

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Vixen. Volume III



Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

Vixen. Volume III

«Public Domain»

Брэддон М.

Vixen. Volume III / М. Брэддон — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

M. E. Braddon , Elizabeth Mary Vixen, Volume III

CHAPTER I. Going into Exile

After a long sleepless night of tossing to and fro, Vixen rose with the first stir of life in the old house, and made herself ready to face the bleak hard world. Her meditations of the night had brought no new light to her mind. It was very clear to her that she must go away – as far as possible – from her old home. Her banishment was necessary for everybody's sake. For the sake of Rorie, who must behave like a man of honour, and keep his engagement with Lady Mabel, and shut his old playfellow out of his heart. For the sake of Mrs. Winstanley, who could never be happy while there was discord in her home; and last of all, for Violet herself, who felt that joy and peace had fled from the Abbey House for ever, and that it would be better to be anywhere, in the coldest strangest region of this wide earth, verily friendless and alone among strange faces, than here among friends who were but friends in name, and among scenes that were haunted with the ghosts of dead joys.

She went round the gardens and shrubberies in the early morning, looking sadly at everything, as if she were bidding the trees and flowers a long farewell. The rhododendron thickets were shining with dew, the grassy tracks in that wilderness of verdure were wet and cold under Vixen's feet. She wandered in and out among the groups of wild growing shrubs, rising one above another to the height of forest trees, and then she went out by the old five-barred gate which Titmouse used to jump so merrily, and rambled in the plantation till the sun was high, and the pines began to breathe forth their incense as the day-god warmed them into life.

It was half-past eight. Nine was the hour for breakfast, a meal at which, during the Squire's time, the fragile Pamela had rarely appeared, but which, under the present *régime*, she generally graced with her presence. Captain Winstanley was an early riser, and was not sparing in his contempt for sluggish habits.

Vixen had made up her mind never again to sit at meat with her stepfather; so she went straight to her own den, and told Phoebe to bring her a cup of tea.

"I don't want anything else," she said wearily when the girl suggested a more substantial breakfast; "I should like to see mamma presently. Do you know if she has gone down?"

"No, miss. Mrs. Winstanley is not very well this morning. Pauline has taken her up a cup of tea."

Vixen sat idly by the open window, sipping her tea, and caressing Argus's big head with a listless hand, waiting for the next stroke of fate. She was sorry for her mother, but had no wish to see her. What could they say to each other – they, whose thoughts and feelings were so wide apart? Presently Phoebe came in with a little three-cornered note, written in pencil.

"Pauline asked me to give you this from your ma, miss."

The note was brief, written in short gasps, with dashes between them.

"I feel too crushed and ill to see you – I have told Conrad what you wish – he is all goodness – he will tell you what we have decided – try to be worthier of his kindness – poor misguided child – he will see you in his study, directly after breakfast – pray control your unhappy temper."

"His study, indeed!" ejaculated Vixen, tearing up the little note and scattering its perfumed fragments on the breeze; "my father's room, which he has usurped. I think I hate him just a little worse in that room than anywhere else – though that would seem hardly possible, when I hate him so cordially everywhere."

She went to the looking-glass, and surveyed herself proudly as she smoothed her shining hair, resolved that he should see no indication of trouble or contrition in her face. She was very pale, but her tears of last night had left no traces. There was a steadiness in her look that befitted an encounter with an enemy. A message came from the Captain, while she was standing before her glass, tying a crimson ribbon under the collar of her white morning-dress.

Would she please to go to Captain Winstanley in the study? She went without an instant's delay, walked quietly into the room, and stood before him silently as he sat at his desk writing.

"Good-morning, Miss Tempest," he said, looking up at her with his blandest air; "sit down, if you please. I want to have a chat with you."

Vixen seated herself in her father's large crimson morocco chair. She was looking round the room absently, dreamily, quite disregarding the Captain. The dear old room was full of sadly sweet associations. For the moment she forgot the existence of her foe. His cold level tones recalled her thoughts from the lamented past to the bitter present.

"Your mother informs me that you wish to leave the Abbey House," he began; "and she has empowered me to arrange a suitable home for you elsewhere. I entirely concur in your opinion that your absence from Hampshire for the next year or so will be advantageous to yourself and others. You and Mr. Vawdrey have contrived to get yourselves unpleasantly talked about in the neighbourhood. Any further scandal may possibly be prevented by your departure."

"It is not on that account I wish to leave home," said Vixen proudly. "I am not afraid of scandal. If the people hereabouts are so wicked that they cannot see me riding by the side of an old friend for two or three days running without thinking evil of him and me, I am sorry for them, but I certainly should not regulate my life to please them. The reason I wish to leave the Abbey House is that I am miserable here, and have been ever since you entered it as its master. We may as well deal frankly with each other in this matter. You confessed last night that you hated me. I acknowledge to-day that I have hated you ever since I first saw you. It was an instinct."

"We need not discuss that," answered the Captain calmly. He had let passion master him last night, but he had himself well in hand to-day. She might be as provoking as she pleased, but she should not provoke him to betray himself as he had done last night. He detested himself for that weak outbreak of passion.

"Have you arranged with my mother for my leaving home?" inquired Vixen.

"Yes, it is all settled."

"Then I'll write at once to Miss McCroke. I know she will leave the people she is with to travel with me."

"Miss McCroke has nothing to do with the question. You roaming about the world with a superannuated governess would be too preposterous. I am going to take you to Jersey by this evening's boat. I have an aunt living there who has a fine old manor house, and who will be happy to take charge of you. She is a maiden lady, a woman of superior cultivation, who devotes herself wholly to intellectual pursuits. Her refining influence will be valuable to you. The island is lovely, the climate delicious. You could not be better off than you will be at Les Tourelles."

"I am not going to Jersey, and I am not going to your intellectual aunt," said Vixen resolutely.

"I beg your pardon, you are going, and immediately. Your mother and I have settled the matter between us. You have expressed a wish to leave home, and you will be pleased to go where we think proper. You had better tell Phoebe to pack your trunks. We shall leave here at ten o'clock in the evening. The boat starts from Southampton at midnight."

Vixen felt herself conquered. She had stated her wish, and it was granted; not in the mode and manner she had desired; but perhaps she ought to be grateful for release from a home that had become loathsome to her, and not take objection to details in the scheme of her exile. To go away, quite away, and immediately, was the grand point. To fly before she saw Rorie again.

"Heaven knows how weak I might be if he were to talk to me again as he talked last night!" she said to herself. "I might not be able to bear it a second time. Oh Rorie, if you knew what it cost me to counsel you wisely, to bid you do your duty; when the vision of a happy life with you was smiling at me all the time, when the warm grasp of your dear hand made my heart thrill with joy, what a heroine you would think me! And yet nobody will ever give me credit for heroism; and I shall be remembered only as a self-willed young woman, who was troublesome to her relations, and had to be sent away from home."

She was thinking this while she sat in her father's chair, deliberating upon the Captain's last speech. She decided presently to yield, and obey her mother and stepfather. After all, what did it matter where she went? That scheme of being happy in Sweden with Miss McCroke was but an idle fancy. In the depths of her inner consciousness Violet Tempest knew that she could be happy nowhere away from Rorie and the Forest. What did it matter, then, whether she went to Jersey or Kamtchatka, the sandy desert of Gobi or the Mountains of the Moon? In either case exile meant moral death, the complete renunciation of all that had been sweet and precious in her uneventful young life – the shadowy beech-groves; the wandering streams; the heathery upland plains; the deep ferny hollows, where the footsteps of humanity were almost unknown; the cluster of tall trees on the hill tops, where the herons came sailing home from their flight across Southampton Water; her childhood's companion; her horse; her old servants. Banishment meant a long farewell to all these.

"I suppose I may take my dog with me?" she asked, after a long pause, during which she had wavered between submission and revolt, "and my maid?"

"I see no objection to your taking your dog; though I doubt whether my aunt will care to have a dog of that size prowling about her house. He can have a kennel somewhere, I daresay. You must learn to do without a maid. Feminine helplessness is going out of fashion; and one would expect an Amazon like you to be independent of lady's-maids and milliners."

"Why don't you state the case in plain English?" cried Vixen scornfully. "If I took Phoebe with me she would cost money. There would be her wages and maintenance to be provided. If I leave her behind, you can dismiss her. You have a fancy for dismissing old servants."

"Had you not better see to the packing of your trunks?" asked Captain Winstanley, ignoring this shaft.

"What is to become of my horse?"

"I think you must resign yourself to leave him to fate and me," replied the Captain coolly; "my aunt may submit to the infliction of your dog, but that she should tolerate a young lady's roaming about the island on a thoroughbred horse would be rather too much to expect from her old-fashioned notions of propriety."

"Besides, even Arion would cost something to keep," retorted Vixen, "and strict economy is the rule of your life. If you sell him – and, of course, you will do so – please let Lord Mallow have the refusal of him. I think he would buy him and treat him kindly, for my sake."

"Wouldn't you rather Mr. Vawdrey had him?"

"Yes, if I were free to give him away; but I suppose you would deny my right of property even in the horse my father gave me."

"Well, as the horse was not specified in your father's will, and as all his horses and carriages were left to your mother, I think there cannot be any doubt that Arion is my wife's property."

"Why not say your property? Why give unnatural prominence to a cipher? Do you think I hold my poor mother to blame for any wrong that is done to me, or to others, in this house? No, Captain Winstanley, I have no resentment against my mother. She is a blameless nullity, dressed in the latest fashion."

"Go and pack your boxes!" cried the Captain angrily. "Do you want to raise the devil that was raised last night? Do you want another conflagration? It might be a worse one this time. I have had a night of fever and unrest."

"Am I to blame for that?"

"Yes – you beautiful fury. It was your image kept me awake. I shall sleep sounder when you are out of this house."

"I shall be ready to start at ten o'clock," said Vixen, in a business-like tone which curiously contrasted this sudden gust of passion on the part of her foe, and humiliated him to the dust. He loathed himself for having let her see her power to hurt him.

She left him, and went straight upstairs to her room, and gave Phoebe directions about the packing of her portmanteaux, with no more outward semblance of emotion than she might have shown had she been starting on a round of pleasant visits under the happiest circumstances. The faithful Phoebe began to cry when she heard that Miss Tempest was going away for a long time, and that she was not to go with her; and poor Vixen had to console her maid instead of brooding upon her own griefs.

"Never mind, Phoebe," she said; "it is as hard for me to lose you as it is for you to lose me. I shall never forget what a devoted little thing you have been, and all the muddy habits you have brushed without a murmur. A few years hence I shall be my own mistress, and have plenty of money, and then, wherever I may be, you shall come to me. If you are married you shall be my housekeeper, and your husband shall be my butler, and your children shall run wild about the place, and be made as much of as the litter of young foxes Bates reared in a corner of the stable-yard, when Mr. Vawdrey was at Eton."

"Oh, miss, I don't want no husband nor no children, I only want you for my missus. And when you come of age, will you live here, miss?"

"No, Phoebe. The Abbey House will belong to mamma all her life. Poor mamma! may it be long before the dear old house comes to me. But when I am of age, and my own mistress I shall find a place somewhere in the Forest, you may be sure of that, Phoebe."

Phoebe dried her honest tears, and made haste with the packing, believing that Miss Tempest was leaving home for her own pleasure, and that she, Phoebe, was the only victim of adverse fate.

The day wore on quickly, though it was laden with sorrow. Vixen had a great deal to do in her den; papers to look over, old letters, pen-and-ink sketches, and scribbings of all kinds to destroy, books and photographs to pack. There were certain things she could not leave behind her. Then there was a melancholy hour to spend in the stable, feeding, caressing, and weeping over Arion, who snorted his tenderest snorts, and licked her hands with abject devotion – almost as if he knew they were going to part, Vixen thought.

Last of all came the parting with her mother. Vixen had postponed this with an aching dread of a scene, in which she might perchance lose her temper, and be betrayed into bitter utterances that she would afterwards repent with useless tears. She had spoken the truth to her stepfather when she told him that she held her mother blameless; yet the fact that she had but the smallest share in that mother's heart was cruelly patent to her.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when Pauline came to Violet's room with a message from Mrs. Winstanley. She had been very ill all the morning, Pauline informed Miss Tempest, suffering severely from nervous headache, and obliged to lie in a darkened room. Even now she was barely equal to seeing anyone.

"Then she had better not see me," said Vixen icily; "I can write her a little note to say good-bye. Perhaps it would be just as well. Tell mamma that I will write, Pauline."

Pauline departed with this message, and returned in five minutes with a distressed visage.

"Oh, miss!" she exclaimed, "your message quite upset your poor mamma. She said, 'How could she?' and began to get almost hysterical. And those hysterical fits end in such fearful headaches."

"I will come at once," said Vixen.

Mrs. Winstanley was lying on a sofa near an open window, the Spanish blinds lowered to exclude the afternoon sunshine, the perfume of the gardens floating in upon the soft summer air. A tiny teapot

and cup and saucer on a Japanese tray showed that the invalid had been luxuriating in her favourite stimulant. There were vases of flowers about the room, and an all-pervading perfume and coolness – a charm half sensuous, half aesthetic.

"Violet, how could you send me such a message?" remonstrated the invalid fretfully.

"Dear mamma, I did not want to trouble you. I know how you shrink from all painful things; and you and I could hardly part without pain, as we are parting to-day. Would it not have been better to avoid any farewell?"

"If you had any natural affection, you would never have suggested such a thing."

"Then perhaps I have never had any natural affection," answered Vixen, with subdued bitterness; "or only so small a stock that it ran out early in my life, and left me cold and hard and unloving. I am sorry we are parting like this, mamma. I am still more sorry that you could not spare me a little of the regard which you have bestowed so lavishly upon a stranger."

"Violet, how can you?" sobbed her mother. "To accuse me of withholding my affection from you, when I have taken such pains with you from your very cradle! I am sure your frocks, from the day you were short-coated, were my constant care; and when you grew a big, lanky girl, who would have looked odious in commonplace clothes, it was my delight to invent picturesque and becoming costumes for you. I have spent hours poring over books of prints, studying Vandyke and Sir Peter Lely, and I have let you wear some of my most valuable lace; and as for indulgence of your whims! Pray when have I ever thwarted you in anything?"

"Forgive me, mamma!" cried Vixen penitently. She divined dimly – even in the midst of that flood of bitter feeling in which her young soul was overwhelmed – that Mrs. Winstanley had been a good mother, according to her lights. The tree had borne such fruit as was natural to its kind. "Pray forgive me! You have been good and kind and indulgent, and we should have gone on happily together to the end of the chapter, if fate had been kinder."

"It's no use your talking of fate in that way, Violet," retorted her mother captiously. "I know you mean Conrad."

"Perhaps I do, mamma; but don't let us talk of him any more. We should never agree about him. You and he can be quite happy when I am gone. Poor, dear, trusting, innocent-minded mamma!" cried Vixen, kneeling by her mother's chair, and putting her arms round her ever so tenderly. "May your path of life be smooth and strewn with flowers when I am gone. If Captain Winstanley does not always treat you kindly, he will be a greater scoundrel than I think him. But he has always been kind to you, has he not, mamma? You are not hiding any sorrow of yours from me?" asked Vixen, fixing her great brown eyes on her mother's face with earnest inquiry. She had assumed the maternal part. She seemed an anxious mother questioning her daughter.

"Kind to me," echoed Mrs. Winstanley. "He has been all goodness. We have never had a difference of opinion since we were married."

"No, mamma, because you always defer to his opinion."

"Is not that my duty, when I know how clever and far-seeing he is?"

"Frankly, dear mother, are you as happy with this new husband of yours – so wise and far-seeing, and determined to have his own way in everything – as you were with my dear, indulgent, easy-tempered father?"

Pamela Winstanley burst into a passion of tears.

"How can you be so cruel?" she exclaimed. "Who can give back the past, or the freshness and brightness of one's youth? Of course I was happier with your dear father than I can ever be again. It is not in nature that it should be otherwise. How could you be so heartless as to ask me such a question?"

She dried her tears slowly, and was not easily comforted. It seemed as if that speech of Violet's had touched a spring that opened a fountain of grief.

"This means that mamma is not happy with her second husband, in spite of her praises of him," thought Vixen.

She remained kneeling by her mother's side comforting her as best she could, until Mrs. Winstanley had recovered from the wound her daughter's heedless words had inflicted, and then Violet began to say good-bye.

"You will write to me sometimes, won't you, mamma, and tell me how the dear old place is going on, and about the old people who die – dear familiar white heads that I shall never see again – and the young people who get married, and the babies that are born? You will write often, won't you, mamma?"

"Yes, dear, as often as my strength will allow."

"You might even get Pauline to write to me sometimes, to tell me how you are and what you are doing; that would be better than nothing."

"Pauline shall write when I am not equal to holding a pen," sighed Mrs. Winstanley.

"And, dear mamma, if you can prevent it, don't let any more of the old servants be sent away. If they drop off one by one home will seem like a strange place at last. Remember how they loved my dear father, how attached and faithful they have been to us. They are like our own flesh and blood."

"I should never willingly part with servants who know my ways, Violet. But as to Bates's dismissal – there are some things I had rather not discuss with you – I am sure that Conrad acted for the best, and from the highest motives."

"Do you know anything about this place to which I am going, mamma?" asked Vixen, letting her mother's last speech pass without comment; "or the lady who is to be my duenna?"

"Your future has been fully discussed between Conrad and me, Violet. He tells me that the old Jersey manor house – Les Tourelles it is called – is a delightful place, one of the oldest seats in Jersey, and Miss Skipwith, to whom it belongs, is a well-informed conscientious old lady, very religious, I believe, so you will have to guard against your sad habit of speaking lightly about sacred things, my dear Violet."

"Do you intend me to live there for ever, mamma?"

"For ever! What a foolish question. In six years you will be of age, and your own mistress."

"Six years – six years in a Jersey manor house – with a pious old lady. Don't you think that would seem very much like for ever, mamma?" asked Vixen gravely.

"My dear Violet, neither Conrad nor I want to banish you from your natural home. We only want you to learn wisdom. When Mr. Vawdrey is married, and when you have learnt to think more kindly of my dear husband – "

"That last change will never happen to me, mamma. I should have to die and be born again first, and, even then, I think my dislike of Captain Winstanley is so strong that purgatorial fires would hardly burn it out. No, mamma, we had better say good-bye without any forecast of the future. Let us forget all that is sad in our parting, and think we are only going to part for a little while."

Many a time in after days did Violet Tempest remember those last serious words of hers. The rest of her conversation with her mother was about trifles, the trunks and bonnet-boxes she was to carry with her – the dresses she was to wear in her exile.

"Of course in a retired old house in Jersey, with an elderly maiden lady, you will not see much society," said Mrs. Winstanley; "but Miss Skipwith must know people – no doubt the best people in the island – and I should not like you to be shabby. Are you really positive that you have dresses enough to carry you over next winter?"

This last question was asked with deepest solemnity.

"More than enough, mamma."

"And do you think your last winter's jacket will do?"

"Excellently."

"I'm very glad of that," said her mother, with a sigh of relief, "for I have an awful bill of Theodore's hanging over my head. I have been paying her sums on account ever since your poor

papa's death; and you know that is never quite satisfactory. All that one has paid hardly seems to make any difference in the amount due at the end."

"Don't worry yourself about your bill, mamma. Let it stand over till I come of age, and then I can help you to pay it."

"You are very generous, dear; but Theodore would not wait so long, even for me. Be sure you take plenty of wraps for the steamer. Summer nights are often chilly."

Vixen thought of last night, and the long straight ride through the pine wood, the soft scented air, the young moon shining down at her, and Rorie by her side. Ah, when should she ever know such a summer night as that again?

"Sit down in this low chair by me, and have a cup of tea, dear," said Mrs. Winstanley, growing more affectionate as the hour of parting drew nearer. "Let us have kettledrum together for the last time, till you come back to us."

"For the last time, mamma!" echoed Violet sadly.

She could not imagine any possible phase of circumstances that would favour her return. Could she come back to see Roderick Vawdrey happy with his wife? Assuredly not. Could she school herself to endure life under the roof that sheltered Conrad Winstanley? A thousand times no. Coming home was something to be dreamt about when she lay asleep in a distant land; but it was a dream that never could be realised. She must make herself a new life, somehow, among new people. The old life died to-day.

She sat and sipped her tea, and listened while her mother talked cheerfully of the future, and even pretended to agree; but her heart was heavy as lead.

An hour was dawdled away thus, and then, when Mrs. Winstanley began to think about dressing for dinner, Vixen went off to finish her packing. She excused herself from going down to dinner on the plea of having so much to do.

"You could send me up something, please, mamma," she said. "I am sure you and Captain Winstanley will dine more pleasantly without me. I shall see you for a minute in the hall, before I start."

"You must do as you please, dear," replied her mother. "I hardly feel equal to going down to dinner myself; but it would not be fair to let Conrad eat a second meal in solitude, especially when we are to be parted for two or three days and he is going across the sea. I shall not have a minute's rest to-night, thinking of you both."

"Sleep happily, dear mother, and leave us to Providence. The voyage cannot be perilous in such weather as this," said Vixen, with assumed cheerfulness.

Two hours later the carriage was at the door, and Violet Tempest was ready to start. Her trunks were on the roof of the brougham, her dressing-bag, and travelling-desk, and wraps were stowed away inside; Argus was by her side, his collar provided with a leather strap, by which she could hold him when necessary. Captain Winstanley was smoking a cigar on the porch.

Mrs. Winstanley came weeping out of the drawing-room, and hugged her daughter silently. Violet returned the embrace, but said not a word till just at the last.

"Dear mother," she whispered earnestly, "never be unhappy about me. Let me bear the blame of all that has gone amiss between us."

"You had better be quick, Miss Tempest, if you want to be in time for the boat," said the Captain from the porch.

"I am quite ready," answered Vixen calmly.

Phoebe was at the carriage-door, tearful, and in everybody's way, but pretending to help. Argus was sent up to the box, where he sat beside the coachman with much gravity of demeanour, having first assured himself that his mistress was inside the carriage. Mrs. Winstanley stood in the porch, kissing her hand; and so the strong big horses bore the carriage away, through the dark shrubberies,

between banks of shadowy foliage, out into the forest-road, which was full of ghosts at this late hour, and would have struck terror to the hearts of any horses unaccustomed to its sylvan mysteries.

They drove through Lyndhurst, where the twinkling little lights in the shop-windows were being extinguished by envious shutters, and where the shop-keepers paused in their work of extinction to stare amazedly at the passing carriage; not that a carriage was a strange apparition in Lyndhurst, but because the inhabitants had so little to do except stare.

Anon they came to Bolton's Bench, beneath a cluster of pine-trees on a hilly bit of common, and then the long straight road to Southampton lay before them in the faint moonshine, with boggy levels, black furze-bushes, and a background of wood on either side. Violet sat looking steadily out of the window, watching every bit of the road. How could she tell when she would see it again – or if ever, save in sad regretful dreams?

They mounted the hill, from whose crest Vixen took one last backwards look at the wide wild land that lay behind them – a look of ineffable love and longing. And then she threw herself back in the carriage, and gave herself up to gloomy thought. There was nothing more that she cared to see. They had entered the tame dull world of civilisation. They drove through the village of Eling, where lights burned dimly here and there in upper windows; they crossed the slow meandering river at Redbridge. Already the low line of lights in Southampton city began to shine faintly in the distance. Violet shut her eyes and let the landscape go by. Suburban villas, suburban gardens on a straight road beside a broad river with very little water in it. There was nothing here to regret.

It was past eleven when they drove under the old bar, and through the high street of Southampton. The town seemed strange to Vixen at this unusual hour. The church clocks were striking the quarter. Down by the docks everything had a gray and misty look, sky and water indistinguishable. There lay the Jersey boat, snorting and puffing, amidst the dim grayness. Captain Winstanley conducted his charge to the ladies' cabin, with no more words than were positively necessary. They had not spoken once during the drive from the Abbey House to Southampton.

"I think you had better stay down here till the vessel has started, at any rate," said the Captain, "there will be so much bustle and confusion on deck. I'll take care of your dog."

"Thanks," answered Vixen meekly. "Yes, I'll stay here – you need not trouble yourself about me."

"Shall I send you something? A cup of tea, the wing of a chicken, a little wine and water?"

"No, thanks, I don't care about anything."

The Captain withdrew after this to look after the luggage, and to secure his own berth. The stewardess received Violet as if she had known her all her life, showed her the couch allotted to her, and to secure which the Captain had telegraphed that morning from Lyndhurst.

"It was lucky your good gentleman took the precaution to telegraph, mum," said the cordial stewardess; "the boats are always crowded at this time of the year, and the *Fanny* is such a favourite."

The cabin was wide and lofty and airy, quite an exceptional thing in ladies' cabins; but presently there came a troop of stout matrons with their olive-branches, all cross and sleepy, and dazed at finding themselves in a strange place at an unearthly hour. There was the usual sprinkling of babies, and most of the babies cried. One baby was afflicted with unmistakable whooping cough, and was a source of terror to the mothers of all the other babies. There was a general opening of hand-bags and distribution of buns, biscuits, and sweeties for the comfort and solace of this small fry. Milk was imbibed noisily out of mysterious bottles, some of them provided with gutta-percha tubes, which made the process of refreshment look like laying on gas. Vixen turned her back upon the turmoil, and listened to the sad sea waves plashing lazily against the side of the boat.

She wondered what Rorie was doing at this midnight hour? Did he know yet that she was gone – vanished out of his life for ever? No; he could hardly have heard of her departure yet awhile, swiftly as all tidings travelled in that rustic world of the Forest. Had he made up his mind to keep faith with Lady Mabel? Had he forgiven Vixen for refusing to abet him in treachery against his affianced?

"Poor Rorie," sighed the girl; "I think we might have been happy together."

And then she remembered the days of old, when Mr. Vawdrey was free, and when it had never dawned upon his slow intelligence that his old playfellow, Violet Tempest, was the one woman in all this wide world who had the power to make his life happy.

"I think he thought lightly of me because of all our foolishness when he was a boy," mused Vixen. "I seemed to him less than other women – because of those old sweet memories – instead of more."

It was a dreary voyage for Violet Tempest – a kind of maritime purgatory. The monotonous thud of the engine, the tramping of feet overhead, the creaking and groaning of the vessel, the squalling babies, the fussy mothers, the dreadful people who could not travel from Southampton to Jersey on a calm summer night without exhibiting all the horrors of seasickness. Vixen thought of the sufferings of poor black human creatures in the middle passage, of the ghastly terrors of a mutiny, of a ship on fire, of the Ancient Mariner on his slimy sea, when

The very deep did rot; O Christ,
That ever this should be;
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea!

She wondered in her weary soul whether these horrors, which literature had made familiar to her, were much worse than the smart white and gold cabin of the good ship *Fanny*, filled to overflowing with the contents of half-a-dozen nurseries.

Towards daybreak there came a lull. The crossest of the babies had exhausted its capacity for making its fellow-creatures miserable. The sea-sick mothers and nurses had left off groaning, and starting convulsively from their pillows, with wild shrieks for the stewardess, and had sunk into troubled slumbers. Vixen turned her back upon the dreadful scene – dimly lighted by flickering oil-lamps, like those that burn before saintly shrines in an old French cathedral – and shut her eyes and tried to lose herself in the tangled wilderness of sleep. But to-night that blessed refuge of the unhappy was closed against her. The calm angel of sleep would have nothing to do with a soul so troubled. She could only lie staring at the port-hole, which stared back at her like a giant's dark angry eye, and waiting for morning.

Morning came at last, with the skirmishing toilets of the children, fearful struggles for brushes and combs, towel fights, perpetual clamour for missing pieces of soap, a great deal of talk about strings and buttons, and a chorus of crying babies. Then stole through the stuffy atmosphere savoury odours of breakfast, the fumes of coffee, fried bacon, grilled fish. Sloppy looking cups of tea were administered to the sufferers of last night. The yellow sunshine filled the cabin. Vixen made a hasty toilet, and hurried up to the deck. Here all was glorious. A vast world of sunlit water. No sign yet of rock-bound island above the white-crested waves. The steamer might have been in the midst of the Atlantic. Captain Winstanley was on the bridge, smoking his morning cigar. He gave Violet a cool nod, which she returned as coolly. She found a quiet corner where she could sit and watch the waves slowly rising and falling, the white foam-crests slowly gathering, the light spray dashing against the side of the boat, the cataract of white roaring water leaping from the swift paddle-wheel and melting into a long track of foam. By-and-by they came to Guernsey, which looked grim and military, and not particularly inviting, even in the morning sunlight. That picturesque island hides her beauties from those who only behold her from the sea. Here there was an exodus of passengers, and of luggage, and an invasion of natives with baskets of fruit. Vixen bought some grapes and peaches of a female native in a cap, whose patois was the funniest perversion of French and English imaginable. And then a bell rang clamorously, and there was a general stampede, and the gangway was pulled up and the vessel was steaming gaily towards Jersey; while Vixen sat eating grapes and looking dreamily

skyward, and wondering whether her mother was sleeping peacefully under the dear old Abbey House roof, undisturbed by any pang of remorse for having parted with an only child so lightly.

An hour or so and Jersey was in sight, all rocky peaks and promontories. Anon the steamer swept round a sudden curve, and lo, Vixen beheld a bristling range of fortifications, a rather untidy harbour, and the usual accompaniments of a landing-place, the midsummer sun shining vividly upon the all pervading whiteness.

"Is this the bay that some people have compared to Naples?" Violet asked her conductor, with a contemptuous curl of her mobile lip, as she and Captain Winstanley took their seats in a roomy old fly, upon which the luggage was being piled in the usual mountainous and insecure-looking style.

"You have not seen it yet from the Neapolitan point of view," said the Captain. "This quay is not the prettiest bit of Jersey."

"I am glad of that, very glad," answered Vixen acidly; "for if it were, the Jersey notion of the beautiful would be my idea of ugliness. Oh what an utterly too horrid street!" she cried, as the fly drove through the squalid approach to the town, past dirty gutter-bred children, and women with babies, who looked to the last degree Irish, and the dead high wall of the fortifications. "Does your aunt live hereabouts, *par exemple*, Captain Winstanley?"

"My aunt lives six good miles from here, Miss Tempest, in one of the loveliest spots in the island, amidst scenery that is almost as fine as the Pyrenees."

"I have heard people say that of anything respectable in the shape of a hill," answered Vixen, with a dubious air.

She was in a humour to take objection to everything, and had a flippant air curiously at variance with the dull aching of her heart. She was determined to take the situation lightly. Not for worlds would she have let Captain Winstanley see her wounds, or guess how deep they were. She set her face steadily towards the hills in which her place of exile was hidden, and bore herself bravely. Conrad Winstanley gave her many a furtive glance as he sat opposite her in the fly, while they drove slowly up the steep green country lanes, leaving the white town in the valley below them.

"The place is not so bad, after all," said Vixen, looking back at the conglomeration of white walls and slate roofs, of docks and shipping, and barracks, on the edge of a world of blue water, "not nearly so odious as it looked when we landed. But it is a little disappointing at best, like all places that people praise ridiculously. I had pictured Jersey as a tropical island, with cactuses and Cape jasmine growing in the hedges, orchards of peaches and apricots, and melons running wild."

"To my mind the island is a pocket edition of Devonshire with a dash of Brittany," answered the Captain. "There's a fig-tree for you!" he cried, pointing to a great spreading mass of five-fingered leaves lolloping over a pink plastered garden-wall – an old untidy tree that had swallowed up the whole extent of a cottager's garden. "You don't see anything like that in the Forest."

"No," answered Vixen, tightening her lips; "we have only oaks and beeches that have been growing since the Heptarchy."

And now they entered a long lane, where the interlaced tree-tops made an arcade of foliage – a lane whose beauty even Vixen could not gainsay. Ah, there were the Hampshire ferns on the steep green banks! She gave a little choking sob at sight of them, as if they had been living things. Hart's-tongue, and lady-fern, and the whole family of osmundas. Yes; they were all there. It was like home – with a difference.

Here and there they passed a modern villa, in its park-like grounds, and the Captain, who evidently wished to be pleasant, tried to expound to Violet the conditions of Jersey leases, and the difficulties which attend the purchase of land or tenements in that feudal settlement. But Vixen did not even endeavour to understand him. She listened with an air of polite vacancy which was not encouraging.

They passed various humbler homesteads, painted a lively pink, or a refreshing lavender, with gardens where the fuchsias were trees covered with crimson bloom, and where gigantic hydrangeas

bloomed in palest pink and brightest azure in wildest abundance. Here Vixen beheld for the first time those preposterous cabbages from whose hyper-natural growth the islanders seem to derive a loftier pride than from any other productions of the island, not excepting its grapes and its lobsters.

"I don't suppose you ever saw cabbages growing six feet high before," said the Captain.

"No," answered Vixen; "they are too preposterous to be met with in a civilised country. Poor Charles the Second! I don't wonder that he was wild and riotous when he came to be king."

"Why not?"

"Because he had spent several months of exile among his loyal subjects in Jersey. A man who had been buried alive in such a fragmentary bit of the world must have required some compensation in after life."

They had mounted a long hill which seemed the pinnacle of the island, and from whose fertile summit the view was full of beauty – a green undulating garden-world, ringed with yellow sands and bright blue sea; and now they began to descend gently by a winding lane where again the topmost elm-branches were interwoven, and where the glowing June day was softened to a tender twilight. A curve in the lane brought them suddenly to an old gateway, with a crumbling stone bench in a nook beside it – a bench where the wayfarer used to sit and wait for alms, when the site of Les Tourelles was occupied by a monastery.

The old manor house rose up behind the dilapidated wall – a goodly old house as to size and form – overlooking a noble sweep of hillside and valley; a house with a gallery on the roof for purposes of observation, but with as dreary and abandoned a look about its blank curtainless windows as if mansion and estate had been in Chancery for the last half-century.

"A fine old place, is it not?" asked the Captain, while a cracked bell was jingling in remote distance, amidst the drowsy summer stillness, without eliciting so much as the bark of a house-dog.

"It looks very big," Violet answered dubiously, "and very empty."

"My aunt has no relatives residing with her."

"If she had started in life with a large family of brothers and sisters, I should think they would all be dead by this time," said the girl, with a stifled yawn that was half a sigh.

"How do you mean?"

"They would have died of the stillness and solitude and all-pervading desolation of Les Tourelles."

"Strange houses are apt to look desolate."

"Yes. Particularly when the windows have neither blinds nor curtains, and the walls have not been painted for a century."

After this conversation flagged. The jingling bell was once more set going in the unknown distance; Vixen sat looking sleepily at the arched roof of foliage chequered with blue sky. Argus lolled against the carriage-door with his tongue out.

They waited five minutes or so, languidly expectant. Vixen began to wonder whether the gates would ever open – whether there were really any living human creatures in that blank dead-looking house – whether they would not have to give up all idea of entering, and drive back to the harbour, and return to Hampshire by the way they had come.

While she sat idly wondering thus, with the sleepy buzz of summer insects and melodious twittering of birds soothing her senses like a lullaby, the old gate groaned upon its rusty hinges, and a middle-aged woman in a black gown and a white cap appeared – a female who recognised Captain Winstanley with a curtsy, and came out to receive the smaller packages from the flyman.

"Antony will take the portmanteaux," she said; "the boat must have come in earlier than usual. We did not expect you so soon."

"This is one of Miss Skipwith's servants," thought Vixen; "rather a vinegary personage. I hope the other maids are nicer."

The person spoken of as Antony now appeared, and began to hale about Violet's portmanteaux. He was a middle-aged man, with a bald head and a melancholy aspect. His raiment was shabby; his costume something between that of a lawyer's clerk and an agricultural labourer. Argus saluted this individual with a suppressed growl.

"Sh!" cried the female vindictively, flapping her apron at the dog, "whose dog is this, sir? He doesn't belong to you, surely?"

"He belongs to Miss Tempest. You must find a corner for him somewhere in the outbuildings, Hannah," said the Captain. "The dog is harmless enough, and friendly enough when he is used to people."

"That won't be much good if he bites us before he gets used to us, and we die of hydrophobia in the meantime," retorted Hannah; "I believe he has taken a dislike to Antony already."

"Argus won't bite anyone," said Vixen, laying her hand upon the dog's collar, "I'll answer for his good conduct. Please try and find him a nice snug nest somewhere – if I mustn't have him in the house."

"In the house!" cried Hannah. "Miss Skipwith would faint at the mention of such a thing. I don't know how she'll ever put up with a huge beast like that anywhere about the place. He must be kept as much out of her sight as possible."

"I'm sorry Argus isn't welcome," said Vixen proudly.

She was thinking that her own welcome at Les Tourelles could hardly be more cordial than that accorded to Argus. She had left home because nobody wanted her there. How could she expect that anyone wanted her here, where she was a stranger, preceded, perhaps, by the reputation of her vices? The woman in the rusty mourning-gown, the man in the shabby raiment and clod-hopper boots, gave her no smile of greeting. Over this new home of hers there hung an unspeakable melancholy. Her heart sank as she crossed the threshold.

Oh, what a neglected, poverty-stricken air the garden had, after the gardens Violet Tempest had been accustomed to look upon! Ragged trees, rank grass, empty flower-beds, weeds in abundance. A narrow paved colonnade ran along one side of the house. They went by this paved way to a dingy little door – not the hall-door, that was never opened – and entered the house by a lobby, which opened into a small parlour, dark and shabby, with one window looking into a court-yard. There were a good many books upon the green baize table-cover; pious books mostly, Vixen saw, with a strange revulsion of feeling; as if that were the culmination of her misery. There was an old-fashioned work-table, with a faded red silk well, beside the open window. A spectacle-case on the work-table, and an armchair before it, indicated that the room had been lately occupied. It was altogether one of the shabbiest rooms Vixen had ever seen – the furniture belonging to the most odious period of cabinet-making, the carpet unutterably dingy, the walls mildewed and mouldy, the sole decorations some pale engravings of naval battles, which might be the victories or defeats of any maritime hero, from Drake to Nelson.

"Come and see the house," said the Captain, reading the disgust in his stepdaughter's pale face.

He opened a door leading into the hall, a large and lofty apartment, with a fine old staircase ascending to a square gallery. The heavy oak balusters had been painted white, so had the panelling in the hall. Time had converted both to a dusky gray. Some rusty odds and ends of armour, and a few dingy family portraits decorated the walls; but of furniture there was not a vestige.

Opening out of the hall there was a large long room with four windows looking into a small wilderness that had once been a garden, and commanding a fine view of land and sea. This the Captain called the drawing-room. It was sparsely furnished with a spindle-legged table, half-a-dozen armchairs covered with faded tapestry, an antique walnut-wood cabinet, another of ebony, a small oasis of carpet in the middle of the bare oak floor.

"This and the parlour you have seen are all the sitting-rooms my aunt occupies," said Captain Winstanley; "the rest of the rooms on this floor are empty, or only used for storehouses. It is a fine old house. I believe the finest in the island."

"Is there a history hanging to it?" asked Vixen, looking drearily round the spacious desolate chamber. "Has it been used as a prison, or a madhouse, or what? I never saw a house that filled me with such nameless horrors."

"You are fanciful," said the Captain. "The house has no story except the common history of fallen fortunes. It has been in the Skipwith family ever since it was built. They were Leicestershire people, and came to Jersey after the civil war – came here to be near their prince in his exile – settled here and built Les Tourelles. I believe they expected Charles would do something handsome for them when he came into his own, but he didn't do anything. Sir John Skipwith stayed in the island and became a large landowner, and died at an advanced age – there is nothing to kill people here, you see – and the Skipwiths have been Jersey people ever since. They were once the richest family in the island. They are now one of the poorest. When I say they, I mean my aunt. She is the last of her race. The Skipwiths have crystallised into one maiden lady, my mother's only sister."

"Then your mother was a Skipwith?" asked Violet.

"Yes."

"And she was born and brought up here?"

"Yes. She never left Jersey till my father married her. He was here with his regiment when they met at the governor's ball. Oh, here is my aunt," said the Captain, as a rustling of silk sounded in the empty hall.

Vixen drew herself up stiffly, as if preparing to meet a foe. She had made up her mind to detest Miss Skipwith.

The lady of the manor entered. She shook hands with her nephew, and presented him with a pale and shrivelled cheek, which he respectfully saluted.

She was an elderly and faded person, very tall and painfully thin, but aristocratic to the highest degree. There was the indication of race in her aquiline nose, high narrow brow and neatly cut chin, her tapering hand and small slender foot. She was dressed in black silk, rustier and older than any silk Vixen had ever seen before: not even excepting Mrs. Scobel's black silk dresses, when they had been degraded from their original rank to the scrubbery of early services and daily wear. Her thin gray hair was shaded by a black lace cap, decorated with bugles and black weedy grasses. She wore black mittens, and jet jewellery, and was altogether as deeply sable as if she had been in mourning for the whole of the Skipwith race.

She received Miss Tempest with a formal politeness which was not encouraging.

"I hope you will be able to make yourself happy here," she said; "and that you have resources within yourself that will suffice for the employment of your time and thoughts. I receive no company, and I never go out. The class of people who now occupy the island are a class with which I should not care to associate, and which, I daresay, would not appreciate me. I have my own resources, and my life is fully employed. My only complaint is that the days are not long enough. A quiet existence like mine offers vast opportunities for culture and self-improvement. I hope you will take advantage of them, Miss Tempest."

Poor Violet faltered something vaguely civil, looking sorely bewildered all the time. Miss Skipwith's speech sounded so like the address of a schoolmistress that Vixen began to think she had been trapped unawares in a school, as people are sometimes trapped in a madhouse.

"I don't think Miss Tempest is given much to study," said the Captain graciously, as if he and Violet were on the friendliest terms; "but she is very fond of the country, and I am sure the scenery of Jersey will delight her. By-the-way, we ventured to bring her big dog. He will be a companion and protector for her in her walks. I have asked Doddery to find him a kennel somewhere among your capacious outbuildings."

"He must not come into the house," said Miss Skipwith grimly; "I couldn't have a dog inside my doors. I have a Persian that has been my attached companion for the last ten years. What would that dear creature's feelings be if he saw himself exposed to the attacks of a savage dog?"

"My dog is not savage, to Persians or anyone else," cried Vixen, wondering what inauspicious star had led the footsteps of an oriental wanderer to so dreary a refuge as Les Tourelles.

"You would like to see your bedroom, perhaps?" suggested Miss Skipwith, and on Violet's assenting, she was handed over to Hannah Doddery, the woman who had opened the gate.

Hannah led the way up the broad old staircase, all bare and carpetless, and opened one of the doors in the gallery. The room into which she ushered Violet was large and airy, with windows commanding the fair garden-like island, and the wide blue sea. But there was the same bare, poverty-stricken look in this room as in every other part of the manor house. The bed was a tall melancholy four-poster, with scantiest draperies of faded drab damask. Save for one little islet of threadbare Brussels beside the bed, the room was carpetless. There was an ancient wainscot wardrobe with brass handles. There was a modern deal dressing-table skimpily draped with muslin, and surmounted by the smallest of looking-glasses. There were a couple of chairs and a three-cornered washhand-stand. There was neither sofa nor writing-table. There was not an ornament on the high wooden mantelshelf, or a picture on the panelled walls. Vixen shivered as she surveyed the big barren room.

"I think you will find everything comfortable," said Mrs. Doddery, with a formal air, which seemed to say, "and whether you do or do not matters nothing to me."

"Thank you, yes, I daresay it is all right," Vixen answered absently, standing at one of the windows, gazing out over the green hills and valleys to the fair summer sea, and wondering whether she would be able to take comfort from the fertile beauty of the island.

"The bed has been well aired," continued Mrs. Doddery, "and I can answer for the cleanliness of everything."

"Thanks! Will you kindly send one of the maids to help me unpack my portmanteau?"

"I can assist you," Mrs. Doddery answered. "We have no maid-servant. My husband and I are able to do all that Miss Skipwith requires. She is a lady who gives so little trouble."

"Do you mean to say there are no other servants in this great house – no housemaids, no cooks?"

"I have cooked for Miss Skipwith for the last thirty years. The house is large, but there are very few rooms in occupation."

"I ought to have brought my maid," cried Vixen. "It will be quite dreadful. I don't want much waiting upon; but still, I'm afraid I shall give some trouble until I learn to do everything for myself. Just as if I were cast on a desert island," she said to herself in conclusion; and then she thought of Helen Rolleston, the petted beauty in Charles Reade's "Foul Play," cast with her faithful lover on an unknown island of the fair southern sea. But in this island of Jersey there was no faithful lover to give romance and interest to the situation. There was nothing but dull dreary reality.

"I daresay I shall be able to do all you require, without feeling it any extra trouble, unless you are very helpless," said Mrs. Doddery, who was on her knees unstrapping one of the portmanteaux.

"I am not helpless," replied Vixen, "though I daresay I have been waited on much more than was good for me."

And then she knelt down before the other portmanteau, and undid the buckles of the thick leather straps, in which operation she broke more than one of her nails, and wounded her rosy fingertips.

"Oh dear, what a useless creature I am," she thought; "and why do people strap portmanteaux so tightly? Never mind, after a month's residence at Les Tourelles I shall be a Spartan."

"Would you like me to unpack your trunks for you?" inquired Mrs. Doddery, with an accent which sounded slightly ironical.

"Oh no, thanks, I can get on very well now," answered Vixen quickly; whereupon the housekeeper opened the drawers and cupboards in the big wainscot wardrobe, and left Miss Tempest to her own devices.

The shelves and drawers were neatly lined with white paper, and strewn with dried lavender. This was luxury which Vixen had not expected. She laid her pretty dresses on the shelves, smiling scornfully as she looked at them. Of what use could pretty dresses be in a desert island? And here were her riding-habit and her collection of whips – useless lumber where there was no hope of a horse. She was obliged to put her books in the wardrobe, as there was no other place for them. Her desk and workbox she was fain to place on the floor, for the small dressing-table would accommodate no more than her dressing-case, devotional books, brushes and combs, pomatum-pots, and pinboxes.

"Oh dear," she sighed. "I have a great deal too much property for a desert island. I wonder whether in some odd corner of Les Tourelles I could find such a thing as a spare table?"

When she had finished her unpacking she went down to the hall. Not seeing anyone about, and desiring rather to avoid Captain Winstanley and his aunt than to rejoin them, she wandered out of the hall into one of the many passages of the old manor house, and began a voyage of discovery on her own account.

"If they ask me what I have been doing I can say I lost myself," she thought.

She found the most curious rooms – or rather rooms that had once been stately and handsome, now applied to the most curious purposes – a dining-hall with carved stone chimney-piece and painted ceiling, used as a storehouse for apples; another fine apartment in which a heap of potatoes reposed snugly in a corner, packed in straw; there was a spacious kitchen with a fire-place as large as a moderate-sized room – a kitchen that had been abandoned altogether to spiders, beetles, rats, and mice. A whole army of four-footed vermin scampered off as Vixen crossed the threshold. She could see them scuttling and scurrying along by the wall, with a whisking of slender tails as they vanished into their holes. The beetles were disporting themselves on the desolate hearth, the spiders had woven draperies for the dim dirty windows. The rustling leaves of a fig-tree, that had grown close to this side of the house, flapped against the window-panes with a noise of exceeding ghostliness.

From the kitchen Vixen wandered to the out-houses, and found Argus howling dismally in a grass-grown court-yard, evidently believing himself abandoned by the world. His rapture at beholding his mistress was boundless.

"You darling, I would give the world to let you loose," cried Vixen, after she had been nearly knocked down by the dog's affectionate greeting; "but I mustn't just yet. I'll come by-and-by and take you for a walk. Yes, dear old boy, we'll have a long ramble together, just as we used to do at home."

Home, now she had left it, seemed so sweet a word that her lips trembled a little as she pronounced it.

Everything without the house was as dreary as it was within. Poverty had set its mark on all things, like a blight. Decay was visible everywhere – in the wood-work, in the stone-work, in hinges and handles, thresholds and lintels, ceilings and plastered walls. It would have cost a thousand pounds to put the manor house in decent habitable order. To have restored it to its original dignity and comeliness would have cost at least five thousand. Miss Skipwith could afford to spend nothing upon the house she lived in; indeed she could barely afford the necessities of life. So for the last thirty years Les Tourelles had been gradually decaying, until the good old house had arrived at a stage in which decay could hardly go farther without lapsing into destruction.

A door opened out of the court-yard into the weedy garden. This was not without a kind of beauty that had survived long neglect. The spreading fig-trees, the bushes of bright red fuchsia, and the unpruned roses made a fertile wilderness of flowers and foliage. There was a terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, and from this a flight of crumbling moss-grown stone steps led down to the garden, which was on the slope of the hill, and lay considerably below the level of the house.

While Vixen was perambulating the garden, a bell rang in a cupola on the roof; and as this sounded like the summons to a meal, she felt that politeness, if not appetite, demanded her return to the house.

"Three o'clock," she said, looking at her watch. "What a late hour for luncheon!"

She made her way back to the small side-door at which she had entered with Captain Winstanley, and went into the parlour, where she found the Captain and his aunt. The table was laid, but they had not seated themselves.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," Vixen said apologetically.

"My aunt has been waiting five minutes or so; but I'm sure she will forgive you, as you don't yet know the ways of the house," replied the Captain amiably.

"We have early habits at Les Tourelles, Miss Tempest," said the lady of the manor: "we breakfast at half-past seven and dine at three; that arrangement gives me a long morning for study. At six we drink tea, and, if you care for supper, it can be served for you on a tray at half-past nine. The house is shut, and all lamps put out, at ten."

"As regularly as on board ship," said the Captain. "I know the customs of the manor of old."

"You have never favoured me with a long visit, Conrad," remarked Miss Skipwith reproachfully.

"My life has been too busy for making long visits anywhere, my dear aunt."

They took their places at the small square table, and Miss Skipwith said grace. Antony Doddery was in attendance, clad in rusty black, and looking as like a butler as a man who cleaned windows, scrubbed floors, and hewed wood could be fairly expected to look. He removed the cover of a modest dish of fish with a grand air, and performed all the services of the table with as much dignity as if he had never been anything less than a butler. He poured out a glass of ale for the Captain and a glass of water for his mistress. Miss Skipwith seemed relieved when Violet said she preferred water to ale, and did not particularly care about wine.

"I used to drink wine at home very often, just because it was put in my glass, but I like water quite as well," said Vixen.

After the fish there came a small joint of lamb, and a couple of dishes of vegetables; then a small custard pudding, and some cheese cut up in very minute pieces in a glass dish, some raw garden-stuff which Doddery called salad, and three of last year's pears in an old Derby dessert-dish. The dinner could hardly have been smaller, but it was eminently genteel.

The conversation was entirely between Captain Winstanley and his aunt. Vixen sat and listened wonderingly, save at odd times, when her thoughts strayed back to the old life which she had done with for ever.

"You still continue your literary labours, I suppose, aunt," said the Captain.

"They are the chief object of my existence. When I abandon them I shall have done with life," replied Miss Skipwith gravely.

"But you have not yet published your book."

"No; I hope when I do that even you will hear of it."

"I have no doubt it will make a sensation."

"If it does not I have lived and laboured in vain. But my book may make a sensation, and yet fall far short of the result which I have toiled and hoped for."

"And that is –"

"The establishment of a universal religion."

"That is a large idea!"

"Would a small idea be worth the devotion of a life? For thirty years I have devoted myself to this one scheme. I have striven to focus all the creeds of mankind in one brilliant centre – eliminating all that is base and superstitious in each several religion, crystallising all that is good and true. The Buddhist, the Brahmin, the Mohamedan, the Sun-worshipper, the Romanist, the Calvinist, the Lutheran, the Wesleyan, the Swedenborgian – each and all will find the best and noblest characteristics

of his faith resolved and centred in my universal religion. Here all creeds will meet. Gentler and wiser than the theology of Buddha; more humanitarian than the laws of Brahma; more temperate than the Moslem's code of morality; with a wider grasp of power than the Romanist's authoritative Church; severely self-denying as Calvin's ascetic rule; simple and pious as Wesley's scheme of man's redemption; spiritual as Swedenborg's vast idea of heaven; – my faith will open its arms wide enough to embrace all. There need be no more dissent. The mighty circle of my free church will enclose all creeds and all divisions of man, and spread from the northern hemisphere to the southern seas. Heathenism shall perish before it. The limited view of Christianity which missionaries have hitherto offered to the heathen may fail; but my universal church will open its doors to all the world – and, mark my words, Conrad, all the world will enter in. I may not live to see the day. My span of life has not long to run – but that day will come."

"No doubt," replied Captain Winstanley gravely. "There is a slovenliness, so to speak, about the present arrangement of things, and a great deal of useless expense; every small town with its half-a-dozen churches and chapels of different denominations – Episcopalians, Wesleyans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Primitive Methodists. Now on your plan one large building would do for all, like the town hall, or the general post office. There would be a wonderful economy."

"I fear you contemplate the question from an entirely temporal point of view," said Miss Skipwith, flattered but yet reproachful. "It is its spiritual aspect that is grandest."

"Naturally. But a man of the world is apt to consider the practicability of a scheme. And yours seems to me eminently practical. If you can only get the Mohamedans and the Brahmins to come in! The Roman Catholics might of course be easily won, though it would involve doing away with the Pope. There was a prophecy, by-the-way, that after the ninth Pius there would be only eleven more Popes. No doubt that prophecy pointed at your universal religion. But I fear you may have some difficulty about the Buddhists. I fancy they are rather a bigoted sect."

"The greatest bigots have but to be convinced," said Miss Skipwith. "St. Paul was a bigot."

"True. Is your book nearly finished?"

"No. There are still some years of labour before me. I am now working at the Swedenborgian portion, striving to demonstrate how that great man's scheme of religion, though commonly supposed to be a new and original emanation of one mind, is in reality a reproduction of spiritual views involved in other and older religions. The Buddhists were Swedenborgians without knowing it, just as Swedenborg unconsciously was a Buddhist."

"I begin to understand. The process which you are engaged in is a kind of spiritual chemistry, in which you resolve each particular faith into its primary elements: with a view to prove that those elements are actually the same in all creeds; and that the differences which heretofore have kept mankind apart are mere divergencies of detail."

"That, crudely and imperfectly stated, is my aim," replied Miss Skipwith graciously.

This kind of conversation continued all through dinner. Miss Skipwith talked of Buddha, and Confucius, and Mahomet, and Zuinglius, and Calvin, and Luther, as familiarly as if they had been her most intimate friends; and the Captain led her on and played her as he would have played a trout in one of the winding Hampshire streams. His gravity was imperturbable. Vixen sat and wondered whether she was to hear this kind of thing every day of her life, and whether she would be expected to ask Miss Skipwith leading questions, as the Captain was doing. It was all very well for him, who was to spend only one day at Les Tourelles; but Vixen made up her mind that she would boldly avow her indifference to all creeds and all theologians, from Confucius to Swedenborg. She might consent to live for a time amidst the dullness and desolation of Les Tourelles, but she would not be weighed down and crushed by Miss Skipwith's appalling hobby. The mere idea of the horror of having every day to discuss a subject that was in its very nature inexhaustible, filled her with terror.

"I would sooner take my meals in that abandoned kitchen, in the company of the rats and beetles, than have to listen every day to this kind of thing," she thought.

When dinner was over the Captain went off to smoke his cigar in the garden, and this Vixen thought a good time for making her escape.

"I should like to take a walk with my dog, if you will excuse me, Miss Skipwith," she said politely.

"My dear, you must consider yourself at liberty to employ and amuse yourself as you please, of course always keeping strictly within the bounds of propriety," solemnly replied the lady of the manor. "I shall not interfere with your freedom. My own studies are of so grave a nature that they in a measure isolate me from my fellow-creatures, but when you require and ask for sympathy and advice, I shall be ready to give both. My library is at your service, and I hope ere long you will have found yourself some serious aim for your studies. Life without purpose is a life hardly worth living. If girls of your age could only find that out, and seek their vocation early, how much grander and nobler would be woman's place in the universe. But, alas! my dear, the common aim of girlhood seems to be to look pretty and to get married."

"I have made up my mind never to marry," said Violet, with a smile that was half sad half cynical; "so there at least you may approve of me, Miss Skipwith."

"My nephew tells me that you refused an excellent offer from an Irish peer."

"I would not have done the Irish peer so great a wrong as to have married him without loving him."

"I admire your honourable feeling," said Miss Skipwith, with solemn approval; "I, too, might have married, but the man towards whom my heart most inclined was a man of no family. I could not marry a man without family. I am weak enough to be prouder of my pedigree than other women are of beauty and fortune. I am the last of the Skipwiths, and I have done nothing to degrade my race. The family name and the family pride will die with me. There was a time when a Skipwith owned a third of the island. Our estate has dwindled to the garden and meadows that surround this old house; our family has shrunk into one old woman; but if I can make the name of Skipwith famous before I go down to my grave, I shall not have lived and laboured in vain."

Vixen felt a thrill of pity as she listened to this brief confession of a self-deluded solitary soul, which had built its house upon sand, as hopefully as if the foundations were solidest rock. The line of demarcation between such fanaticism as Miss Skipwith's and the hallucination of an old lady in Bedlam, who fancies herself Queen Victoria, seemed to Vixen but a hair's breadth. But, after all, if the old lady and Miss Skipwith were both happy in their harmless self-deceptions, why should one pity them? The creature to be pitied is the man or woman who keenly sees and feels the hard realities of life, and cannot take pleasure in phantoms.

Vixen ran off to her room to get her hat and gloves, delighted to find herself free. Miss Skipwith was not such a very bad sort of person, after all, perhaps. Liberty to roam about the island with her dog Vixen esteemed a great boon. She would be able to think about her troubles, unmolested by inquisitive looks or unwelcome sympathy.

She went down to the court-yard, untied the faithful Argus, and they set out together to explore the unknown, the dog in such wild spirits that it was almost impossible for Vixen to be sad. The afternoon sun was shining in all his glory, birds were singing, flickering lights and shadows playing on the grassy banks. Argus scampered up and down the lanes, and burst tumultuously through gaps in the hedges, like a dog possessed of demons.

It was a pretty little island, after all; Vixen was fain to admit as much. There was some justification for the people who sang its praises with such enthusiasm. One might have fancied it a fertile corner of Devonshire that had slipped its moorings and drifted westward on a summer sea.

"If I had Arion here, and – Rorie, I think I could be almost happy," Vixen said to herself with a dreamy smile.

"And Rorie!"

Alas, poor child! faintly, feebly steadfast in the barren path of honour: where could she not have been happy with the companion of her childhood, the one only love of her youth? Was there ever a spot of land or sea, from Hudson's Bay to the unmapped archipelago or hypothetical continent of the Southern Pole, where she could not have been happy with Roderick Vawdrey? She thought again of Helen Rolleston and her lover on the South Sea island. Ah what a happy fate was that of the consumptive heroine! Alone, protected, cherished, and saved from death by her devoted lover.

Poor Rorie! She knew how well she loved him, now that the wide sea rolled between them, now that she had said him nay, denied her love, and parted from him for ever.

She thought of that scene in the pine-wood, dimly lit by the young moon. She lived again those marvellous moments – the concentrated bliss and pain of a lifetime. She felt again the strong grasp of his hands, his breath upon her cheek, as he bent over her shoulder. Again she heard him pleading for the life-long union her soul desired as the most exquisite happiness life could give.

"I had not loved thee, dear, so well
Loved I not honour more."

Those two familiar lines flashed into her mind as she thought of her lover. To have degraded herself, to have dishonoured him; no, it would have been too dreadful. Were he to plead again she must answer again as she had answered before.

"His mother despised me," she thought. "If people in a better world are really *au courant* as to the affairs of this, I should like Lady Jane Vawdrey to know that I am not utterly without the instincts of a gentlewoman."

She wandered on, following the winding of the lanes, careless where she went, and determined to take advantage of her liberty. She met few people, and of those she did not trouble herself to ask her way.

"If I lose myself on my desert island it can't much matter," she thought. "There is no one to be anxious about me. Miss Skipwith will be deep in her universal creed, and Captain Winstanley would be very glad for me to be lost. My death would leave him master for life of the Abbey House and all belonging to it."

She roamed on till she came to the open seashore; a pretty little harbour surrounded with quaint-looking houses; two or three white villas in fertile gardens, on a raised road; and, dominating all the scene, a fine old feudal castle, with keep, battlements, drawbridge, portcullis, and all that becomes a fortress.

This was Mount Orgueil, the castle in which Charles Stuart spent a short period of his life, while Cromwell was ruling by land and sea, and kingly hopes were at their lowest ebb. The good old fortress had suffered for its loyalty, for the Parliament sent Admiral Blake, with a fleet, to reduce the rebellious island to submission, and Mount Orgueil had not been strong enough to hold out against its assailants.

Violet went up the sloping path that led to the grim old gateway under the gloomy arch, and still upward till she came to a sunny battlemented wall above the shining sea. The prospect was more than worth the trouble. Yonder, in the dim distance, were the towers of Coutance Cathedral; far away, mere spots in the blue water, were the smaller fry of the Channel Islands; below her, the yellow sands were smiling in the sun, the placid wavelets reflecting all the colour and glory of the changeful sky.

"This would not be a bad place to live in, Argus, if – "

She paused with her arm round her dog's neck, as he stood on end, looking over the parapet, with a deep interest in possible rats or rabbits lurking in some cavity of the craggy cliff below. If! Ah, what a big "if" that was! It meant love and dear familiar companionship. It meant all Vixen's little world.

She lingered long. The scene was beautiful, and there was nothing to lure her home. Then, at last, feeling that she was treating poor Miss Skipwith badly, and that her prolonged absence might give alarm in that dreary household, she retraced her steps, and at the foot of the craggy mount asked the nearest way to Les Tourelles.

The nearest way was altogether different from the track by which she had come, and brought her back to the old monastic gate in a little more than an hour. She opened the gate and went in. There was nothing for the most burglarious invader to steal at Les Tourelles, and bolts and locks were rarely used. Miss Skipwith was reading in her parlour, a white Persian cat dozing on a cushioned arm-chair beside her, some cups and saucers and a black teapot on a tray before her, and the rest of the table piled with books. There was no sign of Captain Winstanley.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.