

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**MONICA, VOLUME 3
(OF 3)**

Evelyn Everett-Green
Monica, Volume 3 (of 3)

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Evelyn Everett-Green

Monica, Volume 3 (of 3) / A Novel

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.

BEATRICE

“Beatrice, I believe my words are coming true, after all. I begin to think you are getting tired of Trevlyn already.”

It was Monica who spoke thus. She had surprised Beatrice alone in the boudoir at dusk one afternoon, sitting in an attitude of listless dejection, with the undoubted brightness of unshed tears in her eyes.

But the girl looked up quickly, trying to regain all her usual animation, though the attempt was not a marked success, and Monica sat down beside her, and laid one hand upon hers in a sort of mute caress.

“You are not happy with us, Beatrice, I see it more and more plainly every day. You have grown pale since you came here, and your spirits vary every hour, but they do not improve, and you are often sad. I think Trevlyn cannot suit you. I think I shall have to prescribe change of air and scene, and a meeting later on in some other place.”

Monica spoke with a sort of grave gentleness, that indicated a tenderness she could not well express more clearly. For answer, Beatrice suddenly flung herself on her knees before her hostess, burying her face in her hands.

“Oh, don’t send me away, Monica! Don’t send me away! I could not bear it – indeed I could not! I am miserable – I am wretched company. I don’t wonder you are tired of me; but ah! don’t send me away from you, and from Trevlyn. I think I shall *die* if you do. Oh, why is the world such a hard, cruel place?”

Monica was startled at this sudden outburst, for since the day following her arrival Beatrice had showed herself unusually reserved. She had been *distracte*, absorbed, fitful in her moods, but never once expansive; therefore, this unexpected impulse towards confidence was the more surprising.

“Beatrice,” she said gently, “I did not mean to distress you. You know how very, very welcome you are to stay with us. But you are unhappy; you are far more unhappy than when you came.”

Beatrice shook her head vehemently at this point, but Monica continued in the same quiet way. “You are unhappy, you are restless and miserable. Beatrice, answer me frankly, would you be happy if Tom Pendrill were not here? He has already outstayed his original time, and we could quite easily get rid of him if his presence is a trouble to you. We never stand on ceremony with Tom, and Randolph could manage it in a moment.”

Beatrice lifted a pale, startled face.

“Tom Pendrill?” she repeated, almost sharply. “What has he got to do with it? What makes you bring in his name? What do you know about – about – ?” She stopped suddenly.

“I know nothing except what I see for myself – nothing but what your face and his tell me. It is easy to see that you have known each other before, and under rather exceptional circumstances, perhaps. Do you think it escapes me, that feverish gaiety of yours whenever he is near – gaiety that is expended in laughing, chatting, flirting, perhaps, with the other guests, but is never by any chance directed to him? Do you think I do not notice how quickly that affectation of high spirits evaporates when he is gone; how many fits of sad musing follow in its wake? How is it you two never talk to one another? never exchange anything beyond the most frigid commonplaces? It is not your way to

be so distant and so cool, Beatrice. There must be a reason. Tell me truly, would you not be happier if Tom Pendrill were to go back to St. Maws?"

But Beatrice shook her head again, and heaved a long, shuddering sigh.

"Oh, no, no!" she said. "Don't send him away. Nothing really matters now; nothing can do either good or harm. Let him stay. I think his heart is made of ice. He does not care; why should I? It is nothing but my folly and weakness, only it brings it all back so bitterly – all my pride, and self-will, and stubbornness. Well, I have suffered for it now."

It was plain that a confession was hovering on Beatrice's lips; that she was anxious at last to unburden herself of her secret. Monica helped her by asking a direct question.

"Were you engaged to him once?"

"No – no! not quite. I had not got quite so far as that. I might have been. He asked me to be his wife, and I – I – " She paused, and then went on more coherently.

"I will tell you all about it. It was years ago, when I was barely eighteen – a gay, giddy girl, just 'out,' full of fun, very wild and saucy, and thoroughly spoiled by persistent petting and indulgence. I was the only daughter of the house, and believed that Lady Beatrice Wentworth was a being of vast importance. Well, I suppose people spoiled us because we were orphans. We were all more or less spoiled, and I think it was the ruin of my eldest brother. He was at Oxford at the time I am speaking of; and I was taken to Commemoration by some gay friends of ours, who had brothers and sons at Oxford.

"It was there I met Tom Pendrill. He was the 'chum' of one of the undergraduate sons of my chaperon, and he was a great man just then. He had distinguished himself tremendously in the schools, I know – had taken a double-first, or something, and other things beside. He was quite a lion in his own set, and I heard an immense deal in his praise, and was tremendously impressed, quite convinced that there was not such another man in the world. He was almost always in our party, and he took a great deal of notice of me. He gave us breakfast in his rooms, and I sat next him, and helped to do the honours of the table. You can't think how proud I was at being singled out by him, how delighted I was to walk by his side, listening to his words of wisdom, how elevated I often felt, how taken out of myself into quite a new world of thought and feeling."

Beatrice paused. A smile – half sad, half bitter – played for a moment over her face; then she took up the thread of her narrative.

"I need not go into the subject of my feelings. I was very young, and all the glamour of youth and inexperience was upon me. I had never, in all my life, come across a man in the least like him – so clever, so witty, so cultured, and withal with so strong a personality. He was not silent and cynical, as he is now, but full of life and sparkle, of brilliance and humour. I was dazzled and captivated. I believed there had never been such a man in the world before. He was my ideal, my hero; and he seemed to court me, which was the most wonderful thing of all.

"You know what young girls are like? No, perhaps you don't, and I will avoid generalities, and speak only of myself. Just because he captivated me so much – my fancy, my intellect, my heart – just because I began to feel his power growing so strongly upon me, I grew shy, frightened, restive. I was very wilful and capricious. I wanted him to admire me, and I was proud that he seemed to do so; but I did not in the least want to acknowledge his power over me. I was frightened at it. I tried to ignore it – to keep it off.

"So, in a kind of foolish defiance and mistrust of myself, I began flirting tremendously with a silly young marquis, whom I heartily despised and disliked. I only favoured him when Tom Pendrill was present, for I wanted to make him jealous, and to feel my power over him. Coquetry is born in some women, I believe; I am sure it was born in me. I did not mean any harm. I never cared a bit for the creature. I cared for no one but the man I affected now to be tired of. But rumours got about. I suppose it would have been a very good match for me. People said I was going to marry

the cub, and I only laughed when I heard the report. I was young, vain, and foolish enough to feel rather flattered than otherwise.”

She paused a moment, with another of those bitter-sweet smiles, and went on very quietly:

“Why are girls so badly brought up? I was not bad at heart; but I was vain and frivolous. I loved to inflict pain of a kind upon others, till I played once too often with edge-tools, and have suffered for it ever since. Of course, Tom Pendrill heard these reports, and, of course, they angered him deeply; for I had given him every encouragement. He did not know the complex workings of a woman’s heart, her wild struggles for supremacy before she can be content to yield herself up for ever a willing sacrifice. He did not understand; how should he? I did not either till it was too late.

“I saw him once more alone. We were walking by the river one moonlight night. He was unlike himself – silent, moody, imperious. All of a sudden it burst out. He asked me almost fiercely if I would be his wife – he almost claimed my promise as his right – said that I owed him that reparation for destroying his peace of mind. How my heart leapt as I heard those words. A torrent of love seemed to surge over me. I was terrified at the depth of feeling he had stirred up. I struggled with a sort of fury against being carried away by it, against betraying myself too unreservedly. I don’t remember what I said; I was terribly agitated. I believe in my confusion and bewilderment I said something disgusting about my rank and his – the difference between us. Then he cast that odious marquis in my teeth, supposed that the report he had heard was true, that I was going to sell myself for the reversion of a ducal coronet, since I thought so much of *rank*. I was furious; all the more furious because I had brought it on myself, though, had he but known it, it was ungenerous to take me at a disadvantage, and cast my words back at me like that – words spoken without the least consideration or intention. But, right or wrong, he did it, and I answered back with more vehemence than before. I don’t know what I said, but it was enough for him, at any rate. He turned upon me – I think he almost cursed me – not in words, but in the cruel scorn expressed in his face and in his voice. Ah! it hurts me even now. Then he left me without another word, without a sign or sound of farewell – left me standing alone by that river. I never saw him again till we met in your drawing-room that night.”

Beatrice paused; Monica had taken her hand in token of sympathy, but she did not speak.

“Of course, at first I thought he would come back. I never dreamed he would believe I had really led him on, only to reject him with contempt, when once he dared to speak his heart to me. We had quarrelled; and I was very miserable, knowing how foolish I had been; but I never, never believed for a moment that he would take that quarrel as final.

“Two wretched days of suspense followed. Then I heard that he had left Oxford the morning after our interview by the river, and I knew that all was over between us. That is the story of my life, Monica; it does not sound much to tell, but it means a good deal to me. I have never loved anyone else – I do not think I ever shall.”

Monica was silent.

“Neither has he.”

Beatrice’s eyes were full of a sort of wistful sadness and tender regret; but she only kissed Monica very quietly, and stole silently from the room.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH. STORM

“Ah, Randolph! I am glad you are in. It is going to be such a rough night!”

Monica was sitting by the fire in her own room, waiting for her husband to join her there, as he always did immediately upon coming in from his day’s sport. They had one or two more guests at Trevlyn now – men, friends of Randolph’s in days past; but nothing ever hindered him from devoting this one hour before dinner to his wife. It was to Monica the happiest hour of the day.

“I am so glad to have you safe back. Are you not very wet?”

“No; I was well protected from the rain; but it has been a disagreeable sort of day. The other fellows were carried off to dine at Hartland’s. We came across their party just outside the park, and he begged us all to accept his hospitality for the night, as the weather was getting so bad. Haddon and I came home to tell you, but the rest accepted the invitation. We shall be quite a small party to-night.”

Monica looked up with a smile.

“I think I am glad of that, Randolph.”

He sat down and put his arm about her.

“Tired of our guests already, Monica?”

“I don’t know – I like to have your friends, and to help to make them enjoy themselves; but I don’t think there is any such happiness as having you all to myself.”

He held her closer to him, and looked with a proud fond smile into her face.

“You feel that too, Monica?”

“Ah, yes! How could I help it?”

He fancied she spoke sadly, and would know why.

“I think I have been sad all day,” she answered; “I am often sad before a storm, when I hear the wind moaning round the house. It makes me think of the brave men at sea, and their wives waiting for them at home.”

There was a little quiver in her voice as she spoke the last words. Randolph heard it, and held her very close to him.

“It is not such a very bad night, Monica.”

“No; but it makes me think. When you are away, I cannot help feeling sad, often. Ah, my husband! how can I tell you all that you have been to me these happy, happy months?”

“My sweet wife!” he murmured, softly.

“And other wives love their husbands,” she went on in the same dreamy way, “and they see them go away over the dark sea, never to come back any more,” and she shivered.

“Let us go to the music-room, Monica,” said Randolph. “You shall play the hymn for those at sea.”

He knew the power of music to soothe her, when these strange moods of sadness and fear came upon her. They went to the organ together, and before half-an-hour had passed Monica was her own calm, serene self again.

“Monica,” said Randolph, “can you sing something to me now – now that we are quite alone together? Do you remember that little sad, sweet song you sang the night before I went away to Scotland? Will you sing it to me now? I have so often wanted to hear it again.”

Monica gave him one quick glance, and struck the preliminary chords softly and dreamily.

Wonderfully rich and sweet her voice sounded; but low-toned and deep, with a subtle searching sweetness that spoke straight to the heart:

“And if thou wilt, remember —

And if thou wilt, forget.”

There was the least little quiver in her voice as it died into silence. Randolph bent over her and kissed her on the lips.

“Thank you,” he said. “It is a haunting little song in its sad sweetness. Somehow, it seems like you, Monica.”

But she made no answer, for at that moment a sound reached their ears that made them both start, listening intently. Monica’s face grew white to the lips.

The sound was repeated with greater distinctness.

“A gun!” said Randolph.

“A ship in distress!” whispered Monica.

A ship in distress upon that cruel, iron-bound coast – a pitch-dark night and a rising gale!

Randolph looked grave and resolute.

“We must see what can be done,” he said.

Monica’s face was very pale, but as resolute as her husband’s.

“I will go with you!” she said.

He glanced at, her, but he did not say her nay.

In the hall servants were gathering in visible excitement. Lord Haddon was there, and Beatrice. The distressing signals from the doomed vessel were urging their imperative message upon every heart. Faces were flushed with excitement. Every eye was turned upon the master of the house.

“Haddon,” he said, “there is not a man on the place that can ride like you, and you know every inch of the country by this time. Will you do this? – take the fastest, surest horse in the stable, and gallop to the nearest life-boat station. You know where it is? – Good! Give the alarm there, and get all in readiness. If the ship is past our help, and drifts with the wind, they may be able to save her crew still.”

Haddon stayed to ask no more. He was off for the stables almost before the words had left Randolph’s lips.

Monica was wrapping herself up in her warm ulster; Beatrice followed her example; the one was flushed, the other pale, but both were bent on the same object – they must go down to the shore to see what was done. They could not rest with the sound of those terrible guns ringing in their ears.

The night was pitchy black, the sky was obscured by a thick bank of cloud. The wind blew fierce and strong, what sailors would call “half a gale.” It was a wild, “dirty” night, but not nearly so bad a one as they often knew upon that coast.

The lanterns lighted them down the steep cliff-path, every foot of which, however, was well known to Monica. She kept close beside her husband. He gave her his hand over every difficult piece of the road, Beatrice followed a little more slowly. At last they all stood together upon the rocky floor of the bay.

Monica looked out to sea. She was the first to realise what had happened.

“She has struck on the reef!” she said. “She does not drift. She has struck!”

“And in such a sea she will be dashed to pieces in a very short time,” said Randolph, as another signal flashed out from the doomed vessel.

Other lights were moving about the shore. It was plain that the whole population of the little hamlet had gathered at the water’s edge. Through the gusts of rain they could see indistinctly moving figures; they could catch as a faint murmur the loud, eager tones of their voices.

“Stay here, Monica,” said Randolph, “under the shelter of this rock. I must go and see what is being done. Wait here for me.”

She had held fast by his arm till now! but she loosed his clasp as she heard these words.

“You will come back?” she said, striving to speak calmly and steadily.

“Yes, as soon as I can. I must see what can be done. There seems to be a boat. I must go and see if it cannot be launched. The sea in the bay is not so very wild.”

Randolph was gone already. Beatrice and Monica were left standing in the lee of a projection of the cliff. They thought they were quite alone. They did not see a crouching figure not many paces away, squeezed into a dark fissure of the rock. The night was too obscure to see anything, save where the flashing lights illumined the gloom. Even the wild beast glitter of a pair of fierce eyes watching intently passed unseen and unheeded.

Monica looked out to sea with a strange fixed yearning in her dark eyes. She was looking towards the vessel, struck fast upon the very rock where she had once stood face to face with death. How well she remembered that moment and the strange calmness that possessed her! She never realised the peril she was in – it had seemed a small thing to her then whether she lived or died. She recalled her feelings so well – was she really the same Monica who had stood so calmly there whilst the waves leaped up as if to devour her? Where was her old, calm indifference now? – that strange courage prompted by the want of natural love for life?

A sense of revelation swept over Monica at that moment. She had never really feared, because she had never truly loved. It was not death even now that she dreaded for herself, or for her husband, but separation. Danger, even to death, shared with him, would be almost welcome: but to think of his facing danger alone – that was too terrible. She pressed her hands closely together. It seemed as if her very soul cried to Heaven to keep away this dire necessity. Why she suspected its existence she could not have explained, but the shadow that had hung upon her all day seemed wrapping itself about her like a cloud.

“Monica, how you tremble!” said Beatrice. “Are you cold? Are you afraid?”

She was trembling herself, but it was with excitement and impatience.

Monica did not answer, and Beatrice moved a little away. She was too restless to stand still.

Monica did not miss her. A storm was sweeping over her soul – one of those storms that only perhaps come once in a life-time, and that leave indelible traces behind them. It seemed to her as if all her life long she had been waiting for this hour – as if everything in her past life had been but leading up to it.

Had she not known from her earliest childhood that some day this beautiful, terrible, pitiless sea was to do her some deadly injury – to wreck her life and leave her desolate? Ay she had known it always – and now – had the hour come?

Not in articulate words did Monica ask this question. It came as a sort of voiceless cry from the depths of her heart. She did not think, she did not reason – she only stood quite still, her hands closely clasped, her white face turned towards the sea, with a mute, stricken look of pain that yet expressed but a tithe of the bitter pain at her heart.

But during those few minutes, that seemed a life-time to her, the battle had been fought out and the victory won. The old calmness had come back to her. She had not faced this hour all her life to be a coward now.

She was a Trevlyn – and when had a Trevlyn ever been known to shrink or falter before a call of duty?

Beatrice rushed back with the greatest excitement of manner.

“They have a boat, but nearly all the men are away – the strong men who could man it easily. There are a few strong lads, who are willing and eager to go, and two fishermen; but there are only six in all, and they don’t know if it is enough. Oh, dear! oh, dear! And those poor people in the ship! Must they all be drowned?”

“I think not,” answered Monica, quietly. “I think some means will be found to save them. Where is Randolph?”

Randolph was beside her next moment.

“Ah, if only I were a man,” Beatrice was saying, excitedly. “Ah! why are women so useless, so helpless? To think of them drowning within sight of land – and they say the sea does not run so very high. Oh, what will they do? They cannot let them drown! Randolph, can nothing be done?”

“Yes, something can be done,” he answered steadily and cheerfully. “The boat is being run down. It will not be difficult or dangerous to launch her in shelter of the cliff. There are six men to man it – all they want is a coxswain. Monica,” he added, turning to her, and taking both her hands in his strong clasp, “you have taught me to navigate the Bay of Trevlyn so well, that I am equal to take that task upon myself. There are lives to be saved – the danger to the rescuing party is small, they say so, and I believe they speak the truth. Will you let me go?”

She looked up to him with a mute entreaty in her eyes.

“There are lives to be saved, my Monica,” he said, with grave gentleness. “Are our brothers to go down within sight of land, without one effort on our part to save them? Have you not wept for such scenes before now? Have you no pity to-night? Monica, in that vessel on the rocks there are men, perhaps, whose wives are waiting at home for them, and praying for their safety. Will you let me go?”

She spoke at length with manifest effort, though her manner was quite calm.

“Is there no one else?”

“There is no one else.”

For perhaps ten seconds there was perfect silence between them.

“Then Randolph, I will let you go.”

He bent his head and kissed her.

“I knew my wife would bid me do my duty,” he said proudly; “and believe me, my life, the danger is not great, and already the wind seems abating. It is but a small vessel. In all probability one journey will suffice. We shall not be out of sight, save for the darkness; we shall be under the lee of the cliff for the best part of the way. The boat is sound, the men know their work. We shall soon be back in safety, please God, and then you will be glad that you let me go.”

She lifted her head and looked at him.

“Take me with you, Randolph.”

“My darling, I cannot. It would not be right. We must not load the boat needlessly, even were there no other reason. Your presence there would take away half my courage, and perhaps it might necessitate leaving behind some poor fellow who otherwise might be saved.”

Monica said no more. She knew that he spoke the truth.

Her white, still face with its stricken look, went to his heart. He knew how strangely nervous she was on wild, windy nights. He knew it would be hard for her to let him go, but she had shown herself his brave, true Monica, as he knew she would do, and now the kindest thing he could do was to shorten the parting, and return to her as quickly as his errand would allow him.

He held her a moment in his strong arms.

“Good-bye, my Monica, my own sweet wife. Keep up a brave heart. Kiss me once and let me go. Whatever happens, we are in God’s hands. Remember that always.”

She lifted her pale face, there was something strangely pathetic in its haunting beauty.

“Let me see you smile before I go. Tell me again that you bid me do my duty.”

Suddenly the old serenity and peace came back to the upturned face. The smile he asked for shone in her sweet eyes.

“Good-bye, my Randolph – my husband – good-bye. Yes, I do bid you do your duty. May God bless and keep you always.”

For a moment they stood together, heart pressed to heart, their lips meeting in one long, lingering kiss; for one moment a strange shadow as of farewell seemed to hang upon them, and they clung together as if no power on earth could separate them.

The next moment he was gone, and Monica, left alone, stretched out her hands in the darkness.

“Oh, my love! my love!”

It was the one irrepressible cry from the depths of her heart; the next moment she repeated dreamily to herself the words that had lately passed her husband's lips:

“‘Whatever happens, we are in God's hands. Remember that always.’ Randolph, I will! I will!”

A ringing cheer told her that the boat was off. Nobody had seen the slim figure that had slunk after Randolph down to the beach. No one, in the darkness and general excitement, had seen that same slim figure leap lightly and noiselessly into the boat, and crouch down in the extreme end of the bow.

Conrad Fitzgerald had witnessed the parting between husband and wife; he had heard every word that had passed between them; and now, as he crouched with a tiger-like ferocity in the bottom of the boat, he muttered:

“This time he shall not escape me!”

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH. WIDOWED

The boat launched by the rescuing party vanished in the darkness. Monica stood where her husband had left her in the shelter of the cliff, her pale face turned seawards, her eyes fixed upon the glimmering crests of the great waves, as they came rolling calmly in, in their resistless might and majesty.

Beatrice had twice come back to her, to assure her with eager vehemence that the danger was very slight, that it was lessening every moment as the wind shifted and abated in force – dangerous, indeed, for the poor fellows in the doomed vessel that had struck upon the fatal reef, but not very perilous for the willing and eager and experienced crew that had started off to rescue them. Beatrice urged this many times upon Monica; but the latter stood quite still and spoke not a word; only gazed out to sea with the same strange yearning gaze that was like a mute farewell.

Was it only an hour ago that she had been with her husband at home, telling him of the dim foreboding of coming woe that had haunted her all that day? It seemed to her as if she had all her life been standing beside the dark margin of this tempest-tossed sea, waiting the return of him who made all the happiness of her life – and waiting in vain.

Beatrice looked at her once or twice, but did not speak again. Presently she moved down towards the water's edge. Surely the boat would be coming back now!

Suddenly there was a glad shout of triumph and joy from the fisher-folk, down by the brink of the sea.

"Here she is!" "Here she comes!" "Steady, there!" "Ease her a bit!" "This way now!" "Be ready, lads!" "Here she comes!" "Now, then, all together!" "After this wave – NOW!"

Cries, shouts, an eager confusion of tongues – the grating of a boat's keel upon the beach, and then a ringing hearty cheer.

"All safe?"

"All saved – five of them and a lad." "Just in time only." "She wouldn't have floated five minutes longer." "She was going down like lead."

What noise and confusion there was – people crowding round, flitting figures passing to and fro in the obscurity, every one talking, all speaking together – such a hubbub as Beatrice had never witnessed before. She stood in glad, impatient expectancy on the outskirts of the little crowd. Why did not Randolph come away from them to Monica? Why did she not hear his voice with the rest? Her heart gave a sudden throb as of terror.

"Where is Lord Trevlyn?"

Her voice, sharpened by the sudden fear that had seized her, was heard through all the eager clamour of those who stood round. A gleam of moonlight, struggling through the clouds, lighted up the group for a moment. The words went round like wildfire: "Where is Lord Trevlyn?" and men looked each other in the face, growing pale with conscious bewilderment. Where, indeed, was Lord Trevlyn? He was certainly not amongst them; yet he had undoubtedly steered the boat to shore. Where was he now? Men talked in loud, rapid tones. Women ran hither and thither, wringing their hands in distressful excitement, hunting for the missing man with futile eagerness. What had happened? Where could he be?

Suddenly a deep silence fell upon all; for in the brightening moonlight they saw that Monica stood amongst them – pale, calm and still, as a spirit from another world.

"Tell me," she said.

The story was told by one and another. Monica was used to the people and their ways. She gathered without difficulty the substance of the story. The boat had reached, without over-much

difficulty or danger, the sinking vessel. She was a small coaling ship, with a crew of seven men and a boy. Two of the former had already been washed away, and the vessel was sinking rapidly. The five survivors were easily rescued; but the lad was entangled in the rigging, and was too much exhausted to free himself and follow. Lord Trevlyn was the first to realise this, and he sprang out of the boat at some peril to himself to the lad's assistance. Nobody had been able to see in the darkness what had passed, but all agreed that the lad had been handed to those in the boat by a pair of strong arms, and that after an interval of about three minutes – for the boat had swung round, and had to be brought back again, which took a little time – a man had sprung back into the boat, had shouted “All right!” had seized the tiller, and sung out to the crew to “Give way, and put off!” which they had done immediately, glad enough to be clear of the masts of the sinking vessel, which were in dangerous proximity.

No one had been able in the darkness to see the face of the steersman; but all agreed that the voice was “a gentleman's”; and most mysterious of all was the fact that the boat had been steered to shore with a skill that showed a thorough knowledge of the coast, and that not a man of those who now stood round had ever laid a hand upon the tiller.

A thrill of superstitious awe ran round as this fact became known, together with the terrible certainty that Lord Trevlyn had *not* returned with them. Was it indeed a phantom hand that had guided the frail bark through the wild, tossing waves? The bravest man there felt a shiver of awe – the women sobbed, and trembled unrestrainedly.

The boat was put to sea once more without a moment's delay. The wind was dropping, the tide had turned, and the danger was well nigh over. But heads were shaken in mute despair, and old men shook their heads at the bare idea of the survival of any swimmer, who had been left to battle with the waves round the sunken reef on a stormy winter's night.

Monica stood like a statue; she heeded neither the wailing of the women, the murmurs of sympathy from the men, nor the clasp of Beatrice's hand round her cold fingers. She saw nothing, heard nothing, save the tossing, the moaning of the pitiless sea.

The boat came back at last – came back in dead, mournful silence. That silence said all that was needed.

Monica stepped towards the weary, dejected men, who had just left the boat for the second time.

“You have done all that you could,” she said gently. “I thank you from my heart.”

And then she turned quietly away to go home – alone.

No one dared follow her too closely; even Beatrice kept some distance behind, sick with misery and sympathetic despair. Monica's step did not falter. She went back to the spot where her husband had left her, and stood still, looking out over the sea.

“Good-bye, my love – my own dear love,” she said, very softly and calmly. “It has come at last, as I knew it would, when he held me in his arms for the last time on earth. Did he know it, too? I think he did just at the last. I saw it in his brave, tender face as he gave me that last kiss. But he died doing his duty. I will bear it for his sake.” Yet with an irrepressible gesture of anguish she held out her arms in the darkness, crying out, not loud, indeed, but from the very depth of her broken heart, “Ah, Randolph! – husband – my love! my love!”

That was all; that one passionate cry of sorrow. After it calmness returned to her once more. She stepped towards Beatrice, who stood a little way off, and held out her hand.

“Come, dear,” she said. “We must go home.”

Beatrice was more agitated than Monica. She was convulsed with tearless sobs. She could only just command herself to stumble uncertainly up the steep cliff path that Monica trod with ease and freedom.

The moon was shining clearly now. She could see the gaze that her companion turned for one moment over the tossing waste of waters. She caught the softly-whispered words, “Good-bye, dear love! good bye!” and a sudden burst of tears came to her relief; but Monica's eyes were dry.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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