me something that belonged to your mother. I won’t put it on now, because I shouldn’t know how to wear it. I’ll take it with me on board the schooner, Joe, and then we will see.”

Joe nodded in delight, and then went and got his little red boat, and rowed Isla and Jacob over to the mail-schooner, which was making signals for departure. Jacob’s eyes were round with wonder at all he was seeing. He held Isla’s hand tight, but having that, feared nothing, and followed cheerfully where she bade him.

Captain Ezekiel, the sturdy, brown-bearded skipper of the *Egret*, welcomed the children kindly enough. He hardly knew the wild Heron girl by sight, but he knew all about her, and had learned through Joe Brazybone of her plans for her little brother. Most of the villagers thought it was tomfoolery, and said the appointments of Providence weren’t good enough for Herons, so this girl was going to try and reverse the Lord’s judgment about her deaf-dummy brother. But Captain Ezekiel knew too much for this point of view, and had silenced the talk, as much as he could, and promised the preacher to befriend the two helpless children.

[67]

[68]

[69]



He was a silent man, and, after nodding kindly to Jacob, and telling Isla to make herself at home, he had nothing further to say. As he and his mate hoisted the shining sail, Isla turned to Joe to say good-by.

"Joe," she said, "you have been so good and kind. I can't thank you, Joe, but Giles will be glad if he knows."

Joe did not take the hand she held out to him.

"I—I wasn't thinkin' of goin' back right away, Isly," he said, shuffling awkwardly about, with his eyes on the deck. "Cap'n 'Zekle, he's no objection to me goin' over to the main, he says. I wa'n't calc'latin' to go back right yet, ye see."

"Oh!" said Isla, in surprise. It was years since Joe Brazybone had left the island, and she knew it.

"I didn't know you had friends over on the main, Joe."

"Not—not rightly friends, perhaps I shouldn't call 'em," Joe admitted, still studying the planks with attention. "But—well" (and his face brightened visibly), "I ain't got no enemies. There's where it is, you see, Isly, I ain't got no enemies, so there's nothin' to hender my goin' over to the main, so long as Cap'n Zekle has no objection."

He drew a long breath after this statement, and ventured to steal a look at Isla out of the corner of his eye. But Isla thought little of what he said. She accepted the homage of the queer man who had loved her father; it seemed entirely natural that Joe Brazybone should be devoted to her; but she gave him little thought beyond a kindly feeling, and a consciousness that she could make him happy for a day by smiling and nodding to him, even though she seldom spoke. Now she had said far more than usual, and she thought no more of his matters. Her thoughts still flew forward to the new life, the prisoned life in which Jacob would be all her sun and air, her world, her joy, as she would be his. But her eyes turned backward with passionate longing toward the home that they were leaving. The schooner moved swiftly, sailing along the southern shore. Now they were coming to the South Rocks, her own rocks, where half of her heart must stay, while her body went on, away. They passed the opening of the Dead Valley. It seemed as if the sleeping mammoths must rise from their long slumber and call to her; as if every crag and cliff, every ragged, friendly tree, must see her desertion and cry out upon it. Her eyes strained backward as the schooner flew, the heart seemed torn out of her breast. See! The ravens, rising from a tufted fir, and sailing slowly above the valley. Were they looking for her? Would they know why she had gone, how it killed her to go? Now the wild birds flapped toward the shore, uttering a harsh cry; and it smote on the girl's heart like a reproach. An answering cry rose to her lips, but she forced it back, and, turning resolutely away, fixed her eyes on little Jacob's face. The boy was smiling happily at the bright waves as they rose and fell around the schooner; and Isla took his hand in hers and saw her sunshine in his face.

CHAPTER IX. THE NEW SCHOLARS.

[71]

“**A**ND how are the two new scholars doing?” asked the trustee.

The principal smiled, and then sighed, and shook her head. “They are doing extremely well,” she said; “but—”

“But?” said the trustee.

“I don’t make them out at all,” said the principal. “That is,—oh, the little boy, of course, is just a good little fellow, not too bright, but with the sunniest, sweetest disposition in the world. It is the girl that puzzles me. It is incredible that she should know as much as she does, if she has been always deaf; yet it is evident that she has been taught no lip-reading; and her signs are none of the regular ones, but a language of her own, that she carries on with the little brother. She will not answer any questions that we put in writing; just smiles, a kind of thrilling smile, that goes to one’s heart,—I don’t know how to describe it,—and puts out her hand and strokes yours, and—and somehow, one doesn’t ask her anything more. She comes from an island, she writes, and the parents are dead, and she and the boy are wholly alone.”

The trustee mused.

“You had some kind of reference with them,” he asked. “Tell me all about it, will you? I have been away, you know, and only heard of the matter at third hand.” [72]

“It was about a month ago. I happened to be crossing the hall myself, on some errand, and heard James, the porter, talking to some one. He saw me, and called me to come. There on the steps stood these two children,—well, the girl is hardly a child in stature, being tall and slight, but she seems very young,—hand in hand. The girl held a note, and was trying to make him read it; James was asking question after question, and at each one she shook her head quietly. She made none of the usual signs, and he never thought of her being a deaf-mute. I took the note, and found it was addressed to me; it was from a young woman I know, a divinity student. She was appointed a travelling missionary this summer to sail about the coast, teaching and preaching, and, on some wild island or other,—I forgot its name,—she found these children. She asked me to be kind to the children; said that Isla was an interesting girl, and that her one desire was to have her little brother taught to speak. She said nothing about Isla herself learning; possibly she thought her too old for the school, or else that she would plead her own cause; and she has certainly done it. She is a strange, wild creature, but there is something unspeakably winning about her. Oh, and there was another thing that was very curious. I think James himself must tell you about that.”

She rang the bell, and the porter appeared, a good-natured looking Irishman, not perhaps too clever. [73]

“James,” said Miss Stewart, “I want you to tell Mr. Upton about the strange man who came here just after I had taken the Heron children up-stairs, the day they first came.”

James looked uneasy, and shuffled on his feet.

“Sure, he was a crazy man, sir!” he said. “There did be no sense in the things he said to me, at all.”

“No matter; let’s hear them, James. If we never heard any remarks but those with sense in them, we might live in silence a good part of our lives. Out with it!”

James shuffled again, and looked over his shoulder, as if expecting to see some one behind him.

“Well, sir, I’ll tell you just as it befel, and, if you don’t believe me, it’ll not be my fault, nor yet I’ll not be blamin’ ye. I thought strange of those two youngsters, coming all by their two selves that way; and, after Miss Stewart took them up-stairs, I went out on the steps and looked up and down the street a couple o’ times. ‘It might be like this,’ says I to myself, ‘that somebody wanted to get shut on ‘em,’ I says, ‘and has turned ‘em over, poor dumb things, where they’ll be taken care of, and now stealin’ off wid himself!’ I says. And that minute, if I didn’t catch sight of a feller skulkin’ behind the corner, and eyein’ me round it, for all the world like a sneakin’ spy, Miss Stewart, ma’am. I’ll not deceive you, sir, that I didn’t like the look of him at all. If he’d been a common mortal man, like you and me, sir, and no offence, I’d ha’ had him out o’ that by the collar before he could wink, and asked his business. But he was an on’arthly piece; I don’t know what he was like, at all; but his face was all patches, and his mouth the whole way round it, so it was; and the way he looked out of his two eyes,—well! I thought I’d be goin’ in, whether he was a man or a pixy, the way we see thim in Ireland. But I couldn’t turn round, till he was up on the steps, and had me by the collar, and the two eyes of him gogglin’ in my face, fit to turn me to stone. And he put his face up close to mine, that never was near such an ugly thing before, God be good to me! and he says, and it half a whisper and half a yell,—

[74]

“‘You’ll take care of that young lady!’ he says. ‘Are you the boss here?’ and me no chance to answer, wid his hand in the neck of me, and me voice choked in me throat,—‘You’ll take care of that young lady!’ he says, ‘I want you to know,’ he says, ‘that she’s not alone, that young lady ain’t. There’s them as is watchin’ over her, and that’ll know if she ain’t treated good. And if they

find out she ain't, see here! I'll come here myself, and I'll wring your neck!' he says. 'I could do it as easy as I would a chicken's, and 'twould be nothing but a pleasure. So now you know. That young lady's name is Heron: Isly Heron her name is, and she's wuth more money than there is in your city and Noo York wropped together! I know Herons, and you'd better know 'em too, and treat 'em as is right and proper. And my name's Brazybone, and don't you forget the sound of it; Brazybone, do ye hear? And when Heron's near, just you be sure Brazybone ain't fur off! You be sure of that, and mind your lobster-pots! That's what I say to you!' [75]

"And then, Mr. Upton, he give my collar a twist, sir, as near broke my neck, it did; and shook his fist in my face, and put his own ugly mug right up, grinnin' at me till I thought the eyes would rowl out of his head. And then dropped me, and goes shamblin' off round the corner. There! Now I've told it, Miss Stewart, and don't ask me to tell it again no more, for the chills go down my back, they do, when I think of it."

James was soothed and dismissed, and went off, muttering, to his den.

"It is true that he was terribly frightened, poor fellow," said Miss Stewart, laughing. "We found him as white as a sheet, and for a long time he would not say a word about what had happened. Indeed, I have never heard the whole of it before. Do you think the man was a lunatic?"

"Perhaps; or perhaps some Caliban of an islander, who had been sent to guard the two children. My curiosity is thoroughly roused about them, I confess. Can I have a peep at them before I go, or are they already in bed?"

Miss Stewart led the way up-stairs.

"We have given them a room together," she said apologetically. "It is hardly according to rules, but they have never been separated in their lives, and it seemed so terrible a thing to them, that we thought we might strain a point, and let them be together for a while, till they grew accustomed to the new surroundings. There was a vacant room, which was not in use." [76]

The trustee nodded. "I like india-rubber in my cast-iron, too!" he said, sympathetically. "It wears much better."

They went silently up the second flight. At the landing, Miss Stewart paused, and beckoned to her companion to come up; unconsciously she put her finger to her lips, which was absurd, if there were none but deaf children near by. The trustee came up, and looked over her shoulder.

The door of a large room opposite the stairs stood open. No furniture was in the room, save two beds and a chair or two. In one bed a little boy sat upright, clapping his hands and making soft sounds of pleasure; his voice was unmodulated, but had no harsh, unnatural tone, rather a low, rustling murmur, like leaves touched by a light wind. His eyes were fixed on a figure that instantly caught the eyes of the two beholders, and held them.

Isla was circling round and round the room with light, swift motions, like a bird's; her arms were outspread, her finger-tips brushed the walls as she sped by, and it was like the brushing of wings. Her long russet hair, unbraided, waved about her shoulders; her eyes seemed to lighten the dusky room, where the twilight was already falling. Now and then she turned to smile at Jacob, to flutter to the bed and take him in her arms for a moment; then turned again to her bird-like flight, skimming the ground as a swallow skims the sea. You would have said, a bird imprisoned in human form, shut within walls, and trying with all its wild nature to escape its bonds. Her face turned bright on the little brother, but, when it was away from him, the loneliness, the longing, were pitiful to see. The trustee, standing well back in the shadow, touched his companion on the arm with a glance of inquiry; what did this mean? She shook her head, and he was glad to see her eyes full of tears. His own heart ached, as if he were watching a sylvan creature in pain. [77]

Suddenly the girl paused, tired, or desperate, hung for a moment at the window, gazing out at the roofs and chimney-pots, and the strip of blue sky above them; then dropped on the ground and sat bowed together, her face in her hands, rocking to and fro.

Miss Stewart stepped into the room, and laid her hand gently on the child's shoulder. At the first tread, Isla raised her head, then dropped it again. A strong shudder went through her, and her breath came fast; but only for an instant. It was a different face that she raised to Miss Stewart now, in answer to the kindly pressure, the troubled sign of inquiry. Gentle, quiet, a little anxious, perhaps, with a smile that sought to propitiate; this was the Isla that Miss Stewart knew. At the teacher's sign, she rose quickly, and came forward to greet the stranger. She took the hand he held out, and gazed at him intently; her eyes were full of liquid light, but behind the light, what shadow lay? suspicion, fear, expectation, as of something long dreaded? What could it be? And as the trustee looked in amazement into these gleaming, watchful eyes, that braved, yet shrank from him,—why, what was this? He had fancied it all! The girl's look was only winning, only timid, anxious to please, perhaps a little shy of a stranger; assuredly the sweetest look he had seen in human eyes. [78]

"God bless you, my dear child!" he said, hastily. And the principal felt that Isla was certainly improving in lip-reading, for she brightened at the words, and smiled more joyously, and led the way to little Jacob's bed.

CHAPTER X. JOE'S TREASURY.

[79]

JOE BRAZYBONE was walking slowly up the village street, on his way home. He seemed deep in thought, and his round shoulders were bowed forward, as if beneath a heavy weight. The few boys who were hanging about called after him, but he paid no attention to them. Usually, they were able to rouse him to frenzy by the song that one of their number had composed, and it was their delight to see him turn and chase them, with uncouth gestures of malediction.

"Sculpin Brazybone,
Hit him on his crazy-bone;
Knocked out his wits, and
Scared him into fits, and
Warn't nothin' left of him
Only jest a lazybone!"

But to-day the insulting chant fell on unheeding ears, which was disappointing. Joe shambled along till he reached the low, brown cottage, where he and his sister-in-law wrangled their lives along. He looked up and around before entering the house, scanning sea and sky with sharp, weather-wise eyes.

"It's getting time for her!" he muttered to himself. "Soft sky, and everythin' turnin' green along by; time she was back here, to see things growin'. She never could stand it there in summer, not Isly couldn't." [80]

Reaching the poor little room which was his castle and his defence against all storms, Joe sat for a time in meditation; then he rose, and, after carefully reconnoitring the premises, and deciding that Ma'am Brazybone was nowhere about, he went on tiptoe to a cupboard in the wall, and examined its contents. One by one he drew out several objects, and, after looking them over with anxious scrutiny, proceeded to arrange them in orderly lines on his bed, which served for table, also. A look of honest pride spread over his homely face, as he gazed at these objects; he took from a drawer an old rag of red handkerchief, and slowly and methodically wiped off every one, spying for a particle of dust. It was a motley array. A pair of silver-bowed spectacles; a bracelet of carnelian beads; a brass thimble and a horn snuff-box; a brooch of the mineral called goldstone, set in tarnished, coppery gold; a piece of red coral, smoothed and polished; an ancient parasol, of faded green silk; these were the contents of Joe's treasury. He gloated over them, lifting first one and then another; he murmured praise of them to the four walls that were his only hearers.

"Them's pretty beads!" he said, slipping the string over his great red wrist, and rubbing the smooth balls with delight. "Lovely, them is! I remember of Pop Brazybone's bringin' 'em home to little Sister Marthy, as if 'twas yesterday. She was tickled 'most to death, warn't she? Poor little Marthy! She warn't rugged enough to grow up. Old Joe had the ruggedness, and the ugliness, too; she was well-favoured, little Marthy was; not anythin' to speak of like Isly, but well-favoured for Brazybones. Wouldn't Isly look handsome in them! she'd be more than handsome, she'd be pretty! And she's goin' to have 'em, too. Isly don't know it yet, but she's goin' to have old Joe's handsome things, when she comes back, to wear like a lady, and put city folks to their shames." [81]

"This sunshade, now! wal, I feel some dubious about this sunshade. 'Tis tasty, real tasty, but I kind o' feel that Isly wouldn't want to carry that; unless she was goin' to meetin'. Yes, she might take it with her to meetin'." He nodded, relieved.

"The specs I'll have to keep, I calc'late; no need for them on Isly's eyes, that's bright as sunshine. Old Joe'll put 'em on himself, mebbe, some day, and he might look better for 'em."

He put the spectacles on his nose, and, finding a bit of cracked looking-glass in a corner, gazed for a moment at his reflection; then he shook his head.

"Nothin' seems to make much difference in your looks, Joe. Look a leetle wuss in 'em than what you do out of 'em. Wal, now, how long do you suppose Mother Brazybone can stand seein' them featur's every day, right along? 'Tis a caution, how she bears up as she doos; but she's terrible rugged, Mother Brazybone is. I don't expect I'll git red on her this long time.

"Now here!" He held up the goldstone brooch, and looked at it with reverence. [82]

"That's a fine piece of joolery, that is. When I go up to Bellton, how'd it be if I took that piece of joolery along for Isly? She'd think a sight of it; ma'am did, I know. How'd it be if I jest handed it in at the door, keerless like, and said to that whopper-jawed piece of putty with buttons on to him, 'You give that to young Lady Heron,' I says, 'and you tell her the man as brought it is at the door,' I says, 'and she's only got to say the word and there'll be more like it.' Why—there is more like it, ain't there? Where's them ear-bobs?"

He turned over each article with laborious care, searching for what might lie under them. Finding nothing, he went to the cupboard, and ransacked it, his face growing more and more troubled. The sweat broke out on his forehead, and he mopped it with the rag of handkerchief; he felt in every corner; he looked under the bed, thinking that the earrings might have fallen and rolled out of sight; but no earrings were to be seen.

He was still searching painfully, when the sound of footsteps was heard in the outer room. A suspicion darted into Joe's mind, and clung there like a snake. With shaking hands he put his treasures back in the cupboard, heaping them carelessly, instead of ranging them in order, as he loved to do. He turned the key, noticing for the first time what a common pattern it was, and how easily any other key in the house might fit the lock; then, putting it in his pocket, he went into the outer room, closing the door behind him.

Mrs. Brazybone was standing with her back to him, taking off her bonnet leisurely, and humming a psalm tune as she did so; she had been at a "singing tea-party," and had enjoyed herself immensely. Her brother-in-law took her by the shoulders and whirled her round to face him; his eyes were blazing, the muscles on his temples stood out like brown cords, and his jaws worked for a moment before the words would come. [83]

"You—you—" he stammered, "you critter, you've got my ear-bobs! Who give you leave to ransack my cupboard and take my joolery?"

For a moment Mrs. Brazybone was at a loss; but the next moment she spoke, with good assurance.

"Was you thinkin' of wearin' 'em yourself, Joe? I'm sure I'd never have tetched 'em, if I'd ha' thought you wanted to put 'em in your own handsome ears."

"You critter!" said Joe again, shaking her great shoulders, till her chin waggled to and fro. "Take them bobs out, hear? Ain't you satisfied with the rest of what you are, 'thout addin' thief on to it? Will you take 'em out, or shall I take 'em out for ye?"

Mrs. Brazybone thought rapidly; her eyes brightened for a moment with lust of battle, but she felt Joe's hands like iron on her shoulders, and decided for peace. Her voice took on a tone of whining bluster.

"Well, Joseph Brazybone! if I ever thought to hear your brother's widder called a thief in *this* world! Poor Jabez! I'm glad he ain't here; 't would break his heart to hear me spoke so of."

Joe snorted, but she saw no relenting in his eyes, so she began slowly to take out the earrings. [84]

"They're terrible paltry bobs," she said. "I should think you'd be glad to see 'em worn by a respectable lady, Joseph, 'stead of takin' on this way!" and she sniffed, as she handed the precious ornaments to their owner.

"Respectable!" roared Joe, who had kept an anxious silence while the earrings were being removed, but with them safe in his hands now felt that he could give the rein to his feelings.

"*You* respectable, you half-fruz jelly-fish? You've never ben *threatened* with bein' respectable! Don't you be afraid, Mother Brazybone, nobody'll ever say that of ye! But now, see here! you let my belongings alone, do ye hear? from henceforth now and forever, so help ye; or I'll trim yer ears to match yer nose, and then the hull island 'ud fly away in the air to get out of the sight of ye."

He retired with his rescued treasures, and Mrs. Brazybone congratulated herself on getting off so easily. She had counted on restoring the gauds before Joe came back from fishing, and had been regretting all the afternoon that she had not taken the brooch as well; now she reflected that "a passel o' words didn't do one a might o' hurt," and remembered with a thrill of pride how many eyes had been fixed admiringly on the dangling ornaments. She promised herself to be more careful next time; but the next time she opened the cupboard with her door-key, the treasury was empty.

CHAPTER XI. DISCOVERY.

[85]

THE trustee stood on the steps of the Deaf-mute School, and pulled the bell. He had come to see his friend Isla, and his pockets were full of oranges for Jacob. He had grown much attached to the stranger children, and Isla especially had come very near his heart. He was a childless man, and now and then the thought crossed his mind that some day he might take the brother and sister home to his ample house, to be his children, his very own. It would be a silent house, but he was used to that. And he did not like noise. Besides, one never thought of Isla's silence, her eyes were such eloquent speakers of all lovely and tender things. Wild, sometimes; it seemed to him now and then as if the girl had some trouble, some secret, that was wearing her out. He had tried to talk with her, to learn her history; but all she told in her graceful sign-language was calm and happy, of the lovely island, the care-free life till after her mother's death, and then the desire to learn speech, which overmastered everything else. But something there was, the trustee felt more and more sure; and whatever the trouble might be, it was increasing. Through the long winter the girl had been quiet; almost apathetic, though her lovely smile never failed to brighten at sight of her friends, never failed to make sunshine for her little Jacob. Now, however, as the spring came on, a restlessness seized her. She wandered from window to window, looking out, scanning the houses across the street, as if she tried to see through and beyond their solid walls. When taken out to walk with the other children, this restlessness became almost uncontrollable. Every leaf, every blade of grass, seemed to draw her as if by magic; she plucked them, cherished them in her hands, took them home to her room. She would stand rapt, watching the birds, till the teacher touched her arm, and motioned her to go on. Then she would fling her arms out, with a gesture of distress, of impatience; but next moment would come the downward look, the pause, and then the sweet, patient smile, and the deprecating hand laid on her friend's arm.

[86]

"I declare," said this young teacher, speaking to the principal one day, "I can hardly believe, sometimes, that Isla does not hear. It is not only that she watches the birds; she certainly seems to listen. Do you think she can catch any vibrations of the air, when they are trilling and twittering so far above her?"

The principal thought not, but owned that Isla puzzled her, too. "Little Jacob is perfectly normal," she said, "but how much less interesting! Just a sweet, good little fellow, and that is all. Yet he is learning fast to articulate, while Isla will not make the slightest attempt. It is strange!"

Now, as the kind trustee stood waiting for James to open the door, he heard footsteps behind him, and turning, saw a man coming up behind him. Such a man the trustee had never seen before, though he had travelled far. It was not that he was ugly, though that was enough; it was not that he was clumsy, though that was enough; it was not even that he looked as much like a fish as a man, if arms and legs could be concealed; it was,—

[87]

"Ha!" said the trustee. "I have it! Caliban, with the addition of a soul! Precisely! and may I be asked to resign if this is not James's pixy!"

These remarks were not audible to the strange man, who stood looking intently at the gentleman, with bright blue eyes that were little in keeping with the rest of his uncouth being.

He opened his mouth once or twice, with such suggestions of Jonah that the trustee involuntarily recoiled a step or two; he tried to speak, but found difficulty in doing so; at length,—

"You're a gentleman!" said Caliban.

"Thank you!" said the trustee. "I think it highly probable that you are another. What can I do for you this morning?"

Joe pulled off his hat with a gesture indescribably feudal.

"I know a gentleman when I see him," he said, humbly. "Brazybones ain't never been gentlemen, but they knows 'em, 'count o' bein' along o' Herons so long, you see. Yes, sir; Joseph Brazybone is my name: Sculpin Joe, some calls me, on account of my style o' featur, which is what was give me at birth; and I've come to see my young Lady Heron, as is stopping here a spell. You—bein' a gentleman, you might know young Lady Heron, mebbe, sir?"

[88]

"Isla Heron?" said the trustee. "Oh, yes; I know Isla very well, and her little brother, too."

Joe Brazybone turned away suddenly, and his round shoulders heaved once or twice. He was silent for a moment, and when he spoke it was slow and brokenly.

"You—you'll excuse me, gentleman," he said. "It came kind o' suddin, that's all is the matter with me. Old Joe's had a hard winter of it, ye see, never hearin' a word of his young lady, let alone seein' her, as every day he done sence Giles was laid away, till this winter. He's had a hard time of it, Joe has, and all the way down he's been thinkin', suppose somethin' had happened to my young lady. She's well, you said, gentleman?" He turned suddenly, and his glance was like a sword. "No, you didn't say so, but yet you spoke as if—she's well, Isly is?"

The trustee nodded quickly. "Yes, Joseph; she is perfectly well," he said. "A very lovely girl, your young lady, and we are all very fond of her here. Now you want to see her, I am sure, and here is the door opening. I will send for the children at once."

The trustee would have liked to stay a few minutes to ask this queer retainer a question or two about the Heron children and their people; but the eagerness of the man was so piteous, his attempts to conceal it so hopeless, that the kind trustee had mercy. Besides, James had opened the door, only to fall into a kind of fit at sight of his goblin of the past summer. He was now behind the door, holding it well between him and the strange visitor, and admonishing his favourite saints, in a terrified gabble, to stand by him now and save him from being pixy-rid. But Joe had no eyes now for James, or anybody his like. He had found a gentleman, and the gentleman was going to take him to his young lady; this was enough to fill Joe's world very full, and he only fixed, in passing, a vacant stare on the unhappy porter, which sent cold shivers down the latter's back, and made him feel that he had got the evil eye on him this time, and no mistake.

[89]

The trustee passed on up the wide staircase, Joe following humbly at his heels, keeping step exactly, and standing motionless whenever he paused for a moment. The man's action was so exactly that of a good dog, that the trustee turned round once or twice on the way up, to make sure that his follower was indeed human. But suddenly Joe paused, with a broken exclamation.

"There now! there now! I want to know if I forgot that! I want to know if I did, after all my plannin' and contrivin'."

The trustee turned round, and saw his companion fumbling awkwardly in his breast. He drew out a small object wrapped in coarse brown paper, and held it out with a piteous look.

"See here! gentleman," he said. "I meant to send this to Isly first; that's what I meant to do. I meant to send it in by the putty-faced feller, and tell how the man that brought it was there, and had more where that came from." He unfolded the paper with trembling fingers, and held out the goldstone brooch.

[90]

"That's handsome, ain't it?" he said, anxiously. "That's handsome enough for a young lady like Isly, ain't it, gentleman? That's what ladies wear, round in city parts?"

The trustee examined the brooch gravely.

"A fine piece of goldstone, Joseph. I never saw a prettier piece; yes, Isla will surely be pleased with that. But don't you think it would be just as well to give it directly to her? I think she might be better pleased if you gave it to her yourself. Wait here a moment, and I will bring both the children; or, there is Miss Stewart; I will ask her to bring them."

A few words told Miss Stewart the nature of the new arrival; after a curious glance at the fish-like visitor, she sped away. The kind trustee waited, saying a word now and then to Joe, trying to make him feel at ease, pointing out this and that picture on the walls; but the islander paid little heed. His eyes were fixed on the door; he sat on the edge of his chair, turning the brooch absently in his fingers; he was listening so intently that the trustee fancied he could almost see his ears prick from under the wisps of sandy hair. Presently there came a sound of feet on the stair, and Joe started up with an inarticulate sound, between a whistle and a cry. The trustee heard three distinct footfalls, but Joe heard only one.

"She's comin'!" he cried. "Isly's comin'!"

[91]

Was this Isla who came in? The trustee stared in amazement. Deadly white, with brows drawn as if in pain, with lips set close, hands pressed together, eyes full of fear,—was this Isla? The principal shook her head, and signed her amazement. "I could hardly make her come," she whispered. "She fell into a sort of shuddering fit,—I fear there is something wrong about it all. Hush!"

Both were silent, feeling the matter taken out of their hands. Joseph Brazybone was at Isla's feet, half kneeling, half crouching; he was patting her dress, her hands, touching the ends of her long hair with timid fingers. The trustee felt that he was needing a tail to wag, and was sorry for him. Little Jacob threw himself on the islander, with every sign of pleasure, but Joe hardly heeded him, only looked up in Isla's face with dog-like, beseeching eyes. The girl's eyes were like hard, bright stones, save for that watchful look of fear, of expectation; but, presently, they softened. The old kindness, the thought of her father and her home, flowed over her like a wave, shook her like a wind. She smiled, and tried hard to make it her own smile; she patted Joe's shoulder with a friendly touch, and pointed to a chair. But Joe still crouched on the floor gazing at her.

"Ye're lookin' well, Isly!" he said at length; and the two onlookers started at the sound of his voice, so tense had the silence grown.

"Ye're looking real well, and growed a perfec' lady, as I always knowed." He paused a moment; then went on.

"Joe thought he'd come to see ye, y' understand, young lady! Old Joe thought he'd come. The winter's been long enough on the island, and come spring Joe says to himself, 'She'll be thinking about home,' he says, 'and mebbe she'll be glad to see a face as comes from home, even if 'tis an ugly one. Joe ain't never set up to be a beauty, ye know, Isly.'"

[92]

He tried a laugh, and it broke off in his throat.

"Ain't ye glad to see the old man, Isly?" he said, after a pause. "Ain't ye goin' to pass the time o' day to old Joe, Joe Brazybone, as he and Giles was boys together?"

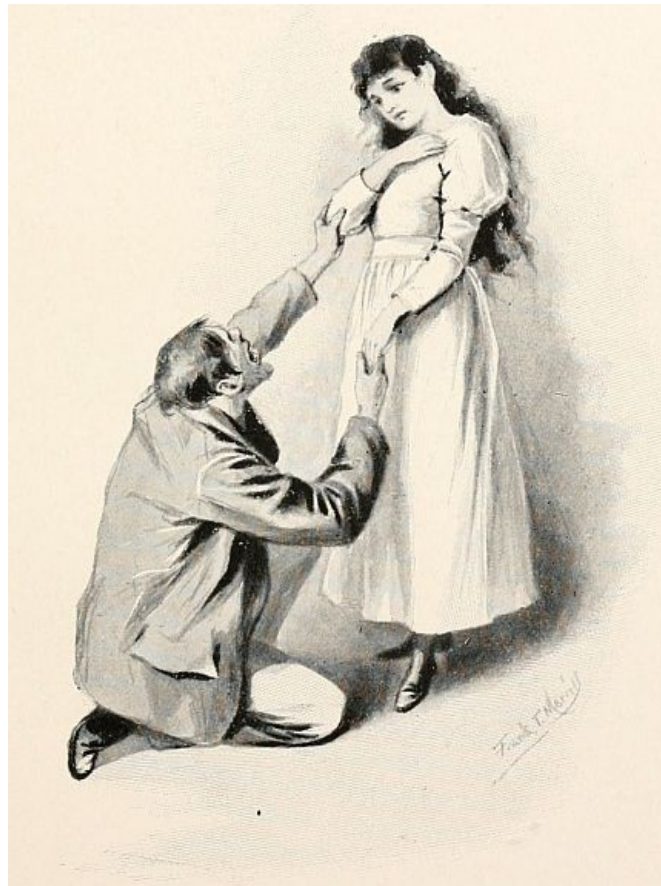
Isla smiled, and pressed his hand kindly; her lips never moved, but now she began to shake as

if with an ague; pale flushes came and went through her clear skin, and her breathing was hurried and broken. The trustee touched Joe on the shoulder. "I fear you are distressing her!" he said kindly, seeing the man labouring in anguish of perplexity. "You forget Isla hears nothing, and she has not yet learned to read from the lips."

Joseph Brazybone started to his feet, and threw up his hands with a strange gesture.

"What's that you're sayin'?" he asked. "What's that you said, gentleman, about Isly Heron?"

"I do not need, surely, to tell you that she is deaf and dumb," said the trustee. "You cannot speak to her by signs, as Jacob did when he came!"



"Deef!" cried Joe, and his voice rang through the room like a trumpet. "Isly Heron deaf? It's a lie, whoever says so. Isly, why don't you speak to me? why don't you speak to these folks, and tell 'em not to call you out o' your name?"

[93]

[94]

[95]

"Isly Heron deaf and dumb, her that sings like a bird, and talks like angels in the sky? Why, gentleman, and you, lady stranger, you—you don't understand what you're sayin'. I tell ye, if God only allowed one voice on this airth, that voice 'ud be Isly Heron's. And old Joe comes to see his young lady, and she won't speak to him. Oh, Isly, Isly, for yer father's sake, speak to old Joe just once, if ye never do again!"

He was down on the floor again, crouching at her feet. Isla looked round the room, with wild eyes of a trapped creature that sees death before it; she saw the grave wonder, the doubt and distress, in the faces of the two spectators; she saw the agony of pleading in the rugged, misshapen features of the fisherman. She looked,—ah! where else should she turn now for comfort? In the face of her little Jacob; Jacob, for whose dear sake she had borne and suffered all; to whom now, perhaps, she was bringing shame, punishment for her sin; for she never doubted its being a sin. Jacob was smiling, pleased and happy at seeing a face that he remembered well in the old days at home. Those days were growing dim now for Jacob, and the new life filled his little cup with joy and comfort. He looked happily up at his sister, but met her eyes all fierce and burning, saw her face drawn and distorted with pain. Jacob did not understand pain, and Isla looked dreadful. He shrank from her, and caught the hand that was next to him, the hand of the principal of the school, and nestled in her gown.

[96]

When Isla Heron saw that, she threw out her arms, and cried aloud.

"God!" she cried in her extremity. "God! God! where are you?" Then, with her bird-like motion, she swung out from among them, pushing aside the hands that would have held her, avoiding the kind arms that sought to stay her; out of the room, and down the stair, flying so light and swift that no one missed the wings; out of the room and down the stair; and, before any one could stir to follow her, they heard the front door open quickly, close lightly,—Isla was gone!

CHAPTER XII. THE WILD ROCKS AGAIN.

[97]

HOME! home to the Wild Rocks, to the sea and the sky! Away, fast as flying feet might go, from the walls that shut out life and light, that stifled heart and soul! Since the sin was sinned in vain; since she must be turned away with shame, if she did not go of her own accord, and that quickly; since with her the little brother, for whose dear sake she had planned the sin, must be sent too, to share the shame, and lose all the help and happiness that lay before him if he might but stay; oh! and above all, above all, since he, the little cherished one, had turned his face from her and clung to the new friends, who could give so much, while she had nothing but her great love; since all these things were, home to the Wild Rocks, praying for the flight of a bird, speeding straight, with the steps of a child who had learned to run with the hares and the mountain sheep. Many turned to look at the girl, but none sought to stop her. Rather people stood aside, as for the flight of an arrow, feeling the passage of some dire need that would not be stayed nor questioned. Home! home to the Wild Rocks!

Captain Ezekiel and his mate, making all ready for the homeward voyage, never noticed the slight figure that hovered about the wharf, slipping behind a corner or a barrel when they turned their faces that way, venturing nearer when they set them toward the sea. When they hoisted the sail, they never saw a shadow that flitted past them, a slender shape that passed noiseless as a bird, and slipped down the narrow stairs of the little cabin, and was gone. There were no passengers that day, or none that the captain knew of. He sailed out of the harbour on an easy wind, and for some hours the schooner made good headway, running lightly in a smooth sea; but at twilight the breeze dropped away, and soon the vessel lay rolling on a sea of purple glass, shot with golden lights. "Ain't goin' to have a quick chance this time, Elmer!" said the captain; and Elmer, aloft, at work on the gaff topsail, grunted, with his knife between his teeth, and agreed with the captain.

[98]

The purple faded into gray, softened into black velvet, with stars trailing their slender lines of gold across. The sea breathed deep and gently, and the schooner rolled slowly on its broad bosom, making little progress forward. The captain and Elmer brought out their store of ship biscuit and corned beef, and made coffee in the little fore-castle, and, while they were busy over these matters, the same light shape came softly up the stairs, and, passing forward, hid itself among the rigging and piles of rope. Once some small object was displaced, and Captain Ezekiel raised his head at the sound.

"Did you hear anythin' movin' forrard there, Elmer?"

"Cat!" said Elmer, raising a mug of coffee to his lips.

[99]

"So 'tis!" assented the captain. "Caught a rat, likely, and got her supper. Well now, ain't this awful moderate? I don't call this no kind of a chance. You better go to bed, Elmer, when you've got them dishes done up."

Elmer burrowed in the little cabin, and slept like a woodchuck. The lonely watcher in the bow saw the captain's sturdy figure standing at the wheel, turning the spokes from time to time, smoking his pipe with calm, regular puffs, studying sky and sea with patient inquiry. It grew cold, and the dew gathered thick, and dripped from rope and spar. Isla hardly felt the cold. She was breathing the sea air, her own air, once more, and the good boat was under her, and she was going home,—but going alone. She had been so shaken and torn with fear and pain these many months, her life and strength had gone so entirely into the part she was playing, the goal she must reach, that now there seemed nothing in life so good as this, to sit quiet, with no one to see her or speak to her, rising and falling with that slow, calm breathing of the waters, as her own sea-gulls loved to fall and rise. To-morrow, the awaking again to pain and loneliness, and the thought of what she had lost forever; tonight, rest; rest, with no thought nor feeling, only the sight of the quiet sea dimpling and lapping below, the quiet sky bending above. Rest!

She must have slept at last, for she was roused by cheerful voices, and came to herself with a start. The dawn was breaking pale and clear, the stars still shining; the east was tender with rose color; below the faint, sweet glow lay a band of green, cold and pure as chrysoprase; and against this green towered a great black rock.

[100]

"Half-past three!" said the captain, looking at his watch, as he climbed down into the boat which Elmer held ready against the side. "Longest chance I ever had, save and except one. Reckon we shall have to rout out the folks to get us some breakfast,—my good land! what's that?"

The good boat was staunch, but that was a perilous moment, for both men started to their feet when Isla's light figure dropped down, and sank with one motion into the bow.

"Who—who are ye?" asked the captain, in a stout voice which quavered strangely. "Are ye a livin' woman? Say quick, before I heave ye out o' here."

"Oh, Captain Ezekiel, it is Isla! Isla Heron! Take me home, will you? Home to the island. I am never going away again."

"And when we come to the beach," said the captain, telling about it afterwards, "and I was just thinkin' how I would get the poor child home to my house and get her warm, and then mebbe she'd feel like tellin' me where she come from and all about it,—I was just thinkin', when out she

jumps like a flash, and says, "Thank you, captain!" that pretty way she had, and she was gone, up and out over the rocks, quicker'n any bird I ever saw fly."

Up and over the rocks! Oh, the good rocks, gray and black, with their clinging lichens of orange and russet! Oh, the friendly touch of them on her feet as she ran! The beach, with its white shell-sand disfigured by heads and entrails of fish, had no charm to stay the girl for an instant. The rocks drew her. Over them, away and away, round the point where the cliff nodded outward; there was home, and rest, and peace. The light broadened and brightened, the sea turned from gray to blue again, the grass shimmered in green and gold, for it was buttercup time. Isla stopped now and again to lay her hand on some well-known stone, to greet an old tree that had been her friend ever since she could remember. The ravens were still asleep, were they? Lazy old ravens; how she would startle them! But they would see that she came alone. She moaned, and ran on the faster. [101]

Past the Dead Valley now. They were sleeping, too, the old mammoths,—they had never missed her, had never known how she dreamed of them, how she longed for them. The sea knew; it murmured and sang to her, telling her over and over again, how glad it was to see her home again. Now, only one more point to round, and she was home indeed. The strip of white sand where Jacob had slept that last time she ever left him till now, the roll of seaweed that marked the boundary line; then through the swampy bit, and up into the little green glade, where the cottage clung to the wall of the sheltering cliff behind it. Isla stood and looked where her home should be, and saw a heap of ashes, gray as the rock behind them, with charred beams scattered here and there.

THE LAST.

NOT many days after this, a sad and anxious group of people stood beside the ruins of the Heron cottage. Joe Brazybone, or the distracted ghost of him, the trustee, who had thrown over everything else and come with Joe, and the young missionary. The latter had come to visit the school only the day after Isla's flight; what more natural than that she should join in the search? The trustee had gladly acceded to her petition that she might accompany him. "Yes, yes!" he said; "a woman is the thing. A woman can make her listen; poor lost lamb! Miss Stewart cannot leave her post, and you are the very one we need."

Here they stood now, looking blankly about them. They had heard, in the village, of the cottage having been burned soon after the Heron children left it, by some wanton boys, who had dared each other to eat their supper in the "Witch-house," and had built a fire carelessly, and fled when they saw the mischief they had wrought. No one had seen Isla since her return, though one and another had made search for her. Captain Ezekiel spent all the time between the two last trips in searching and calling. He fancied he saw her once, but, if it were she, she had fled at sight or sound of him, and it might have been a young lamb, he said, running quick and light through the woods. He brought food with him, and left it near the ashes of the cottage; when he came again, it was gone, and he hoped the child had taken it. [103]

Where should search begin? The trustee looked about him, hopelessly. If the islanders themselves could not find the lost girl, what could he, a stranger, hope to do? His face brightened as he turned to look at Joe. The man was questing here and there like a hound, spying at every tree, catching at every bent leaf or broken twig. His eyes were closed to sharp blue points, and their glance pierced where it struck. Suddenly he stopped and threw up his head, and, in all his distress, the trustee thought again that the creature wanted a tail to wag, and pitied him his mistaken humanity.

"She's passed here!" said Joe, speaking for the first time, in a thick, husky voice. "She's passed here, gentleman and preacher, Isly has. I knowed it before, but I wanted to make surer than sure. Look at here!"

He held up two or three shells strung together, and they recognized part of a shell bracelet that Isla always wore. Joe's great hand shook as he held it up, and the breath hissed through his teeth.

"We'll find her, sir!" he said, putting the shells in his bosom. "We'll find Isly this day. If she's willin', that is!" he added, turning upon them almost savagely. "This hull island is Isly Heron's own dooryard, I want ye to understand, gentleman and preacher. She's to home here, to go where she likes and do as she likes, and I'd like to see any one try to hender her. She lets common folks live up to the fur end, and that's because she's the lady she is. Brazybones know, I tell ye; Brazybones know Herons! And if she don't want us to find her, why then she won't be found. But I hope,—" his voice broke and faltered, and the glare died out of his eyes,—"I'm in hopes that my young lady will let us pass the time o' day with her, seein' we come so fur, and there's things old Joe wants to explain to her. There's things he's got to say to her, I tell ye. There! we're losin' time while I'm palaverin' here. You foller me, gentleman and lady, and foller soft, if you ever went soft in yer lives!" [104]

He led the way, the others following, through the little Home Valley, as Isla called it, through a narrow rocky pass and over a great brown hill, down into the Dead Valley, which lay beyond. The trustee looked about him with amazement, for, though he had travelled far, he had never seen such a place as this on the earth. He would have asked some questions, but Joe waved him on with feverish eagerness.

"Look here!" he said. "She's been here, and not so long ago. Look at the yew-bed, here!"

They looked in wonder at the great cushion of trailing yew that spread thick over the ground under one of the dead cedars. It curled close, a perfumed mat; no queen could have a softer couch. Their eyes sought in vain any print of a light form, though Joe was pointing eagerly. [105]

"I tell ye she's been here!" he repeated. "No place she loved better to sleep in than one of these yew-beds. She mostly never slept within doors in summer, Isly didn't; and this kind o' place she loved to lay in. Look! here's tufts o' wool in it, too. Mebbe a lamb came and couched down with her for company; they allers loved Isly, and come meechin' round her whenever she'd go abroad; and mebbe she felt lonesome, and let one of 'em snuggle up to her."

His voice broke, and he hurried on; the other two felt their own eyes dimmed, as the picture came before them,—the lonely girl lying down to sleep under God's kind sky, with the wild lamb in her arms.

Still on, in silence now. They had made a circuit, and were coming near the sea again, but through rougher, wilder ways. Deep gorges dropped away before them, black as night, with huge boulders wedged across them; in the wider ones a tiny strip of green, with fresh water trickling down. Here they came to a broad meadow, with black spruces, and rocks of orange-tawny lichen glowing like flame. Again, they found themselves in a moss or bog, with rounded tufts, soft and springy, and purple flags nodding here and there; while higher up (for June had come again) they saw the scarlet sorrel spread like a gay mantle on the great hill shoulder.

At the foot of one of these huge shoulders Joe Brazybone paused, and dropped his head, questing silently; then, with a gesture of caution, he led the way upward. [106]

"Do not call!" they had said in the village. "If you call, or startle her, she will go crazed, if she is not already."

Joe knew that well, and from time to time he turned fiercely on his companions, almost threatening in his earnest gestures. He would gladly have bidden them stay below, and let him go alone to find his mistress; but he knew, poor Joe, in his humble, dog-like understanding, he knew his voice was not the one that Isla would be most likely to listen to, that his face was not the one to please her best, coming suddenly into her solitude. "Gentle folks wants their like," he said, patiently to himself. "Old Joe ain't the proper person to speak first to his young lady, supposin' she's willin' to be spoke to."

Could they but move silently! The grass was soft and new, and made no sound, but here and there lay dry leaves of last year, caught in the roots of the trees and held there against the blasts that sweep and tear through the winter; these crackled if one touched them; now and again a twig snapped, for the preacher's dress, gather it close as she could about her, would sometimes float and catch as she passed. Up the huge crag they went, drawing their very breath in fear; and now, Joe, who reached the summit first, flung back his hand, half beckoning, half warning. The others crept nearer. The rock was crested with spruce and cedar; peering through the black fringes, they saw a tiny circle hollowed, carpeted with russet needles and velvet moss, with strawberry and twin-flower creeping together. Here Isla was sitting, braiding her long hair. A leaf, half full of wild strawberries, lay beside her, and with it the broken half of the shell bracelet. Her face was worn with pain, her eyes were dark and soft, with the look of many tears. The black trees bent over her, pressed round her, as if sheltering and protecting her. It was as if she had sought this little secret chamber of the wild rocks, sure of protection and solitude. Who should dare to speak to the island child? [107]

Was there some movement, some sigh? No one else heard it, but Isla suddenly caught her breath; started, turned. For an instant the eyes of the watchers caught hers, full of leaping terror; then, silently, she sprang through the screen of trees, and fled away across the rocks. They must follow her now, as best they might. Keeping out of sight whenever it was possible, the three sped in pursuit; but their hearts sank when they came out full on the further slope of the hill, and saw what lay before them.

Some tremendous convulsion of Nature had in bygone ages struck and shattered this point of the island. There must have been shock upon shock, of awful force, to rear and twist and crush and rend the rocks into these fantastic nightmare shapes. They stretched thus for some distance, a silent tumult, a tempest turned to stone; then came the verge.

Tower on tower, pinnacle on pinnacle, rising, rising. And, looking down, one sheer fall below another; at the foot, the surf leaping, dancing, tossing to and fro, flinging up white arms as if beckoning, entreating. [108]

And from crag to crag ran the wild girl, light as the springing foam itself, flitting now up, now down, but always onward, swift as a bird, never glancing behind her.

Swift as a bird? What birds were these, that swept out from some hidden crevice of the rock, black as itself? They balanced on broad wings, hovered about the child's head, as if greeting her; then, with hoarse cries, drove heavily forward, keeping near her as she ran.

When Joe Brazybone saw the ravens; he stopped dead. A dizziness seized him, and he sank on his knees, and pulled off his ragged cap. "The woman!" he muttered hoarsely. "Let the woman speak to her! Nothin' but the ravens can foller her where she's goin'. Let the woman speak, and you and I'll stop here and pray."

The trustee hesitated a moment—measured the gulfs before him with his eye; glanced at the bowed figure beside him; then he, too, dropped to his knees, and motioned to the preacher to try her voice, since her feet could go no further.

But the preacher was a brave woman, and was minded to go yet a step forward. One and two steps she took; then came upon a toppling verge, below which was nothing but the empty air and the tumbling sea below. She recoiled, and for the first time a human voice rang through that awful solitude.

"Isla!" cried the preacher. "Isla, come back! come back to us!"

The girl turned, with a cry, a wild gesture; whether of greeting or defiance, they could not tell. Then—a slip, was it, or a spring? Who shall say? A foam crest tossed high in air, then fell, and swept out through the pale beryl-green, out to the blue beyond. Borne with the great wave, tossing, drifting,—is it a tress of weed torn from the rock? Or has the sea taken his child to himself? [109]

THE END.

Transcriber's Note: Page 82, "sigh" changed to

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ISLA HERON ***

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