

SARAH WARNER BROOKS

MY FIRE OPAL, AND
OTHER TALES

Sarah Brooks

My Fire Opal, and Other Tales

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PREFACE

In the hope of interesting the reader in that insistent altruistic question of the hour – How may we best treat our *convicted* fellow sinners? – these simple tales (the outcome of intimate personal observation "behind the bars," and woven, almost equally, of fact and fiction) are offered for his kindly-indulgent perusal.

Most sincerely,
S. W. B.

West Medford, Jan. 31, 1896.

MY FIRE OPAL

WELL, have it all your own way, Isabel," meekly conceded Alcibiades; "but really, now, you ought not to be left here alone. Couldn't you have managed to invite company for a day or two – Aunt Maria, say, or Alice Barnes, or Emma and the baby?"

"Company!" mocked I, "that now is *like* a man! Here am I planning to give poor, overworked Cicely a day or two off, while you are all away and the housework at its minimum, and straightway you propose *company*! – which, of course, implies regular meals and extra chamber work.

"No, I thank you, sir, not any *company* for *me*," said I, rising from the breakfast-table to drop my husband a derisive courtesy; "and indeed, and indeed," I urged, "you are not to give up your own vacation because your wife is scared of burglars and bugbears, with neighbors as thick as blackberries, within call, and a stout policeman snoozing away his beat against our front fence!"

Alcibiades sighed and folded his napkin. I felt that he was still unconvinced. Nevertheless, he mounted the stairs, packed his grip, and, intent upon catching the next horse-car, bade me a hurried adieu. "*Au revoir!*" cried I, "in the wind of his going," "and, in case of burglars —

"Fare thee well! and if forever,
Then — "

already he had disappeared, and, closing the door, I resumed my unfinished breakfast. When Cicely came in to clear the table, I rejoiced her heart, by a full consent to her little vacation. Relieved of mind, she plunged vigorously into the Saturday scrubbing, and, having prospectively arranged my Sunday dinner, of pressed corned beef, was enabled to start for "me cousin's in South Boston" at two p. m.

As she whisked out, with a beaming smile, a brick-red face, and a huge newspaper bundle, I locked the door behind her, and found myself "Monarch of all I surveyed."

One fancies that even "Alexander Selkirk" – dreary as his lot was – must have found some slight compensation in the undisputed possession of an entire island. However it may have been with *him*, I must confess to acute satisfaction in the lordly consciousness of absolute sway over that miniature realm – my own domicile.

Delightful, indeed, was the prospect of regulating my "downsittings and uprisings," my bed, and meal times, in fine accordance with my own sweet will, absolutely untrammelled by the ordinary necessity of deferring to the wishes, and respecting the claims, of my fellow-mortals!

A long, lawless afternoon, with all its pleasant possibilities, lay temptingly before me. Straightway, with book and work, I established myself on the shady piazza. Pleasantly remote from the street it was, yet still so near, that, like the Lady of Shallot, "'neath her bower eaves," I could glimpse the passing sights on – Street, could discern the distant peak of "Corey Hill," and catch, now and then, between the wind-tossed trees, a blue gleam of the "Whispering Charles."

Close at hand was my own pretty flower-plot, but lately (by the united efforts of the entire Simpleton family) reclaimed from a desolate tangle of tomato vines, string-beans, and chickweed, and planted with greenhouse beauties, which, now that summer was gone, and early frosts nightly expected, had tantalizingly put forth abundant bloom. The September evenings had already begun to draw chillingly in. By six o'clock, the piazza had become uncomfortable, and I betook myself to the house. Its absolute possession, at this sombre hour, struck me as a trifle less desirable than in the broad sunshine of noonday.

Having carefully locked the outer doors, and bestowed the scanty family silver in the garret rag-bag, a general inspection of the window fastenings seemed the next best thing to do. "Let me," I said to myself, "begin at the beginning." In accordance with this excellent maxim, I at once descended to

the cellar. No sooner had I stepped into that dusky portion of my realm, than some live thing, rushing madly between my feet, had nearly upset me. I suppressed a childish shriek of terror. I recognised the cat. I am not fond of cats, hence *ours*, when not taking her walks abroad, is strictly relegated to the cellar, where, after her best endeavours, mice are ever o'er plenty. I found the cellar windows not only devoid of fastenings, but partially denuded of glass. Abandoning the idea of securing *that* slipshod approach to my stronghold, I beat a hasty retreat, pussy, meantime, at my heels, and brushing my gown with disagreeable familiarity.

The door leading to the cellar stairway had, in addition to its lock, a stout bolt. I carefully secured it by both, and, as twilight was coming on, shot, with a will, the hasps of such window fastenings, in the first and second stories, as had obligingly retained their patent adjustments, and, with hammer and nails, proceeded to secure the rest. Meantime, night was upon me. My own footsteps sounded uncanny, as I passed from room to room, and my hammer-strokes, as I drove in nail after nail, set my startled nerves on edge. In shadowy corners of the dusky apartments, sinister shapes seemed lurking. Imaginary footfalls echoed weirdly in the chambers above. The cat purring offensively, and still dogging my steps, innocently contributed to the general uncomfortableness. Regardless (in this exigent moment) of the quarterly bill, I turned on at every jet a lavish flow of gas, until one superb glare flooded the entire ground floor of Irving Cottage. Reassured by this reckless illumination, I betook myself to the preparation of supper. In consequence of the kitchen fire having gone out, it was a strictly informal meal, consisting solely of sardines, crackers, and lithia water.

Supping, with nervous despatch, I cleared my table, gorged the cat (who, in the unwonted dearth of society, was permitted to lodge in the kitchen), and, making a final survey of the brilliant lower story, turned off the gas, and, match in hand (and with a directness that would have proved the salvation of "Lot's wife"), sought my bedroom.

Lighting my gas, I locked my door, looked under the bed, made an exhaustive search in the closets, and, composed and reassured, sat down to the completion of Black's last novel. Ere long, absorbed in the fortunes of poor, love-crazed "Mac Leod of Dare," I became utterly oblivious of my own dreary situation. Once, the ringing of the side door-bell recalled me to the actual, but, having determined to open to no man *that* night, I discreetly lowered the gas, and, peeping from behind my window-shade, made sure that it was the expressman, and then coolly let him ring. He must have more than exhausted his notoriously scant stock of patience ere I heard him drive off, swearing awfully at his horses, as he lashed them down the drive. It may be recorded, in this connection, that Cicely, some five days later, on opening her pantry shutter to drive out the flies, discovered a blood-stained, brown paper parcel thrust in, and firmly wedged, between window and blind. On examination, it was found to contain the perishing bodies of three hapless squabs, which Alcibiades, in a reckless excess of conjugal tenderness, had bought (as a toothsome addition to my Sunday dinner), on his way to the railroad station.

When this touching proof of my good husband's indulgent care came to light, I take shame to confess that, hardening my heart, I mocked thus wickedly to myself, – "The *idiot*! to fancy that a sane woman would scorch herself over a coal-stove, broiling squabs for her own healthy self, with corned beef, sardines, and delicious olives at hand!"

But, to return from this digression – the ireful expressman well away – I sailed serenely on to midnight, and the last harrowing chapter of my novel. Then bathing my strained eyes, and reducing my light to the merest flicker, I crept wearily to bed.

After a whole fidgety hour spent in the composure of my nerves, and the resolving into natural causes of such "noises of the night" as successively set my hair on end, I fell asleep.

The sun was already high when I awoke. It was a lovely September morning. Recalling, with amused wonder, the groundless alarms of the last eventless night, I bathed and dressed in great spirits, and descended to the preparation of breakfast.

Yesterday's coffee, warmed over in an *Ætna*, was less palatable than I could have imagined, and, easily resisting the indulgence of a second cup, I completed, with scant relish, my untempting meal.

The ringing of the church bells surprised me in my morning work. It was Sunday. Not for a moment, however, must I entertain the idea of going to church!

In C – , bold, day-time robberies were familiar occurrences, and, in my absence, our unguarded domicile would become an easy prey for the spoiler. The outer doors, three in number, were securely fastened, and I especially congratulated myself upon the complete security of the glass door opening from our parlour upon the piazza, as, in addition to its regular fastening, it rejoiced in an admirable catch-lock, that snapped beautifully, of itself, as one closed it.

As the morning wore on, weary of reading, I wrote some letters, and thereafter overhauled my writing-desk. Among my accumulated correspondence, I found half a score of stiffly-worded epistles. They had been indited by inmates of the Massachusetts State Prison. To elucidate the controlling event of my story, let me say, that helpful effort among the convicts had long been an integral part of my life-work.

Among themselves, they were pleased to term me "The Prisoner's Friend," and, when discharged, and homeless, they often came to me for counsel, or aid, in procuring that employment which, naturally, is but grudgingly given to these attainted beings, whom, even as *visitors*, my friends considered objectionable. On Mondays, my weekly visit to the prison hospital was made. I carried to its patients fruit and flowers, and read to them, sandwiching in, as best I could, a modicum of reproof and advice.

The re-reading, sorting, and bestowal of this odd correspondence brought me to dinner-time. An unsubstantial breakfast having whetted my appetite for this important meal, I resolved to start a fire in the kitchen stove. Having achieved this exploit – with that absurd outlay of time, strength, and patience, peculiar to the amateur – I laboriously elaborated an omelet, a dish of Lyonnaise potatoes, and a steaming pot of tea.

Heated and weary, I hurried through the parlours, threw open the piazza door for a whiff of fresh air, before dishing my dinner, and, attracted by the grateful odor of heliotrope, stepped debonairly into the outside sunshine. As I passed, the "sweet west wind" whipped to the piazza door. It closed behind me, with a malicious bang. The much admired patent fastening had, but too well, done its fatal work! I stood diabolically fastened out of my own house! Recovering breath, and taking in the desperate situation, I glanced ruefully at my neighbour's back bow window. Miss Pettingrew, my next neighbour, was an elderly maiden, and of curiosity "all compact." Nominally (as set forth on her sign of blue and gold) a dressmaker, but adding to her regular vocation the supervision of our neighbourhood, the outgoings and incomings of the Simpletons were especially focussed by her awful eye.

Our neighbourhood was not socially congenial. We had come to C – for the sole purpose of putting a son through Harvard, and, having no other local interest in that city, we were simply the nobodies from nowhere, and consequently ineligible as acquaintances.

Irving Cottage – so called from its supposed resemblance to that of Washington Irving – attracted us by an exceptional allowance of door-yard, combined with a moderate rent. Irving Cottage was a double tenement-house; and its north side was now vacant. Its western front commanded – street; its south side an uninterrupted series of back door-yards. On the north it was overtopped by a tall storage building, and in its rear stood a weather-worn old colonial mansion, once an aristocratic abode, but now fallen upon evil times, and become a rickety students' boarding-house. A low picket fence divided our rear premises from those of Mrs. MacNebbins, its proprietor. And now, let me return from this parenthetic information to my forlorn self, drearily surveying my "hermetically sealed" dwelling.

Yes, Miss Pettingrew was, as usual, at her post. It behooved me to take heed to my ways – to step nonchalantly from the piazza, as if being in the yard were entirely optional. Taking a turn or two up and down the drive, I rested a moment beneath the lordly old willows that adorned our grounds.

I pulled a nosegay from the flower-garden; hunted the grass-plot for four-leaved clover – meantime furtively scanning my window fastenings and praying inwardly that some unguarded point of ingress to Irving Cottage might be revealed to me.

In vain! I had too well done my fatal work! Not the merest crack had been left exposed. The cottage rejoiced in a terraced front. Thus the lower back windows were, at least, five feet above the door-yard level. A possible elevation of piazza chairs would command them. I might, with a stone, demolish a convenient pane, and so reach and manipulate a patent fastening; but there still was Miss Pettingrew! How could I break and enter my own house, in broad daylight, and on a Sunday, directly beneath her astonished gaze? Heavy at heart (and mentally craving that lady's kind permission), I sought shelter beneath the kindly woodbine that shut in our piazza. Hungry, discouraged, and forlorn, I moped the slow hours away, until the westward sloping sun and the chill of approaching evening warned me that night was drawing near.

Luckily, I had, on my way out, thrown about me a light shawl. Shivering, I wrapped it close, and then – providentially inspired – I bethought me of a place of refuge, – to wit: the woodshed, adjoining our kitchen! It was but a flimsy structure, but would, at least, be warmer than an open piazza.

Its inner door, now carefully bolted, opened upon the kitchen. Its outer entrance was, however, but slightly secured by a hook, easily manipulated from without, by the insertion of a thin stick. I felt that an entrance might be unostentatiously effected. Eagerly awaiting that auspicious moment when Miss Pettingrew should, at tea-time, vacate her post of observation, I sallied forth upon the lawn, and – still hunting for four-leaved clover – managed to gain the rear of my house. My ogress opportunely disappeared! Already provided with the needful stick, it was but the work of a moment to insert it in the crevice of the loosely-fitting door, to raise the hook, and step gingerly in. Thank heaven, I was, at least, beneath a roof! Humble, indeed, but yet an improvement upon an open sky, or even a vine-draped piazza! And Miss Pettingrew need never know that I had come to grief. Fortunately I wore my watch. It was a slight comfort to note the passage of these unkindly hours. It was now quarter past four. I had become desperately hungry. My mind ran tantalizingly upon the untasted dinner within. Long ere this, my tea must have resolved itself to pure tannin! My omelette and my Lyonnaise must have become the merest chips; and the cat had, no doubt, privately disposed of my precious corned beef. Well, all was not lost! A full hour yet loomed between me and sunset. Given that time, might I not find some escape from my dilemma?

The colonial mansion of the MacNebbins's backed squarely upon our premises. And our woodshed backed, in turn, upon a roomy lawn – now degraded to an open lot which faced upon B – Street. In the absence of windows upon that wall of the building, a knot-hole, generously enlarged by our boys, served admirably as a lookout. At this inconveniently high aperture, I watched (on tip-toe) the careless throng, strolling, in Sunday attire, up and down B – Street. This wholesome, but tame, diversion palled upon me. My jaded appetite craved more exciting nourishment.

Mrs. MacNebbins – poor, overworked body, with a temper of her own – and maintaining, single-handed, half a dozen children and a shiftless sot of a husband, sometimes became desperate. On such occasions, it suited her, broomstick in hand, to drive her worse half from the house, the maids, meantime, looking applause from her kitchen windows. My own boys (in spite of my prohibition) had, I regret to say, often audibly applauded this conjugal exhibition. Such a spicy scene would, I felt, be in fine keeping with the situation, and I blush to own that I now turned my attention to the MacNebbins's back door, in the vulgar hope of an immediate connubial skirmish. In vain! Mr. MacNebbins sat composedly smoking on his back doorsteps; while his more forceful half flitted about the kitchen, intent on the dishing of the students' dinner. Now and then a tantalizing whiff of the roast issued from the open windows. By this time, I had become disgracefully ravenous; and when, after the MacNebbins's dinner, the cook came out to deposit the leavings in that objectionable swill-barrel, close to our back fence, I blush to record that I looked with longing upon the remnants

of this (to *me*, Barmecide) feast. Halved potatoes, slices of pudding, and savoury bits of meat, lay temptingly on the over-heaped barrel. I sighed. It was like "starving in the midst of abundance."

For one wild moment, I thought of rushing into the open street, in my morning wrapper, with a shawl over my head, and imploring somebody to break into my house, and feed me.

But, no! Self-respect forbade a proceeding so insane; and, moreover, should I not thus advertise the fact of my being alone in the house, and at the mercy of the spoiler? Night would soon prevent that attempt which I had half resolved to make upon the back window, and which might, possibly, end in defeat, glass-splinters, and lockjaw. It was now raining. The east wind wailed dolefully around the shed. I must, nevertheless, make shift to lodge there. To that end, I carefully considered the capabilities of the place. On a rude shelf, near the woodpile, I found a gummy kerosene lamp, replete with ill-smelling oil. Beside it was a tin box, containing three matches. In a corner stood a barrel of clean shavings, and, beneath the wash-bench, a basket of soiled clothes.

I had soon disposed the shavings in the form of a couch. Two sheets, used but a single night in the guest-room, and comparatively unsoiled, served for a light covering. On a high peg hung a rusty overcoat, which, on fishing excursions, had repeatedly served my good Alcibiades. It had come to exhale a perpetual "ancient and fish-like smell," and, in consideration of my outraged nostrils, had been relegated to the shed. Alas! I had not now the "proud stomach" which distinguished "Mr. F's Aunt;" and, clothing myself in this unsavoury garment, I thanked heaven for even so ignoble a protection from the searching east wind, now entering, by every crevice and knot-hole, my indifferently constructed sleeping-room.

Dreadfully casting myself upon this rude couch, I endeavoured to compose my limbs for sleep. Unnumbered poets have rapturously celebrated "the rain on the roof." I had myself once offered to a stony-hearted magazine editor some "lines" on this very subject; yet to-day, shivering, starved, and but half housed – heaven knows that the even pelting of this pitiless storm above my forlorn head was nothing, if not prosaic! I remembered, too, that my only door-fastening was a slight hook, easily set at naught.

What facilities were here offered to a prowling tramp, intent upon a night's shelter! When, for a moment, I could withdraw my poor mind from the terrible pangs of hunger, it was but to fix it upon this fearful possibility. Yes, I was undoubtedly at the mercy of all the tramps in the immediate vicinity of C – ! What would Alcibiades – what would my boys (camping out at Great Brewster, with a *circus* tent, comforters in abundance, and every appliance known to youthful Bohemia) say, if they could, this night, look in upon their miserable relative? But, no; Alcibiades should never hear how – by rejecting his safe counsel – I had dedicated myself to desolation. The misery of this night must be forever locked in my own breast! Of course, I could not be expected to close my eyes during the entire night; and, when morning came – should my life be spared till then – I should be too much exhausted from starvation to crawl out of the shed, and should, should, shou – here, I fell fast asleep!

A single hour could scarce have passed, when I was aroused by a slight jar, as of some one leaning heavily against the frame of the shed, directly where I had made my bed. In a moment I was broad awake, and, with my heart in my mouth, intently listening. I now sorely regretted having left my lamp burning; and wished I had, at least, plugged the wide knot-hole looking street-ward. The one small window, opening on our own premises, I had carefully darkened, but had forgotten to screen this irregular look-out. Luckily, it did not command, from the outside, my impromptu bed.

Directly beneath it, I could now hear footsteps. Evidently, an investigation was being made by some person outside. I managed to get upon my feet, and thus await the dreaded issue.

There was a clumsy scramble, a thud on the wet ground inside the fence, and then came heavy footsteps, evidently approaching my place of refuge. The door was tried, vigorously shaken, and opened by a crack; and then I knew that some one was manipulating the hook with a stick; was making an entrance, as I myself had done, but a few hours ago! I tottered weakly over to the woodpile. I had

need to stay myself well against it, so paralyzed with fear had I become. I felt my limbs giving way; an age of horror seemed to pass in the brief moments that ensued before the hook yielded.

The door flew open with a bang! and, then, – then the entire shed reeled, darkened, disappeared; and I knew no more!

Consciousness returning, I found myself reclined upon my shaving couch. A pile of soiled clothes supported my head; my face and hair were dripping with water, which had apparently been showered upon me without stint, or stay, from a wooden piggin standing near, which I remembered to have set under a big leak in the woodshed roof, before settling myself to repose.

Beside me stood a tall, bearded person, holding in his left hand a smoking kerosene lamp, and with his right still liberally sprinkling me from the piggin, and, the while, anxiously scanning my face. As my scattered senses pulled themselves together, I discerned that his demeanour was pacific – even friendly. I found his face by no means bad, with its strong features, determined expression, and the kindly smile which disclosed his sound, white teeth. As I attempted to rise, he said, respectfully: "Pray lie down a bit, madam; you'll be all right again in a moment. You fainted dead away; and, upon my word, I could have knocked myself down for giving you such a turn. It was a deuced sight worse, too," added he, "when I found that you were 'The Prisoner's Friend.'"

"Maybe *you* don't know my face now, madam; but I have known yours, any time, these four years; ever since you brought me that fruit with the posy of pinks an' old-man's love, the time I was laid up in the prison hospital."

No; I could not recall the man's face; but I remember well that such a person had sent me, through the warden, a grateful acknowledgment of my little kindness, in the form of a rosewood box, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and lined with garnet velvet (his own dainty work), and containing a paper thus inscribed:

"Adam Beale, to 'The Prisoner's Friend,' with best wishes."

The warden, as I presently recollected, had, at that time, told me that Adam was serving out five years' sentence for passing a forged check. Well, here, like a Jack-in-a-box, Adam himself had turned up.

It was now *my* turn to "take unto myself shame and confusion of face," – found harbouring in a shed, alone, and at midnight! To give the man, an ex-convict, and alone with me, in this forlorn place, that explanation demanded by the situation, would undoubtedly put me absolutely at his mercy, yet, perceiving that there was no other way out of it, I at once made a clean breast. The tale of my woes well finished, the humour of the whole affair, together with Adam's expression of blank amazement, so upset me that I ended with a peal of hysterical laughter, in which, as I could see by the twitching of his visible muscles, good manners alone restrained my auditor from joining me.

Wisely deferring the relation of his own adventures to serener moments, my convict, at my request, at once set about the work of breaking and entering.

The storm had abated. It was now midnight, and Miss Pettingrew presumably off duty. With empty barrels and boxes, found in the shed, the level of a side window was soon attained, and Adam, demolishing a pane of glass, deftly undid a patent fastening. It was but a moment ere he had entered, and unlocked the side door for the admission of my somewhat crestfallen self.

Nor was it long ere my deliverer had made a famous fire in the kitchen stove, and, in his shirt-sleeves, while his dripping coat steamed hard by on a clothes-horse, was preparing a pot of coffee, while I laid the supper-table.

It goes, without saying, that my zest for this meal was not slight; and the hunger of my guest, as may be inferred, was well-nigh as sharp as my own. The cat having obligingly dined and supped upon omelette and Lyonnaise potato, my corned beef was still intact; and, with some trifling additions, and that best of sauces – hunger – our meal proved delicious.

Well, thought I, as I bestowed a second section of sponge cake, and a third cup of coffee, upon my hungry guest – truth is, undoubtedly, stranger than fiction! Could Alcibiades (dear man!)

be told that, by scorning his kind advice, I had brought myself to so strange a pass as to be supping at midnight with an ex-convict, would he believe it? As for my dazed self, well could I have craved, with that historical old woman of abridged "petticoat," the decisive "bark" of my own "little dog" as assurance that "I was I."

Our hunger appeased, Adam told me how he had come to find himself on that stormy night, on his way to Boston, penniless and shelterless. His sentence had, he said, expired three weeks ago; and, with his "freedom suit," and the regulation gratuity of five dollars from the Prison Aid Society, along with its immemorial offer of a ticket for the West, he had been duly discharged. Having a mind to re-establish himself in his native city – New York – he had declined emigrating to Idaho, but, finding himself somewhat the worse for five years of confinement, bad air, and poor diet, had resolved to recruit for a time, in mountain air, before seeking his city home.

With the State gratuity, and nearly forty dollars of his own prison earnings in his purse, Adam had set forth on a frugal pedestrian tour. Having taken by the way a heavy cold, he had been obliged to lay by, for a whole fortnight, at a country tavern; and what with the board bill, the doctor's fee, and the charges for medicine, his slim purse had been soon drained. Recovered from his ailment, and renovated by the healing mountain air, he had found himself absolutely penniless, and had made thus far his homeward journey, in dependence on charity for food and shelter. Passing through B – Street to crave a night's lodging at the station-house, he had espied my light through the big knot-hole of the shed, and, on inspection, finding the place apparently unoccupied, weary and wet as he was, it had then seemed wise to accept the nearest possibility of shelter; and he had accordingly determined to attempt an entrance to this lighted outbuilding – little thinking, as he said, to find, in so rude a place, a lady whose person was held sacred by every man in the prison.

And now, to make a long story short, Adam's recital ended, we dried his clothes, washed our supper dishes, "riddled up" the kitchen, and then took into consideration the question of ways and means. Before falling into temptation, Adam Beale had been a real estate broker, and though not, hitherto, an eminently successful one, he meant, if possible, to re-establish himself in the old business. This he thought might be done in the whirl of a great city, where identity is easily disguised, or even lost, and – and – and then – I may as well confess it at once – it all ended in my slipping off my diamond ring (one of my girlhood's treasures, and the only valuable bit of jewelry in my possession) and, after much persuasion, inducing Adam to accept it as a loan, and by putting it in pawn realize a sum that would again set him on his feet. "But, dear me!" exclaims the prudent reader, "was not this a most unsafe venture?" Yes, I suppose so; but then, most ventures *are*, more or less, *unsafe*. And, after all, what is a single diamond, or, indeed, a whole cluster of them, when weighed against the possibility of restoring a man to the safe path of rectitude, the saving of a soul?

This risky transaction well over, Adam, by his own election, retired to pass the remainder of this strange night in the woodshed. I bestowed upon him a pillow and some warm comforters, and the cat politely kept him company, glad, no doubt, to escape from her dull imprisonment in the kitchen.

As my convict would be afoot at early dawn, his adieus were made overnight. Once more in my own safe room, and blest with a regular bed, bolster, and pillow, I rested from the fatigue and excitement of the last ten hours, and, on consideration, felt that my mishap was all for the best. Though not downrightly distrustful of Adam, I still remembered that I had not, as the saying goes, "wintered and summered" the man. I may consequently be pardoned the uneasy consciousness that my belongings (to say nothing of myself) were a thought less safe than if lodged in the United States Bank; for had not my new friend, but two hours since, evinced that easy facility in breaking and entering, supposed to be inherent in the convict and the tramp? After an hour or two of uneasy slumber, it was an infinite relief to hear the "loud clarion" of an early cockerel, followed by an audible stir in the woodshed and a heavy footstep in the yard. Springing from my bed, I watched Adam's tall form as it passed evenly down the drive. Well outside our gate, he went directly down street, and soon disappeared from my view. After that, I slept the blessed sleep of the weary and content,

though not until I had taken the precaution to bring from the shed the tell-tale pillow and comforter devoted to Adam's use.

The sun was already four hours high, when Cicely's return awoke me. I scrambled down to let her in, and, ere long, was seated at the late breakfast which she briskly prepared for me. As I lingered luxuriously over my coffee, this valued Hibernian abruptly entered, with upraised hands, and hair on end, to inform me that "a nasty divil of a tramp, be the tokens, had slept the night in our woodshed. An' God save us, me'm," went on the excited creature, "wid yurself slapin aboove like an innocent babe, an' the master an' young jintlemen away, and meself takin' me ase at me cousin's! Praise be to God ye weren't killed intirely! Come out, if ye plase, me'm, this same minute, and see, wid your two eyes, where the crature slept." Regretting that I had thoughtlessly left palpable evidence of Adam's visit, I meekly followed Cicely into the shed.

"Did you find the door unhooked, Cicely?" I inquired, aware that *something* must be said.

"Unhooked, is it?" replied she, "indade an' it was thin! an' wide open! Holy Mary! but it's the narrow escape ye's had!"

"Cicely," I said, decisively, "put these shavings back in the barrel. They will kindle as well as ever, and the sheets will come out, unharmed, from the wash. As for this fishy coat, when Dennis comes for the ashes, you may as well give it to *him*. There is some wear in it yet. And, upon the whole, Cicely, you had better say nothing of the tramp to Mr. Simpleton and the young gentlemen. It would only frighten them, and to no purpose, as it's now all past and gone."

That afternoon, during my visit to the State Prison, I related to the warden so much of the above adventure as pertained to my transaction with Adam Beale. I found that he had been discharged as stated, and had declared his intention of recruiting while in the country, before returning to his home in New York, "but as for your diamond ring, my dear lady," said the astute official, "make up your mind that you have parted with it for good and all; for, as *I* know the convict, not one in a hundred could resist the temptation of retaining it."

"Well," I said, resignedly, "let it go, then; life is replete with mishaps, and I have already survived many a disaster, far more heavy than the loss of a diamond."

When my little family were again re-united, it was Alcibiades who first observed and commented on the continuous absence of my diamond ring from my left-hand middle finger.

"Oh, my ring?" I said, lightly, "well, I am just leaving it off for a time. One does not care to appear eternally in diamonds, like a fat *frau* of a German Jew."

Alcibiades, least inquisitive of mortals, thus easily put off, I resigned myself to the loss of my ring, confident that, at the worst, it had not (as "Mantalini" would have put it) quite "gone to the demnition bow-wows."

More than six months had elapsed, when, one day, the expressman handed me a small package, addressed in a fine, clear hand, and marked "valuable — *with care*."

Luckily, I was alone, and could, unquestioned, receipt for the parcel. It was, as I had suspected, my ring; and glad was I to receive it, but still more rejoiced to have found, unaided by the lantern of *any* Diogenes, an *honest* man!

And now, my story might, with propriety, end. It does not, however, for I have yet to relate how it was that I, the wife of a clerk in the post-office, drawing but an indifferent salary, came into possession of so sumptuous an adornment as a Mexican fire opal, superbly set in diamonds of the very first water.

Ten years had passed since the adventure which resulted in the loaning of my ring to Adam Beale. Our boy had gone honourably through Harvard. We no longer trembled at Miss Pettingrew's "awful nod." We had left C – for good and all. My health no longer permitted me to engage in hospital work, and I had ceased to visit the prison. We were on the eve of our silver wedding, and one evening, as we sat round our hearth in Roxbury, cheerfully talking over the event, which was to be celebrated by a little party, the door-bell rang, and was followed by the entrance of our expressman.

Taking a long breath of relief, he deposited on the hall table a small, carefully-sealed parcel, which, as he said, "had 'bout been the rounds, he reckoned, for, near's he could find out, it started from New York, paid through to C – . Then it came back to the office in Boston, an arter *they* had had a time on't *there*, lookin' up the folks 'at was wanted, he got wind on't himself, and here now it is," he concluded, triumphantly, "landed at last."

As it was directed to me, I wrote my name in his greasy book, Alcibiades paid the accumulated expressage, and the man at once left us.

We were a little curious in regard to this much-traveled parcel – some simple silver-wedding present, no doubt. But "great the wonder grew," when a magnificent fire opal ring, with superb diamond setting, flashed out from its nest of rose-coloured cotton, like a condensed rainbow, circled with sunbeams.

In the package, with the box, was a note directed to "The Prisoner's Friend." It ran thus:

"Dear Lady: I am now a rich man. Your kindness will ever be held in remembrance; and may I ask your prayers for my future prosperity in this life, and a pleasant meeting with you in the life to come.

"Pray accept the enclosed ring, with warmest wishes for the health, prosperity, and happiness of you and yours. I remain, with great respect,

*"Your obedient servant,
Adam Beale."*

That night, from a full heart, I confided to my family the story of that strange midnight adventure, whose touching sequel was this costly gift. Dear Alcibiades (to his eternal credit be it recorded) did not on this occasion harrow my soul with a single "I told you so!" On the evening of my silver wedding I wore Adam's ring. My friends were informed that I had resolved never to disclose the name of the donor of this superb opal; yet, now that I am an old woman, in the hope that it may afford some slight encouragement to others who are seeking to lighten the heavy human burden of sin, and its consequent misery, I have thought that it might not be unwise or indelicate to reveal the long-kept secret of my Fire Opal.

THE STORY OF JOHN GRAVESEND

JOHN GRAVESEND, being neither goblin, sprite nor fairy, it is but logical to infer that his existence was derived from a mortal father; albeit of that father, he, John, had not the faintest conception.

Poor little Jack! He was, what men (misusing the holiest of words) have named, a "love-child."

His father was plainly but an inference; and, as to his mother, she was scarce more than a recollection.

He recalled, from some vague long ago, the face of a sad-eyed woman at whose knee he had said "Now I lay me," with his sleepy little head half-buried in the soft folds of her silken gown. He remembered the same sweet face more pale and still and icy cold. He was not saying his prayer *then*. He thinks he was crying. Be that as it may; Jack cried a good deal in those days. He cried because he was cold, hungry, tired, or beaten; and, later on, he fell into a way of crying for an undefined good – a something which neither warmth, food, nor rest could afford him. This vague sense of irrepletion had first dawned upon the forlorn boy when, on a certain day, creeping about Long Wharf like a half-starved rat, he had seen another boy in a velvet jacket, and with lovely cornsilk hair, folded in the arms of a beautiful lady, but just landed from a newly-arrived steamer. From that hour a nameless longing for that undefined something, which the other lad had gotten from that gentle lady, haunted his love-lorn days.

Sometimes he actually found himself crying for it. Of this – and all other crying – Jack, being a manly little fellow, was so heartily ashamed that (to use his own words) he "swowed never to let on to his folks." Jack's "folks" were – a reputed uncle, by trade a shipwright. A creature habitually red of face; cross in the morning and nasty at night; chronically glum on week-days, and invariably sprightly on Sundays; for then it was the shipwright's prerogative to get superbly drunk!

During these Sabbath celebrations, the man (having no children of his own body to maltreat) often diverted himself by belabouring his ragged little nephew; who, more or less battered, wriggled dexterously from his clutch, and, seeking his familiar haunt, the wharf, there wore out the weary day. Jack's other "folk" was the wife of the aforesaid uncle; a poor, cowed creature, with pinched, wan face and pale, carrotty hair. When the boy, upon a Sunday, did not come readily to hand, the aunt was beaten in his stead. She did not run away, this poor, spiritless scapegoat, but wearily mounting a ladder-like staircase, took sanctuary in the loft. Later, when a drunken slumber enwrapped her lord, she reappeared upon the scene, with set lips, and face so white and ghastly, that little Jack, remembering vaguely that *other* still, white face, crept uneasily out into the sunlight, and tried to forget it.

One day, when the shipwright had beaten his wife terribly, and there was blood upon her clean Sunday gown, she did not, as usual, betake herself to that "city of refuge," the loft; but, groaning faintly, fell prone upon the floor. Jack's uncle then making a dive at *him*, the child scampered off to the wharf as fast as his trembling little legs would carry him. When he had skipped a good many stones into the water, had watched ever so many clouds and vessels sail by, and had seen the crimson water swallow the bloated fiery sun, little Jack felt hungry, and thought it high time to be getting home to his folks. Forlorn little waif! His *folks*, unsatisfactory as they were, were no longer available.

He found the shipwright's dwelling thronged with excited men and women. Upon the bed lay a still, white heap. Fancying that it might be the pinch-faced aunt, who had so long partially fed and clothed him, the child pushed forward, and, creeping softly to the bed, touched, with his dirty little hand, that still, white face.

Ugh! *His* folks were never as cold as *that*!

Repelled by this icy horror, the child stole quietly away, and, crouching timidly in a far corner of the thronged apartment, watched it all.

There was a deal of commotion in Jack's folks' house that Sunday evening; and Jack's uncle, staring vacantly at a gaping throng of men, boys, and frowsy-headed women, and sustained by two doughty dignitaries of the law, was finally conveyed absolutely beyond the line of his childish vision. After this, another gentleman, in bright buttons, summarily cleared the house, and locked the door, with the child on the wrong side of it; and, unheeded, hungry, shelterless, and forlorn, the lad crept silently away. And this is all that Jack remembers of his folks. The next tableau in his memory is that of a ship's cabin, and a fat steward in a white apron, who, as he wells remembers, went busily up and down the companionway, fetching steaming viands, and carrying away empty plates and soiled glasses, which had often, at bottom, a modicum of something strong and nice. He liked it – this fine, fiery stuff! – and when whole spoonfuls had been left in the glasses, and he had been let to drain them all, he felt as cheery as could be; and, at bedtime, went off to his small bunk as happy as a king. But when at dinner-time the steward, in his hurry-scurry, kicked him out of the way, and called him "a d – d little son of a gun, whom (like a soft-hearted lubber) he had smuggled into the *Argo* to save from the poorhouse," Jack fled dejectedly to his bunk to cry alone.

Yes, he remembered well, how a long time ago – very long indeed it seemed in Jack's childish measurement of time – that cruel hunger had gnawed at his poor, depleted little stomach, when his folks' door was fast locked, and he prowling miserably about the wharf; and how the good steward had then found and fed him. From that day, he had clung to his deliverer – his providence – like a grateful spaniel, and, still at his heels, here he was in the great *Argo*, sailing on and on, no doubt, to the very end of the world.

Yes, he knew all that; and he meant to be thankful and good; but was he, for certain true, "a son of a gun?" His father, as before stated, being but an inference, Jack concluded, upon the whole, that he *might* be.

By and by, when the old steward (whose bite was in no wise as formidable as his bark) had tidied over his "hurry-scurry," and, having given him his dinner, tossed him playfully to the ceiling, like a plump little ball, as he was, when he set him to play all manner of monkey tricks for his own and the crew's diversion, calling him "a droll shaver," instead of that other objectionable name, he forgot, for the time, his childish grievances, and was comparatively content.

He liked the rough-handed steward who alternately kicked and petted him, and who, after his own poor fashion, apparently loved him. Yet, taken as they went, these were but uncomfortable years for the loving, sensitive child; and the nice fiery sups from the cabin tumblers were, on the whole, the most comfortable feature of Jack Gravesend's earlier cabin-boy experience.

As the years went on, from being by turns a nuisance and a pet, the boy became a deft-handed helper to his testy old patron, and, coming to man's estate, not only won favour with the *Argo's* crew, but found grace in the eyes of her captain. When the fat steward, in a fit of apoplexy, went off in a final hurry-scurry, to Davy Jones's locker, Jack was promoted to his berth.

Time sped. John Gravesend, from a poor cabin-boy, had come to be second mate of the *Ohio*, when William Ferguson, as bonnie a blue-eyed lad as one might hail in a cruise round the world, had shipped as foremast hand in that stanch new craft. Then it was that our hero first knew that supreme good for which he had been instinctively yearning through all his lonely life – the true love of a human soul.

Will Ferguson, a delicate boy of eighteen, neither by birth or education suited to a sailor's life, was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. He had a persistent cough, came of consumptive stock, and the doctor assured Madame Ferguson that a long sea voyage, if she could but bring her mind to it, would be the very thing for the lad.

"There is the *Ohio*," he went on to say, "now in port, and a finer ship never sailed." Her captain trustworthy, and her second mate personally known to him. Only last year he had carried the fellow through an attack of typhoid, at Chelsea hospital, and if, as he was saying, she could bring her mind

to the thing, he would speak a good word for Will, to this officer, Gravesend – John Gravesend – who would, no doubt, keep a kindly eye on her boy all through the voyage.

Madame Ferguson *did* bring her mind to it, although the parting was as if her heart had been torn from her warm, living side. And thus it was that Will Ferguson went sailing out of his mother's yearning sight in the good ship *Ohio*, specially committed to the care of John Gravesend, and as seasick and homesick a lad as ever smelt brine.

John Gravesend had, as hath been shown, no "folks." Once, in his love-lorn life, he had taken to his starving heart a white Angora cat. This creature, instinct with feline beauty, had proved most unsatisfactory in temper, and, having consequently become obnoxious to an entire ship's crew, had finally been despatched at the hand of an ireful cook. A family of seven white mice had succeeded this unamiable *protégé*. These tiny cannibals had also disappointed the hopes of their patron, a general home-consumption having eventually left, in the once populous cage, but a single inhabitant. The survivor, ultimately becoming as hipped as the poet's "Last Man," fell a prey to melancholy in lieu of mice. After the above abortive efforts, John Gravesend foreswore pets; but here, now, was this poor greenhorn, Ferguson, a likely lad, and consigned to his tenderest care. Why, to love *him* would be "worth while." And when, during their first week out, on that wild, windy night in Jack's watch below, the boy, fevered and seasick, mistook his sailor nurse, with those clumsily tender ways, for his own fond mother, and, throwing his young arms about the watcher's burly neck, begged him never, never, to forget him, Jack made a strong, silent vow that he never would. Alas, he never *did*, for that was his bitter destiny, never, *never* to forget Will Ferguson! This ailing spell well past, the lad mended steadily, and was, ere long, able to be on deck and on duty. Glad days these were for John Gravesend, and still gladder nights; for now, the boy sharing his watch on deck, the pair might, night after night, listen to the sea-song at the *Ohio's* keel, watch the moonlight silvering the crested deep, or, in that other deep above them, might trace the splendid constellations glittering clear and far; Jack, meantime, spinning for Will bewitching sea-yarns, fraught with the simple charm of that every-day knowledge which is the fruit of experience, while Will (who was a bookish lad) might, in his turn, impart to the unread sailor that other knowledge which is the fruit of study. And thus it befell that, ere the *Ohio* had made a third of her long voyage, this man and boy were bound heart to heart, with a two-fold cord of love, pure and passionless, yet "passing the love of woman."

For Gravesend, this was, indeed, a gracious time. No more craving for human tenderness, less thirst for that tempting poison, which had lured his unguarded sense in the old, cabin-boy days, when the busy steward had unwisely permitted him to drain the spirit-glasses. The pernicious taste thus engendered in the child had, alas! grown with his growth, and, at times, had even overmastered the strong man. In Samson's might, as we are told, there was but a single flaw; yet, *there*, Delilah found him weak as the weakest. So it was with our sailor, and hence, at irregular intervals, there were decidedly black days in the otherwise clean life of John Gravesend.

The *Ohio*, bound for China, in due time cast anchor at Canton. Jack and Will had got leave to go ashore together. And there it was that John Gravesend's demon took possession of him. Through all that long afternoon of drunken riot, Will (sorely astonished and dismayed) never once left this frenzied creature. And when Jack had run his mad muck, and, laboriously piloted back to the ship, had at last been persuaded to get into his berth, where he lay, safe, but brutish and insensate, the lad cast himself wearily upon the cabin floor and had a good long, sobbing cry – like the child that he was – the single-hearted, loving child, whose faith in a human soul had been rudely shocked and shaken. On the morrow, Jack was himself again. A trifle dull and heavy-eyed, yet the same old, kind, and sober fellow. That night in their watch the friends talked it all over. Jack retained no distinct consciousness of yesterday's wild doings. After drinking more heavily than he meant, or ought, he had fancied that the crowd had set upon him, and, with spinning head, he had rushed incontinently upon the *crowd*, and knew no more until he awoke next morning in his own snug berth, with Will yet sleeping wearily upon the hard floor. And now, with Ferguson's hand in his own warm clasp,

Gravesend vowed no more to touch, taste, or handle, the unclean thing; and, through all that perilous fortnight in port, he never once broke his vow.

Again the *Ohio* cast anchor. It was in Boston Harbor, and on a May-day evening. Will Ferguson and John Gravesend went ashore together. The month had, this year, come smiling in, and juvenile Boston had paraded in muslin and greenery to its heart's content. Upon the Common, there still lingered a breath of the May-day festivity. A balmy south wind stirred among the new-leaved trees, – a delicious murmuring wind, prophesying violets, jonquils, and endless forthcoming spring delights.

On such bewitching, yet enervating nights, riotous young blood leaps hotly through quickened pulses, and, for the hour, to live in the sweet, sensuous present is enough; the soul craves no higher good. Will Ferguson, thus far, had developed no taste for that reckless youthful procedure, apologetically termed "the sowing of wild oats."

A long sea voyage, and its consequent social limitations, had, however, quickened in the boy a legitimate youthful craving for fun and frolic, and, what with the witchery of this May night, the coming to port, the rapturous thought of home, mother, and that glad greeting of pretty Kate Benson to-morrow at Springfield, he was, as he laughingly averred, "chock full of happiness, and on hand for any sort of a lark." In the heyday of the hour he had not all forgotten that black day at Canton, and had, within himself, resolved to "hold on hard whenever he smelt mischief for Jack."

Sauntering idly into North Street, the pair were abruptly brought to a stand by the gay twang of a violin. "A fiddle; and a waltz!" This set Will's merry feet going; and while he shuffled, boy-fashion, on the sidewalk, a smiling personage, issuing from the door of a certain edifice having over its entrance the sprightly designation of "Dance House," with an "Hullo, there, my hearties!" begged them "Come in a while, and see the fun."

Now, Jack Gravesend was quite aware that in a dance-house "the fun" is of a questionable character. That within it is "the way to hell going down to the chambers of death," and, being a man of clean kernel, he had no lascivious affinity with a dance-house; but here was Will eagerly curious. He liked to humour the lad; and (truth must be told) he, himself, on this May night, was somewhat morally unbraced. Thus it was that, lured on by the merry music, and the cordial solicitations of the doorway panderer, the two crossed the threshold of this evil place. Bacchus, be it known (no less than Venus and Terpsichore), presides over the festivities of the dance-house, and Will Ferguson, soon weary of the "fun," which was in no wise to his liking, found, to his dismay, that Jack Gravesend was weakly succumbing to the fascinations of the "Jolly God." Unable to coax him from the place, he lingered on, inwardly bemoaning his own inquisitive folly; yet resolved, let what would come, to see Jack well out of the scrape. It was not in John Gravesend's nature to do a thing by halves. Whatsoever he did, was done heartily, and mightily; and, having determined to drink, he *drank*, until – ah, well! the bestial orgies of a Circean herd are not things for description, albeit they are nightly enacted in the dance-houses of our own metropolis.

It was broad day. Jack Gravesend awoke. He rubbed his eyes, and looked curiously about him. Where was he? Strange! He couldn't have turned in *here*. He got up, and shook himself wide awake. Two villanous-looking men, having risen from two neighbouring beds, were doing likewise. "Hullo, shipmates!" said Jack, now fairly on his feet; "lend a hand here, and tell me where I am."

The two burglars – for such they were – being well-posted in the leading particulars of his arrest, glanced knowingly at each other, and smirked with sinister significance peculiarly aggravating to Jack, and burglar number one remarked to his associate, "Golly, Bill; he *is* a green one! Wants to know *where he is*! do you twig, Bill? Why, my fine tar, you're in the lock-up, to be sure."

"In the *lock-up*!" said Jack; "and how in thunder *came* I here?"

"*Brung* here, of course," responded his informant, "'t ain't a road folks gin'ally travels on their own account, eh, Bill?" Bill assenting, with a prodigious wink, Jack propounded a third query: "And what the deuce may I be here *for*?"

"*Here* for?" responded the garrulous ruffian. "Thunderin' black job, my cove! Got drunk last night, and *killed* a man!"

"*Killed* a man!" groaned Jack, his eyes dilating, and his flesh creeping with sudden horror. "Killed a *man*! My God! what will Will Ferguson say?"

"Ferguson? Bill – Bill Ferguson," growled the other burglar. "By jiminy, Tom! he wants to know what Bill Ferguson'll say! Precious *little*, I'm thinkin'; he's about said *his* say! Why, grampus, Bill Ferguson's the very indentercal chap you've done for!"

Officer L – long remembered a cry that woke the echoes of the lock-up on that May morning. It might have been the yell of a hunted thing at bay, the outcry of a mortal in fierce extremity, the despairing wail of a hell-tormented soul.

Turning the key in the lock of No. 17, he hastily entered that apartment. On the floor, face downward, lay a man.

"Cove in a fit," explained the facetious Tom. "Bill, here, jes' let on 'bout the killin', an' he gin a howl an' went off in a jiffy."

Officer L – was humane. Good men, thank God! fill many of these humble places of authority. Silencing the bold ruffian, he bade the pair help raise the senseless form and adjust it on the rude cot. This done, he smoothed the tossed hair, wiped the foam from the purple lips, and chafed the great brown hands as helpfully as if they had been little "May's," the dear sick lamb of his own pretty flock. At length, the convulsive throes ceased, and consciousness returned to the stricken man.

Like some dim-remembered dream, the curt, cruel words of the burglar recalled themselves to Gravesend's bewildered brain. One look into the kindly face of the officer reassured him. Feebly rising to his feet, he sank upon his trembling knees, and prayed brokenly to hear it all. He was "all right again, and wanted to know the whole truth. He could bear the *very worst*, and would thank him for it; indeed, sir, he would." The "very worst" was soon told.

There had been, explained the officer, on the previous night, a drunken row at a dance-house on North Street. The prisoner had, unfortunately, been concerned in the affair, and, in the temporary frenzy of intoxication, had drawn his dirk upon a woman. A young man, who had hitherto looked on, taking no part in the *mêlée*, now dashed in to arrest the assailant's hand, and himself received the murderous thrust. The brawlers had been duly arrested, the youth carried to the hospital, where, his wound proving mortal, he had, in half an hour, expired.

On his body a small diary had been found. It was inscribed:

"Willie Ferguson, from his mother.

Springfield, Jan. 1, 18 – ."

Will – Fergus-on, Springfield, – 18 – Will – Springfield – from – his – mother. 18 – Will, Willie, Will. Will Ferguson. He had sworn never to forget him. He is keeping his oath! Will – W-i-l-l F-e-r-g-u-s-o-n. There it is; on the walls, on the ceiling, up and down, over and across! Everywhere, everywhere, the *name*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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