WATSON WILLIAM DAVY

TREVETHLAN: A CORNISH STORY. VOLUME 2

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Pur' è soave cosa, a chi del tutto
Non è privo di senso, il patrio nido:
Che diè Natura al nascimento umano,
Verso il caro paese, ov' altri è nato,
Un non so che di non inteso affetto,
Che sempre vive, è non invecchia mai.

Guarini.

Once more we stand on the shore of Mount's Bay. Far behind we have left the whirl and tumult of the metropolis, and we hear only the hoarse roar of the surges, driven by the last winds of January to beat against the granite at our feet. When last we looked over the same waters, the yellow leaves were falling from the trees, and the little waves rippled musically upon the rock, while the voice of mourning was heard in our halls. Yet if the year was declining, there was beauty in the decay; if the season was sad, there was hope amidst the sorrow. We return to find

the fields desolate, and the sea tempestuous, and our house still forlorn. The face of nature is gloomy and cold, and hope has vanished from our fireside.

Such might be among the first reflections of the orphans of Trevethlan, as they gazed from the windows of the castle over the well-known landscape. They had come home, not as children from school to holiday, exulting in freedom and buoyant with hope, to exchange coercion for caresses; nor as older pupils, having learnt the value of time, merely to modify the routine of occupation, and gladden parental affection with their progress and prudence; nor yet as those who, having entered on the labour of life, know that the bow must not always be bent, and rejoice to seek relaxation around the hearth where they were nursed. Far deeper than any of these were the emotions of the sister, and dark and stern were the thoughts of the brother.

Helen's letter had fallen upon Polydore like a thunderbolt. She had, indeed, in previous communications somewhat ruffled his serenity by indistinct references to the new solicitude she detected in Randolph; but the worthy chaplain readily explained all similar hints by the novelty of his old pupil's situation. "He will become used to it before long, Mr. Griffith," Polydore would say, when the steward ventured to remind him of their difference of opinion respecting the orphans' scheme. "'Tis only the roughness of a first meeting with the world. The points will be soon rubbed smooth. There's a great difference between the Temple and Trevethlan Castle." In reply to which sort of remark,

Griffith could only shrug his shoulders, and hope it might all turn out well in the end.

So when the missive arrived, in which Helen announced that her brother had proclaimed their real name, and abandoned his career, and that they should follow the letter without delay, Polydore was struck with sudden consternation. The steward was too delicate to show that he felt no similar surprise in the chaplain's presence, but to his wife he avowed that he was not in the least astonished. "A Trevethlan conceal his name!" he exclaimed. "It's not in the blood. No, Charlotte Griffith; if we are poor, we are also proud. The secret would be always on the tip of his tongue. Why, suppose he quarrelled? Not unlikely, I can tell you, in one of our house. D'ye think, Mrs. Griffith, Randolph Trevethlan would go out as Mr. Morton? Pooh! pooh!"

Mrs. Griffith rather shuddered at the idea, but she remembered sundry anecdotes of the picture gallery which forbade her to impeach the justice of her husband's position. Whatever were the cause of the return, she rejoiced at the effect, and spread the same feeling among all the little household, by her orders to prepare for the reception of her young master and mistress.

So they came. It was early in the afternoon when their chaise rattled round the green of the hamlet; but a cold sleet drove along upon the wind, and kept the villagers within doors. The folk hurried to their windows only in time to see that the carriage had passed, but the extreme rarity of such a visitation drew forth

a few of the curious to gaze after the chaise, as it wound more slowly up the ascent of the base-court. Randolph lay back in his corner, gloomy and foreboding; but Helen leant forward to catch the first glimpse of an old familiar face. And Jeffrey was duly on the watch; he caught sight of the carriage as it began the ascent; he soon recognized his young lady's face at the window; the gates flew open under his hand; before the travellers had alighted at the hall-door, he had run the old flag to the top of its staff, and a faint cheer from the hamlet greeted the appearance of the well-known signal. The orphans were at home.

Anxieties and forebodings vanished for a season in the warmth of welcome. The time for questions and explanations was not arrived. Everything seemed in exactly the same order as when the brother and sister left; and were it not for the difference of the seasons—were it not that a fire crackled cheerfully in the great chimney, and that patches of snow lay on the bed of mignionette, they might have supposed a night only had elapsed since their departure. But the change in themselves told that the interval had been fraught with momentous consequences for each of them.

When the first hurry of congratulation was over, Helen retired for some confidential talk with Mrs. Griffith, and her brother accompanied the chaplain in a walk round the castle. Yes, every thing remained exactly as it was. In the library, even the volume which Randolph was reading with his instructor, "Cicero on the Art of Divination," remained on the table, as if closed but yesterday, and the subject brought a passing cloud upon his brow.

The portraits in the picture-gallery showed the recent care of Mrs. Griffith.

"My mother's likeness is not here, Mr. Riches?" Randolph said abruptly, as they passed along.

The chaplain, greatly surprised, shook his head in silence.

They ascended to the battlements, and faced the inclemency of the weather. The ancient pieces of ordnance showed signs of that diligence on the part of old Jeffrey, to which Polydore had alluded in a recent letter to Hampstead. More dangerous they, perchance, to the defender than the foe.

"Is there really so much alarm in the country, my dear sir?" Randolph asked. "Are our good Jeffrey's perilous precautions in any way warranted?"

"*It fama per urbes*—you know the rest," the chaplain answered. "We will speak of it by and by."

They descended to the court-yard. If the castle was unchanged, its scanty retainers were as little altered. At the great gateway Randolph found Jeffrey pacing up and down under the arch in demi-military style, while an old-fashioned brass blunderbuss rested against the wall.

"God bless you! Master Randolph," said the old man, taking the offered hand between both of his; "and welcome back. And thanks be to Him, that if so be these walls must fall to the riff-raff from Castle Dinas, why, fall they will around a Trevethlan. But the day shall not come, while"—he caught up his piece, and suddenly discharged it in the air—"the evening gun, Master

Randolph. A little too soon, and not like that as was fired in the old time. But it just serves maybe to frighten the rascals, and let 'em know old Jeffrey is awake."

Randolph thanked the trusty warder for his zeal, and expressed a hope that his forebodings might not be realized; but the sentry shook his head dolefully, and reloaded his gun, saying, "Ye might as well just keep your pistols handy, Master Randolph."

Already, even in this short perambulation, the chaplain was greatly struck by the change which he observed in his former pupil. The stripling, meditative and gentle, had become a man, haughty and impassioned. The disposition, of old plastic as wax, was now at once obstinate and capricious. The change was marked in the imperiousness of Randolph's bearing, in the curl of his lip, and the abruptness of his speech. There was no want of his former respect or affection; but it was plain that henceforth he acted on his own impulse, and was not to be swayed by those who might surround him. "Is it for good or for evil?" the chaplain asked himself, when Randolph parted from him to descend to the beach, and intimated that he wished to be alone. "Pray Heaven for good, or surely my life has been wasted."

It was becoming dusky. The sleet had passed over, and the sky was cloudless; but the blast still whistled along the sea, and brought great waves to break on the well-known promontory of rock. Randolph stood on the point, heedless of the wind and spray, and gave vent to the emotions which were struggling within

his bosom.

"For what am I here?" he said. "Why have I come to my home? To bury myself amidst these gray walls, and watch the gradual ebbing of all the springs of existence? To die in sullen desolation, and find a lonely grave in yonder churchyard? Hope it not, Esther Pendarrel. Not so easily quenched is the fire within me: it may ravage all around it, but it will not smoulder away, consuming only myself. But I must be alone. My sweet sister must not be scathed by my waywardness. She will rest here, while I go forth to achieve the one purpose of my heart. Our scheme has broken to pieces, but my pledge remains. Alas, that my father should bind me by so fatal an undertaking! Yet, if Esther loved—if Esther loved–

"And thou, too, whom I never knew, of whom no trace remains in my memory, my mother! Would that thou hadst not been summoned hence so soon! Would that I had felt thy softening influence, and he learnt of thee to be merciful! Why have I thought of thee so often of late? Why has that veiled shape glided through my dreams? Wilt thou not reveal thyself to thy son? Visit me, oh my mother! fling aside the veil that hides thy face, and be a light to my soul in the darkness that surrounds it."

The muser dwelt long on this invocation, pacing to and fro on the narrow strip of rock. It was the first time he had given expression to an idea which for some while had been lurking among his thoughts. At last he looked round the sky, and saw the mild radiance of the evening star.

"Beautiful planet!" he said, "which fancy chose for the arbiter of my fate, is *she* also beholding thee? Smile upon her, fair planet, and remind her of me. Teach her to think of me, even as thou hast taught me to remember her."

Tranquillized by the reflection, Randolph returned through the deepening twilight to the castle, and joined his sister and the chaplain in a small parlour, occupying a turret that overlooked the sea. It was a favourite room. There, in the evening, Polydore described at some length the state of the adjacent country. "Discontent," he said, "was very general; not only among the miners, who thought they did not earn a just share of their labour's produce, but also among the agricultural population, who complained that wages were too low in proportion to the price of provisions. And social dissatisfaction had partly assumed the aspect of political disaffection. Agitators, strangers to the district, were said to have gone about among the people. Minor outrages had not been very rare, and expressions had been reported nearly equivalent to the 'Guerre aux Châteaux' of the great French Revolution. Musters of men in military array were said to have been held on the moorlands. Rumours flew about of the landing of arms on different parts of the coast. But all," Polydore concluded, "is vague and shadowy. I believe there is great exaggeration abroad. Positive, however, it is, that a patrol of cavalry occasionally dashes at speed by a lonely cottage, and that the coast-guard display unwonted activity. Behold the confirmation of my words!"

For while they were being uttered, his hearers might see a long line of fire rise into the air from the shore of the bay near Mousehole, denoting the flight of a rocket.

"That is the way they amuse us almost every night," continued the chaplain. "'Tis too dark, I suppose, to see anything afloat. Let us put the candles in the shade, and look."

So said, so done. Fruitlessly, for they could discover nothing on the dark waters. But while they were gazing across the bay, a faint, rushing sound fell on their ear, above the noise of the sea; and, turning hastily, they perceived the last sparks of a second rocket, which had been fired from their own coast.

"Yes, that is the way," Polydore repeated. "Of old, the folks would just have wished the smuggler luck, and perhaps turned out in hope to run a keg or so; but they seem to think there's more in these signals now."

"And you feel no alarm yourself, my dear sir?" Helen inquired.

"None, Helen," replied the chaplain. "I may be mistaken, but I do not expect to see Jeffrey's blunderbuss brought into action; and I have a trust which never yet proved wanting."

So saying, Polydore rang the bell, a summons which speedily assembled all the household for family prayer, according to old usage; and when the rite was over, the members sought their respective resting-places, and silence reigned in the castle.

But Randolph could not sleep. Throwing a cloak around him, and shading his lamp with his hand, he proceeded with the

stealthy step of one who dreads he knows not what, along the desolate corridors to the state apartments. Through their faded grandeur he wandered on, until he reached the great chamber which was the scene of his father's death. He placed his light so that only a faint glimmer fell upon the bed, and leant against one of the pillars, and resumed his reverie of the afternoon with such vividness of imagination, that he fancied he again beheld the bright eyes of the dying man, and heard the injunctions which seemed now to separate him from what he held dearest upon earth. But his reverie had not terminated with those gloomy forebodings, nor did his dream. A frail and slender form, veiled in gossamer-like drapery, bent dimly over the couch for a short space and floated away, beckoning him to follow. It rested a moment in the doorway, for he had only obeyed the sign with his eyes. But when he hastily seized the lamp, it flitted fast before him, fading and fading away, until it disappeared entirely as he crossed the threshold of his own chamber. He flung himself on his bed, and closed his eyes for sleep; and as the last gleam of consciousness vanished, a face which he appeared to have known in days long past, meek and lovely,—that of a woman, in her morning of beauty,—bent down upon his, and kissed his lips.

The kiss seemed yet fresh upon them when he woke, and found the sun shining gaily into the apartment.

CHAPTER II

The intelligible forms of ancient poets,
The fair humanities of old religion,
The Power, the Beauty, and the Majesty,
That had their haunts in dale, or piny mountain,
Or forest by slow stream, or pebbly spring,
Or chasms and watery depths—all these have vanished.
They live no longer in the faith of reason.

Coleridge. Piccolomini.

The hamlet of Trevethlan nestled snugly under the slope, at the summit of which stood the castle, and was screened by the rising ground from the sea breezes. It surrounded a green of limited extent, which was only separated from the base-court by the gate Michael Sinson opened for Mrs. Pendarrel's carriage, when that lady was returning from her frustrated attack. On the right, a small wicket led into the churchyard, so full of trees that, except at the present season, the church itself could scarcely be seen. This was a plain edifice, with no pretensions to beauty, deriving all its picturesqueness from the ivy with which it was overgrown. Opposite to it, across the green, a beam projecting from the front of an old-fashioned house, supported the escutcheon of the lords of the village, and, by its inscription, promised good entertainment to man and beast. But the inn had shared the

fortunes of the castle: the windows of the wings, which advanced with scalloped gables beyond the centre, were blocked up with boards, and the middle part only appeared to be now occupied. But Dame Miniver, the hostess, had inherited the savings of more prosperous days. She was a trim, bustling widow woman, tidy and rosy, notable and talkative, whose only sighs were divided between the good-man who slept on the other side of the green, and the splendour which had departed from the castle on the cliff. She never fretted because her stables now held none but a few farm horses, nor because there were no longer any swaggering lackeys to come and crack a bottle of the port, some of which might still be slumbering in her cellars. She would hardly have been a Cornish woman if she did not know how to exchange a wink with the good fellow who had a keg of hollands or brandy to dispose of; and it pleased her mightily to treat a revenue man with a drop of the spirits that had been run under his very nose.

The other habitations surrounding the green were of various sizes, some with small gardens in front, some neat, and some neglected,—almost all thatched and whitewashed. A sleepy, listless air hung about the place. A stranger wandering accidentally into it, would feel at once that it had known better days; the children might seem to play with less liveliness than usual, and the very geese to waddle over the grass with a lazy gait. He would fancy the gossips at the cottage doors to be inanimate in their chat, and might himself be yielding to a sense of drowsiness, when the sight of Dame Miniver, in her neat brown silk gown,

and snow-white apron, looking complacently at the visitor, with an inviting smile that was irresistible, would recall his fleeting spirits, and guide his steps to the friendly shelter of the Trevethlan Arms.

The late owner of the castle, it has already been said, was extremely unpopular with his tenantry, for some time both before and after his marriage. Proud themselves of the family upon which they had depended beyond the memory of man, they hated to see it stripped, acre by acre, of its broad lands, and so impoverished as to be unable to afford them the old advantages. Remembering the current prophecy, they loathed a match which seemed to harbinger its fulfilment, and at the same time rendered it next to impossible for Pendarrel to come to Trevethlan, although the reverse might happen on several contingencies. But after the death of poor Margaret, and when an infant son and daughter stood in the way of any such consummation, and their lord came often among them, haughty indeed, but not unkind; poor, but still generous; and they could not avoid seeing the melancholy written in his face, and recollected his reported courtship, years before, of Esther Pendarrel, and thought of the kinsman who had sold his name; their animosity gradually melted into compassion, and a deep and sullen hatred grew up among them against the house of Pendarrel and everything connected with it.

The discontent now pervading the country had not spared Trevethlan. It was true, that if the sentiment—war to the

mansions—were diffused at all in the village, it had no reference to the castle. There was not a man on the estate but was ready to die in defence of the towers on the cliff. But other feelings might be entertained towards some of their neighbours. Hitherto they had exhausted their animosity in conflicts arising at wrestling-matches and country fairs, but now there were symptoms discoverable of more dangerous hostilities.

And the movement was encouraged by the absence of the young master. The villagers regretted, without blaming, a departure which was intended, they hoped, in some way or other, to restore prosperity to the family. But it removed a check which might have soothed their exasperation. And in like manner the return of the orphans would probably turn aside any ideas of immediate violence, if such had really gained any footing in the hamlet.

On the evening of their arrival, some of the notables met to discuss things in general, around the fire in Dame Miniver's hall. There were farmer Colan, and Germoe the tailor of the hamlet, and Breage whose wife kept the shop where everything was sold, and, among divers others, Edward Owen, Sinson's unsuccessful rival for the affections of pretty Mercy Page. Owen, formerly one of the best-conducted men in the hamlet, was now sulky and perverse, and Mercy had obtained no slight odium by her too great fidelity to one who was regarded as a deserter. She little thought her old lover had been lately in the neighbourhood, and she was even now meditating an excursion to inquire after him,

in one of those mysterious modes, which were yet resorted to occasionally by the lovers of the far-west.

"A health to our squire!" cried Colan, filling a cup of cyder, "and to our bonny young lady, and welcome back to Trevethlan."

"Faith," said Owen, "they're not come back to do much good to Trevethlan, I reckon. There's none of the fortune come with 'em as folks used to talk about, or they'd never ha' gone through the town with a rubbishy old chay from Helston."

"Small blame to Squire Randolph," observed Germoe, "that he don't throw away the little he's left, like our poor master before him. And, for my part, I'd rather have him among us, poor though he may be, than away nobody knows where.

'The place is bare, when the lord's not there.'

There'll be more smiles in Trevethlan than there's been this many a day."

"Then there's not much to smile about," Owen replied; "and the best maybe the squire could do, were to take back some of that's been stolen from him. There's many a lad ready to strike a blow for Trevethlan."

"Wild talk, Edward," said Breage; "wild talk, and nothing but it. We live by the law now-a-days."

"And there's a pleasanter way," observed Dame Miniver. "Miss Mildred of Pendar'l 's as pretty a lady as ever stepped, and she might bring the squire all his land again, and fulfil the saying

quite agreeable,

'Pendar'l and Trevethlan will own one name.'"

"There's too much ill blood atween the houses," Colan said. "A deal too much. Didn't the lady of Pendar'l turn the late squire away? And didn't our young master send her back from his gate with a flea in her ear? Don't ye recollect how Jeffrey chuckled about it? The young folks have ne'er seen one another, Mrs. Miniver."

"How d'ye know?" the hostess asked. "And trust me, if meet they did, there'd meet a couple predestinated to fall in love. In all the old tales that ever I read, the true gentleman falls in love with the wrong lady. But, of course, they must meet, or they haven't the chance, and somehow they always do meet."

"Well," said Germoe, "I'll wager the day ne'er dawns that sees that match. The saying'll not hold good in our time—mark my words."

"There's a deal of wisdom in those old sayings," quoth Mistress Miniver. "Ay, and in others too. Mind ye not how old Maud Basset foretold a fortune for her child, and the gipsy crossed it, and both came out as true as gospel? Those sayings are not to be looked down upon, Master Germoe."

"If ever that saying comes true in my time," muttered Owen, "and not on our side, there'll be a tale told of Pendar'l—that's all I know."

But the remark excited no attention, and from such predictions the company slid by degrees into the kindred and fascinating subject of preternatural visitations, a wide field in that remote district of the west; and they drew their seats closer round the fire, and dropped their voices, until they almost frightened one another into a reluctance to separate on their different ways homeward.

They would, perhaps, have expressed themselves in a more discontented manner, if they had known the intention with which Randolph sought the home of his fathers: he has himself obscurely intimated it, in his soliloquy by the sea. To persuade his sister to remain in those old halls, under the guardianship of Polydore Riches; to return himself to London, to obtain, in spite of all obstacles, an interview with Mildred Pendarrel; to extract from her the confession which he was convinced she was ready to make; to exchange mutual vows; to look round the world for the path which he might cut to honour and fortune; to return and claim his bride, who by that time would be her own mistress—such was the scheme upon which he was at present resolved. It was a wild outline, and he did not trouble himself to fill up the details. Young and ardent, he looked straight to the summit of his ambition, and recked nothing of the ravines which separated the various intervening ridges.

But with all his determination he hesitated to disclose his idea to Helen. He felt that to her he was everything. Until quite recently they had always shared one another's thoughts. He

trembled at the anguish he should inflict by such a separation. And so he deferred the confidence from time to time, persuading himself that it would best be made on the very eve of his departure, until this was indefinitely postponed by intelligence that Pendarrel Hall was being prepared for the immediate reception of its mistress.

In the meanwhile his sister and he renewed their former acquaintance with the good folks of the hamlet, and to external appearance resumed the way in which they had lived before the late Mr. Trevethlan's death. It was a quiet, dreamy sort of life, of which a faint sketch was given in the outset of this narrative. They were born in a land of romance; the whole region was classic ground. From King Arthur's castle of Tintagel in the north-east, to Merlin's stone in Mount's Bay, respecting which an old prophecy—

> "There shall land on the stone Merlyn
> Those shall burn Paul's, Penzance, and Newlyn,"

was said to be fulfilled by some stragglers from the Spanish Armada, every field might be supposed the scene of some chivalrous exploit, or magical enchantment, or superstitious sacrifice. There dwelt the last of the British druids: their strange monuments were still standing on the wild moors and in the cultivated domains, on the desolate carns and among the crags of the sea-shore. Such was the oracular stone at Castle Trereen,—at

that time not forced from its resting-place by sacrilegious hands, and requiring no chain to keep it from *logging* too far. Such was Lanyon Quoit, a cromlech on the moorland beyond Madron, and not very far from the battle-field, where the Saxon Athelstan finally defeated the Britons, and drove them to perish of hunger in the caves of Pendeen. The curious stranger still marks their strong fortresses, Castle Chun and Castle Dinas, occupying the highest ground between Mount's Bay and the Irish Sea; he may read the name of their chieftain, Rialobran, on his tombstone, Mên Skryfa, now prostrate among the herbage; and he may note the sanguinary nature of the struggle, in the title which it gained for the Land's End, of Penvonlas, or the Headland of Blood.

And, again, the customs of the country still kept alive some faint memorials of those heathen times, and of the accommodating spirit of the earliest Christian missionaries. To such an origin is ascribed the salutation of the orchards at Christmas, already referred to: the mistletoe of the apple was not so sacred as that of the oak, but neither was it despicable. And the bonfires of St. John's Eve were said to tell of the days when the cromlechs of Cam Brey were surrounded by a mystic grove, and the officiating priests hurried their human victims through purifying flames to the blood-stained altar.

Nor was the land less indebted for romantic associations to those fabulous historians, who peopled Britain with royalty, beauty, chivalry, and faery, and assigned to Cornwall the honour of producing the renowned Sir Tristan. Not a few

hours were whiled away at Trevethlan Castle in discoursing of their marvellous adventures, their strange wandering towns of Camelot and Caerleon, and the general phantasmagoric character of their narratives. They plotted out the kingdom in an imaginary map, and whatever scenery they required, they regarded as existing and well known. Did they want a lake, from whence should issue a hand bearing a magic sword, they troubled not themselves with any mention of its landmarks: a forest perilous arose wherever they willed: a bridge to be defended, and therefore a stream, was always ready in the champion's path: you were introduced to a fountain as if you had drunk at it all your life. Undoubting faith in their own story was one of their most powerful fascinations: it transferred itself to their hearers, and a tale, which modern exactness would make incoherent and incredible, became credible from its very indistinctness. The Round Table romances present us with a fantastic Britain, which we may conceive to be still in being, like the paradise of Irem in the desert of Aden, and which the second-sight of imagination may yet conjure up in all its pristine glory.

Many of those old tomes, quartos and folios, whose florid binding attested their high estimation by early possessors, enriched the shelves of the castle library; and few of its proprietors were deterred from exploring their contents, by the mystic black-letter and antiquated French in which the stories were told. Under Polydore's guidance, Randolph and Helen had become acquainted with much of this legendary lore; and even

their father sometimes deigned to take part in a conversation arising out of it.

But it was in vain now that Helen, in the hope of chasing away the cloud which hung continually upon her brother's brow, strove to recall his attention to these studies of the old time. The down had been brushed from the butterfly's wing. She strolled with him along the beach, and she sat with him in Merlin's Cave, in spite of the wintry weather; but it was impossible to bring back the mood in which he listened to "Trevethlan's farewell," on the eve of their departure for London. He was fond of roaming through the desolate state rooms, rapt in deep meditation, and only roused when the wind, rushing through some crevice, waved the tapestry of the walls with a rustling sound, and made the dim figures portrayed upon it seem for a moment endued with life. Sometimes he would be found in the picture-gallery, gazing earnestly on the portrait of his father, and seeming, by the expression of his countenance, eager to evoke from the mimic lips an answer to some question which was struggling in his breast. His old teacher noted his moodiness with anxiety, but in silence, and made no attempt to forestall the explanation, which he felt sure must come of itself before long.

CHAPTER III

The heart, surrendered to the ruling power
Of some ungoverned passion every hour,
Finds, by degrees, the truths that once bore sway
And all their deep impression wear away:
So coin grows smooth in traffic current passed,
Till Cæsar's image is effaced at last.

Cowper.

The mistress of Pendarrel Hall never visited it without experiencing a renewal of many an ancient spring of grief. There were not a few spots in the park, sequestered from the more frequented paths, which she could not look upon without bitter regret, yet which she was always sure to explore within a few days of her arrival, so much of pensive pleasure mingled with the pain. But the influence of such reminiscences was of short duration, and the temporary weakness was soon succeeded by that permanent animosity to the owners of Trevethlan Castle, which had become the ruling passion of her life. She would climb an eminence in the neighbourhood, from which the old gray towers were visible, and think, with fresh exasperation, of the obstinacy or the pride which still detained them from her grasp.

But now she came to her home, with a fond belief that the enemy was at last delivered into her hand. Previously, there

seemed no limit to the contention. Now, a few weeks must decide it. Michael Sinson had returned to town before the departure of his patroness, had matured his plans, had obtained her sanction to carrying them out, and had been introduced by her husband to his highly-respected solicitor, Mr. Truby. That gentleman could only assure his client, after a careful perusal of Sinson's statement, that, if it did not break down in court, there could be no doubt whatever that Mr. Randolph Trevethlan would be held to be an intruder upon the castle property, and that immediate possession would be given to him, Mr. Trevethlan Pendarrel. And, as Michael vouched for the perfect soundness of his evidence, Mr. Truby received directions to commence proceedings forthwith. "Let the suit be pressed forward," Mrs. Pendarrel said, "with the utmost possible despatch."

That matter settled, she left London with her daughter; her husband gladly making his official duties a plea for remaining in May Fair. Yet Esther was not altogether at her ease. Plain and straightforward as was Sinson's story, and completely as it destroyed the validity of the late Mr. Trevethlan's marriage, she still suspected there was some unseen flaw. She often thought of Mr. Truby's qualification—if the case did not break down in court. Who was this very important witness that Sinson had so opportunely discovered? And then, as the notion of fraud stole into her mind, she asked herself, what would be the motive; with what object could Sinson have devised his scheme? And again she questioned herself, with some alarm, as to the extent

to which she had authorized the proceedings of her protégé. She had communicated with him once or twice by letter. And the uneasiness expressed in these reflections was somewhat increased by Michael's recent demeanour. He wore a look of intelligence, and assumed an air of importance, seeming to discover a consciousness of some hidden power. A sense of superiority appeared to mingle with his fawning subserviency, such as might mark the carriage of Luke in Massinger's play. But Mrs. Pendarrel soon wrapped herself in her pride, and forgot all her suspicions.

To be sure, that pride rather revolted from the mode of proceeding. An action-at-law was but a bad substitute for a raid of the olden time. The bailiff with a slip of parchment was an indifferent representative of a "plump of spears." The court was but a poor arena, compared to the lists. But for this there was no help. The inconvenient civilization of modern times precluded a resort to that picturesque method of settling the question. And Mrs. Pendarrel owned to herself that her husband was but ill-qualified to head a foray. She recollected the pretences by which he had obtained her hand, and confessed that he would cut a bitter figure in "Doe on the demise of Pendarrel against Trevethlan," than in a cartel of mortal defiance.

Yet had she good cause to tremble. She had only discerned one-half of Sinson's character, his malice against the Trevethlans. She employed him in a manner which gratified that feeling, and she supposed her pecuniary favours were sufficient

to make him her own. But he was far from being a slave, like an eastern mute, or a messenger of the Vehm-Gericht, who would answer in humble submission, "to hear is to obey:" he had his own game to play beside that of his mistress, and well would it be for her if she did not lose more than she won by his cunning finesse.

His disposition had been nourished by his whole life. His early years were spent in the most abject servility. He fawned upon his young cousin, the heir of Trevethlan, like a spaniel. To obtain his partiality, and to be admitted to his society, he was ready to lick the dust under his feet. And at the same time he thought, or was persuaded by his grandmother, that the ties of blood made such distinction a matter of right rather than of favour. So very early in life he acquired ideas much above his real station, and pined for a position for which he was not born.

When Randolph's father ejected the young rustic from the castle, this aspiring ambition seemed to be nipped in the bud. The disappointment was very severe, and his fanatical grandmother changed it into hatred. Having been urgent in inducing her daughter to accept the offered elevation, she heard of the treatment portrayed in poor Margaret's fading cheek with wrath, and regarded her death as a murder to be avenged. So she trained Michael as the instrument of retribution, and made his personal spite the basis of a deep-rooted animosity against all the house of Trevethlan.

With such feelings he presented himself to Mrs. Pendarrel,

and was received into her service. And well pleased he was to find that his first duties implied more or less of hostility towards his former playmate. He entered upon the task with a zeal inspired by hatred. The departure of the orphans from their home seemed to deprive him of his occupation, but in fact widened its sphere. The summons to London extended the bounds of the young peasant's ambition. He had profited well by the early instructions of Polydore Riches; he was of good figure, with a handsome, if unprepossessing face; a short residence in the metropolis changed his rusticity into assurance; and his natural abilities qualified him to play many parts, and in some degree to seem a gentleman.

His progress was quickened by the glimpse he caught of Miss Pendarrel at his first arrival in town. It developed a series of sensations in his mind, only partially excited before by the rural charms of Mercy Page, and made him feel the inferiority of his station with tenfold bitterness. He thought vaguely of Sir Richard Whittington and Sir Ralph Osborne, and longed for the opportunity of making a rapid fortune. With this idea, he bought a ticket in the lottery.

And as he advanced in the confidence of his patroness, a new prospect opened before him. He fancied he saw the means of obtaining a control over her, by which he could bend her to his will, whenever the time came. So that he reached his end, he cared not for the road. And in this case every passion of his heart concurred in urging him forward. Circumstances favoured

his desires even beyond his expectations, and the period was approaching to strike the final blow.

Sinson's connection with the wretched spendthrift, Everope, has already been traced. He destined that individual to play an important part in his plot. The miserable man hung back at every step, and ended by clearing it. Michael's money supplied him with dissipation, and in dissipation he drowned remorse. But the trip into the country nearly rescued him from his betrayer's clutches; it had given him time for reflection such as he had not had for many a day; and when on their return, Sinson laid open his further demands, he encountered a resistance so obstinate that he almost thought his previous labour had been thrown away. But threats and temptations did their work, and Everope finally agreed to take the step, which Sinson promised should be the last required of him. And now Michael remained in town, instead of at once accompanying his patroness to Pendarrel, in order to furnish Mr. Truby with information, and to take heed that his reluctant dupe did not slip through his fingers.

The second week in February had scarcely begun, when Esther arrived in Cornwall. Well might Gertrude warn Mildred that she underrated the difficulties of her position. Mrs. Pendarrel treated her with the most tender consideration, but with great art made her constantly feel that the marriage was a settled thing, without ever affording her an opportunity of protesting. Her assent was continually implied, yet in such a way that she could not contradict the inference. Her situation became

embarrassing and irksome. It was ungenerous, she thought, to take such an advantage of maidenly scruples. She felt that a web was being spun round her, reducing her to a sort of chrysalis, from which it was every day harder to escape, but from which she was resolved a fly should issue, by no means like what was expected.

For she entertained no fear about the final result. If her mother chose to go on, wilfully blind, from day to day, without permitting her eyes to be opened, on her must rest the blame of any éclat. The remembrance of her cousin was deeply imprinted on her heart, and sustained its courage. Night after night, before retiring to rest, she drew aside the curtains of her window to look for the bright planet which he had associated with his destiny, saddened when it was hidden by clouds or dimmed by mist, happy when its rays beamed pure and clear into her chamber.

There were no guests staying at the hall, but numbers of casual visitors called to pay their respects, and hoped perhaps for an invitation to the wedding. And notes, of all shapes and sizes, requested the honour … at dinner and at dance. And a gay life would Mildred's have been, but that she was so pre-occupied. For her mother accepted nearly all the proffered hospitality, and returned it with liberal profusion. And at every one of these festive meetings, Mildred could see that in the compliments Mrs. Pendarrel received, and in her furtive and complacent answers, she had no small portion.

One source of comfort she had, that Melcomb was not in the

country. She had not to endure his odious addresses. But her mother had issued cards for a grand entertainment at rather a distant date, when she hoped to crowd her house with everybody who was the least presentable in all West Kerrier, and to that high festival Mildred feared he would come, an undesired guest, and be in some way exhibited as her accepted suitor to the assembled multitude. But the day was yet far off.

And it was with pleasure she learnt that Randolph and his sister had returned to their ancestral home. Much speculation was afloat concerning them; and though people generally knew the family disagreement, and refrained from alluding to them in Mrs. Pendarrel's presence, slight hints fell inadvertently at times; and some mean minds, little knowing the nature of her they addressed, uttered a passing sarcasm upon their poverty, with the notion that it would be agreeable. But to Mildred the mere mention of their name was a source of interest; and in her rural walks she would sometimes inquire concerning them of the country folk, and speculate on the possibility of meeting Randolph on her way.

To her mother their presence was not equally agreeable. She was far from anxious for any such rencontre. She too well remembered the emotion displayed by Mildred at Mrs. Winston's. She learnt, with regret, that the orphans did not lead so absolutely sequestered a life as before their father's death; but availed themselves of the removal of the restriction which then confined their walks to the precincts of the castle and the sea

coast, and made themselves in some measure acquainted with the wild scenery surrounding their native bay. She did not like the idea of being so near them, just at the time when Sinson's machinations were about to explode. And with a different interest she heard of the state of feeling manifested pretty openly by the tenantry of Trevethlan, and desired her protégé to come to Pendarrel as soon as he should be released from attendance on Mr. Truby. She wished to have more precise information of what passed in the castle and its dependent hamlet, and summoned her retainer to resume his original occupation.

CHAPTER IV

Tu ne quæsieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi
Finem Di dederint, Leuconoc; nec Babylonios
Tentaris numeros. Ut melius, quidquid erit, pati!

Hor.

Seek not to know, it is not given,
The end for us ordained by Heaven;
Nor be by fortune-tellers lured:
What can't be cured, is best endured.

Madron church-town, the mother of the thriving port of Penzance, is a small irregular hamlet, situated on an eminence overlooking its well-grown offspring, and the salt marshes which skirt the coast in the direction of Marazion. It is approached by a steep and winding road, but the prospect from the churchyard will well repay the labour of the way. And many a pilgrim, when he turns from the landscape spread beneath to the memorials at his feet, and feels the breeze from the sea breathe lightly over his cheek, will be mournfully reminded how many have sought a refuge on that genial shore from our English destroyer, beguiling themselves and those dear to them, with the hope of eluding his pursuit, but sinking, nevertheless, under his ruthless embrace;

for on the tombstones round him the stranger will read of other strangers, from far distant places, with names unknown to Cornwall, once graced, he may imagine, with youth and beauty, of whose history it is there written that they "came to Penzance for the benefit of their health." Those simple words, repeated on every side, tell the melancholy end of many a romance.

Up the hill, on an early day in February, a trim country girl was climbing with a step that betokened some indecision of purpose. She was dressed in a dark blue frock, short and full in the skirt, and a red cloak of scanty dimensions, which hung over one shoulder and under the other arm. She was hot, and carried her bonnet, decked with some of the first primroses of the year, in her hand, while her black hair hung round a pair of bright eyes of the same colour, and cheeks always red, and now redder than usual. A very pretty rustic was Mercy Page.

It is some four miles from Marazion to Madron, and further still from Trevethlan; but that is not much for a Cornish maiden. Mercy had walked all the way. But she had not walked with the free quick step usual to her, nor did their wonted open smile play round her provoking lips. Her look was anxious, and her pace uncertain. And now that she was toiling up the hill, and perhaps approaching her destination, she not unfrequently stopped, and with her finger in the corner of her mouth, tried to scrutinize herself, while she seemed to be regarding the prospect. For Mercy had a kind of idea that she was on her way to do what was at least foolish, if not wrong, and she had always been a very

good girl.

But with all this hesitation, she still advanced. She crossed Madron churchyard, and went out of her way to drop a flower on the grave of a cousin who lay there, making a longer pause on the occasion than any which had previously interrupted her walk. However, she proceeded at last, and soon turned aside from the main road by a tiny streamlet. She followed the rivulet's course, as it wound along beneath a bank covered in the summer with broom, gorse, and heather, from amidst which, here and there, a graceful silver birch flung its long tresses on the breeze, until she arrived at a sort of bay or inlet, where the trees grew more thickly, and in the very depth of which lay, still, silent, and dark, encircled by rude stone-work, a well of water, the source of the streamlet which had guided the maiden's steps—St. Madron's Well.

Mercy cast a sharp glance before her, and was glad to see that there was no person near the fountain. She went up to it herself, and bent over the mirror-like surface, and might see her image rising dimly to meet the salute. Could that limpid water tell a maiden's fortune? Was it conscious of the reflection of her features? Could it read their gentle lines, and foreshow by any ripple of its own, the destiny of her who looked upon it? And was such inquiry sanctioned by the saint who had blessed the fountain? Was it not profane so to forestall futurity? Such questions flitted vaguely through Mercy's bosom while she gazed into the tranquil well. An expression of awe stole over her face;

and when, as she changed her position, a straggling briar which had caught her cloak twitched it, she started like a guilty thing, and turned suddenly with a flush on her cheeks and forehead, deeper even than that called forth by exercise. She did not smile on discovering the source of her alarm, but began to search among the pebbles of the brook for some smoother and rounder than common. Having collected two or three of this description, she returned to the fountain, and from trembling fingers, and with eyes half afraid to watch the result, dropped one of the stones into the water. There was a little splash, and then the circling wavelets grew larger and larger, and broke against the sides of the well, and a new ripple arose from each point of contact, and the undulations crossed one another in every direction, and became fainter and fainter, until the surface once more motionless, again presented the maiden with the semblance of her own pretty features, just as she saw them before the disturbance.

Was Mercy any the wiser? She drew a long breath, and murmured to herself, "he is not–" She had heard that if the well were unruffled, the oracle pronounced the person inquired of to be dead. The oracle, it may be presumed, was generally favourable to hope. But Mercy wished to learn much more than this; and those changing and intermingling ripples had to her been as hieroglyphics to the eyes of the profane. She dropped another of her pebbles into the well. Again the same sight, and the same disappointment. Vainly did Mercy try to shape the little

waves into words, or letters, or symbols. She could not make out even a "yes" or a "no." Once more she tried the experiment, and becoming more enthusiastic, pressed the pebble to her lips before she let it fall.

Still it was all the same. The oracle was dumb. Mercy was inclined to revile St. Madron. She had grown excited; felt reconciled to the practice of the black art, and ventured on a step, which, when she started from home, she vowed to herself nothing should induce her to take.

There was a cottage, or rather a hovel, which the maiden had passed on her way to the well, and which she had shunned. The bank formed one of its sides, and it was hard to say where the ground ended and the dwelling began. The walls were built of rough stones, the interstices between them being filled with moss, which had accepted the employment willingly, and grown and flourished. The roof also was of turf, and thus the abode had a vegetable aspect, and looked like an unusually large clump of green, such as one sees often on a moist common, tempting one's foot to press it, or suggesting the idea of an unpleasantly soft pillow. This was the nest of Dame Gudhan, the self-constituted priestess of St. Madron's Well. She was a toothless, deformed, ugly old woman, who lived with her cat, which she had succeeded in training to poach, and bring the game it killed home to be cooked, instead of wasting it raw in the open field. Friend she had none but pussy, but she enjoyed a high reputation as a witch; and many a girl travelled many a mile to ascertain from Dame

Gudhan the colour of her future's hair and eyes, and all his other good qualities.

Now the sibyl had observed the detour which Mercy made to avoid passing near her hut, and observed it with due professional pique. To consult the spirit of the well without the assistance of its minister was to defraud the latter of her rightful perquisite, and depreciate the science of witchcraft. So, whenever Dame Gudhan perceived a timid devotee steal furtively to the well, she would lie in wait for her return, and favour her with unsought predictions of a nature less agreeable than strong. Eying Mercy from the door of her den, the old hag thought her appearance indicated one quite able to afford a fee, and proportionate to the idea was the sibylline wrath. But in order to increase her anger to the proper pitch, Dame Gudhan trod hard upon her cat's tail; and the animal, resenting the affront, inflicted a long scratch upon its mistress's shin. Thereupon ensued a hideous war; a yelling as of the evil demons with which the pythoness pretended to be familiar; unintelligible to vulgar ears; requiring an interpreter from the oyster-quays. It may be supposed the witch had the best of the argument, for after a while, pussy issued from the hovel with her tail trailing behind her, and trotted off in a crest-fallen fashion, stopping now and then to look round sulkily, and shake her whiskers with impotent spite.

Dame Gudhan speedily followed grimalkin, tottering along on a stick, and muttering to herself, chewing her rage as a horse champs the bit. She encountered Mercy at the opening which led

to the well.

"Didst read he would be hung, lass?" she squealed, while all the muscles of her yellow wrinkled visage twitched frightfully. "Didst read he would be hung?"

With all her heart Mercy wished herself safe back at Trevethlan.

"Dost tremble?" continued Dame Gudhan. "What wilt do when the day comes? There's murder in thy face—a red spot on thy brow."

Poor Mercy gasped for breath, and leaned against the bank. She had thrust her hand into her pocket, but was too much agitated to find what she wanted. The old crone divined her intention.

"Na," she screamed. "The spirit won't be bought. The cord's about thy neck, and the gibbet's reared for him. The tree grows no more in the wood. It is felled, and hewn, and squared. The hemp is reaped, and beat, and spun. In an evil day came ye to the blessed well, and passed by Dame Gudhan without seeking her advice. Said is said."

By this time Mercy had succeeded in producing a little purse of red leather with a steel clasp. Her fingers shook very much as she opened it, and tendered Dame Gudhan a bright new shilling, its sole contents. The hag was satisfied with the effect of her fierce prophecy—one she had often vented on like occasions, and looked at the coin with greedy eyes, chattering her teeth, and smacking her lips.

"That was his new-year's gift, I reckon," she said.

She was wrong, and the mistake restored Mercy's fleeting courage.

"Take it, dame," said the maiden.

"Ye'll lack a new ribbon at Sithney fair. And what for? Said is said."

It was a fine instance of conscientious scruples, that affected reluctance of the old woman to receive the maiden's money.

"Take it, dame," Mercy repeated.

"The spirit never lies," said the hag, taking the shilling; "but he sometimes explains his words. Come ye back to the well. Said is said. We'll ask him what it means."

So saying, she hobbled on her stick up the little dell. Mercy looked after her doubtfully, and was more than inclined to walk rapidly away; but, yielding to the fascination which commonly attends inquiries like hers, she at last followed the old crone, and overtook her at the well.

"Now, lass," said the enchantress, "an evil rede I read ye but now, and evil it may be. But forewarned is forearmed. Ye need na be frightened. And so ye saw nought in the dark water. Ye could na hear his voice. Ye kenned na whether he laughed or frowned, or promised or threatened. Smooth and still, deep and dark. Reach me thy hand. Stand by my side, and when I press thy fingers, then drop the pebble."

Injunctions which the maiden obeyed with tremulous emotion. The old hag knelt down by the fountain-side, and bent over the

water until she nearly touched it with her lips, mumbling some incantation. Suddenly she squeezed Mercy's hand in her grasp, and the maiden let fall the pebble which she held in the other. At the sound of the splash the witch raised her head a little, and seemed to scan the ripples which circled on the surface of the well. It was only for a moment, and then she started to her feet, dashed a handful of water in Mercy's face, and screamed:

"Wash it off, wash it off. The spirit never lies. Said is said. Away, lass; away."

She waved Mercy off, and the maiden retreated backwards before her, step by step, until she reached the lower end of the ravine, unable to remove her eyes from those of the fortune-teller. On the open ground Dame Gudhan passed her without uttering another word, and hobbled quickly away to her wretched abode, taking no notice of her cat, which had now returned home, and appeared disposed to make up the late quarrel by purring and rubbing against the old woman's wounded shin.

Mercy, exhausted and terrified, watched her until she disappeared within her dwelling, and then, feeling relieved from her presence, and moved by a sudden impulse, she dropped on her knees and implored, in her own homely manner, the forgiveness of Heaven for what she had just done. She rose somewhat tranquillized, and took her way homeward with a quick step.

Fortune-tellers, unlike Dame Gudhan, generally give good tidings, and in the few cases where it is otherwise, they are

disbelieved. Were it not so, the trade would be ruined. People forebode quite sufficient evil for themselves, and seek a conjuror for comfort, not for aggravation of their uneasiness. A strange fatuity it is that prompts such attempts to raise the veil which hides the future! Were the object accomplished life would be valueless; its interest would be gone; there would be nothing left to live for, and we should be unable to die; we should be fatalists by experience. The impatient reader, who peruses the last chapter of the novel first, has still to learn in what manner the author educes his catastrophe; but the miserable victim of foresight would be acquainted, not only with the close, but with all the incidents of his coming career. And difficult it is to see how human strength could bear up against such a certainty, where the vision was of ill. So the inquirer is apt to discredit the information which he came to seek, when it proves to be unfavourable to his desires.

Mercy Page, already fortified by her silent prayer, soon regained her ordinary cheerfulness. Her spirits rose as she walked, and she tripped lightly along, in happy forgetfulness of Dame Gudhan's frightful denunciations. So she passed under the pretty hamlet of Gulvall, with its picturesque church-tower peeping forth from the embosoming trees, and descended to the hard sands of the sea-shore. For the tide was out, and the beach afforded a short cut to Marazion. Blithely and briskly the maiden sped over the ribbed plain, until she saw in the distance, advancing to meet her, a figure which she recognized.

At that moment there was no individual, perhaps, whom Mercy less desired to see than Edward Owen, her discarded suitor. The woman cannot be worth winning who takes pleasure in rejecting an honest admirer, and Mercy was not a village coquette. She sincerely regretted that Owen's attachment could only be a source of sorrow to himself. She deplored it the more, because the disappointment seemed to have driven the lover into some irregular courses. Now Mercy had sought St. Madron's Well with a vague idea of confirming her belief in the fidelity of a more favoured suitor; and, passing by the rude shock of her interview with Dame Gudhan, it was not on her return from such an errand that she was pleased to meet his rival. Meet him, however, she must, and did.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.