

Trevena John

By Violence



John Trevena
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Trevena J.

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INTRODUCTION

For eight years or more, since I first became acquainted with the novels and tales of John Trevena it has been my firm conviction that only Thomas Hardy and George Moore among contemporary novelists rival his art at its best. Like Meredith, he has written for twenty years in obscurity, and like Meredith also he has been content with a small discriminating audience. I suppose that in 1950 our grandchildren will be electing college courses on his literary method, but meanwhile it would be more gratifying if there were even a slight public response to the quality of his individual talent.

Trevena's novels are the expression of a passionate feeling for Nature, regarded as the sum of human personality and experience, in all its moods, – benign and malign, as man is benign and malign, and faithful to life in the stone as well as the flower. What a gallery of memorable characters they are, Mary and Peter Tavy, Brightly, Cuthbert Orton, Jasper Ramrige, Anthonie and Petronel, William and Yellow Leaf, Captain Drake and dark Pendoggat, Ann Code, Cyril Rossingall, and a hundred others, passionate and gentle, with wind and water and earth and sky for a chorus, and the shifting pageantry of Nature as a stage.

His fourteen volumes reveal a gift for characterization equalled by none of the contemporary English realists, and a Shakespearian humor elsewhere gone from our day. In *Furze the Cruel*, *Bracken*, *Wintering Hay*, and *Sleeping Waters*, to name no others, John Trevena has written novels of Dartmoor that will take their rightful place in the great English line, when the honest carpentering of Phillpotts that now overshadows them is totally forgotten.

The feeling has spread among Trevena's few critical American admirers who have written about him, that he is fundamentally morbid and one-sided. On the contrary, I know of few novelists who are more recklessly and irresistibly gay, in whom sheer fun bubbles over so spontaneously and wholeheartedly. To ignore life's harshness is simply to ignore life. Trevena's many-sidedness will be apparent only when there is a definitive edition of his work. His habit of confining a novel to a single mood or passion of nature, together with the fact that Americans have only had an opportunity to read those novels by him which deal with nature's most cruel moods, have done the reputation of Trevena a grave injustice.

By Violence and *Matrimony* are Trevena's most beautiful short tales, and I hardly know which is the finer revelation of poetic grace and gentle vision. Their message is conveyed so quietly that they may be read for their sensuous beauty only, and yet convey a rare pleasure. If their feeling is veiled and somewhat aloof from the common ways of men, there is none the less a fine human sympathy concealed in them, and a golden radiance indissolubly woven into their pages.

If Nature's power is inevitable in these stories, it is also kind, and I like to think that from *By Violence* as a text a new reading of earth may be deciphered. Trevena has written the books of furze and heather and granite and bracken, which outlast time on the hills of Dartmoor. But this tale hints at a fifth force which survives all the others. Some day, when the wind is strong, John Trevena will write the book of "The Rain-drop," which is the gentlest of all elements, and yet outlasts the stone.

Edward J. O'Brien

South Yarmouth, Mass.

February 26, 1918

BY VIOLENCE

"Dear Sir, —
"The wooden enemies are out.
"Yours obediently,
"Oliver Vorse."

Simon Searell read this short message as he tramped the streets of Stonehouse, which were full of fog, from the sea on one side and the river on the other. Vorse was an uneducated man; the mysticism of flowers was nothing to him, the time of spring was merely a change of season, and the most spiritual of blooms were only "wooden enemies." Searell frowned a little, not at the lack of education, which was rather a peace to be desired, but at the harshness of the words, and went on, wondering if the wood-anemones were to be his friends, or little cups of poison.

He climbed streets of poor houses, their unhappy windows curtained with mist, and came out near a small church made of iron, a cheap and gaudy thing, almost as squalid on the outside as the houses. The backslider looked at it with a shudder. It was his no longer; he had given it up; he was forgetting those toy-like altars, the cheap brass candlesticks, the artificial flowers, and all the images. They were wooden and stone enemies to him now. He was going deeper to find the throbbing heart of religion, putting aside dolls and tapers and the sham of sentimentality. Solitude and mysticism were to be his stars through the night, and he trusted, with their aid, to reach the dawn. He turned from the church, stopped at a house, and that was squalid too, knocked, then wiped his boots, as if certain of being admitted.

"Father Damon?" he asked shortly. Searell's voice was sweet; he had helped people "home," as they called it, with his tongue, not with his soul, just as a sweet-toned organ calls for tears with the beauty of its sounds, though the instrument itself is dead.

"Yes, your reverence," the housekeeper answered, as shortly; and Searell walked up the foggy stairs murmuring to himself, "The wind-flowers are out, and I am free."

Father Damon stood in a little square room hideously papered. He was small, dark, heavy-featured, peasant-like; and Searell saw at a glance that his successor was as dull in many ways as Oliver Vorse. All that he knew had been forced upon him almost violently; he had not gone forth gathering for himself, he dared not, his mind had been tilled by careful teachers, kept under restraint, all his side-growths pruned away, in order that orthodoxy might develop in one large unlovely head. When the order went forth to kneel, he knelt, and when it was time to lift his eyes to Heaven, he lifted them. It was a life of prison, and he could never smell the woodland through the fog of incense.

"He knows nothing," muttered Searell. "He thinks it is daylight where he stands."

"I come to give you information about the mission," he said aloud, and then began; but the telling took some time. How troublesome, how paltry, the details; and Father Damon was so dull. Everything had to be repeated, explained so carefully; and was it worth the words? The successor was very earnest, but not enthusiastic, that had been crushed out of him; and Searell grew impatient at the wooden figure, with its simple face and child-like questions. He spoke faster, almost angrily, desiring to get away and smell the earth; and his eyes wandered about the room, which was so unlovely, not bare, but filled with those things that make for the nakedness of life. There was wanting something to galvanise that sluggish Damon into passion, to destroy the machinery, turn him into a strong animal with dilating nostrils. One little touch would have done it. A portrait of a pretty woman upon the mantelshelf would have gone far; but there was nothing except pictures of mythical saints.

"You are retiring. You seem strong and well," said Damon, when he had obtained all the information that was required.

Searell was in a hurry to be gone, as the sleeper struggles to awake from a bad dream; but that voice and its stagnant repose aroused him.

"I am old, I am sixty," he said. "I am beginning again, trying to find what the Church has not shown me."

"What is that?"

"Light."

Damon stared with the eyes of horror, and put out his peasant-like hands as if to force away some weight that pressed against him; but he said nothing.

"I will not depart in the odour of hypocrisy. Listen," said Searell. "I am far from saying that the Church does not lead towards a kind of light; but it has not led me. And this do I say, that in the world at large all religion is a failure; and I am going to find mine in the solitudes."

"The truth is in the Church. It is your fault if you have missed it," said Damon, in a hollow voice, hoping that the other, for the sake of his soul, was mad.

"It is there for some, the minority. You will never realize how small that minority is. We cannot hasten the dawn with juggling. True religion is a thing of innocence, not a matter of spells and charms; and it is in the innocence of Nature that I will search for it. I believe it exists there, underneath the outward cruelty, and I shall find it among the flowers. The flower alone does not struggle with violence, it sheds no blood; the weed smothers, and the bindweed chokes; but without some fault upon the surface, perfection might be obtained, which cannot be. Look into the flower, and you will find a condition which is not approached by man or other animals. There is a purity which brings tears into your eyes. Eliminate violence, and you have innocence; obtain innocence, and you see the light. At the beginning of things we are told that the world was destroyed by water because the earth was filled with violence. At the beginning of the new era we learn that the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence. Will you say the Church does not rule by violence, by threats, suppressions, rubrics, and by vows?"

"I cannot understand you," said Damon.

"Will you understand when I say that the God of life is to be found among the flowers?"

The other shook his head and looked frightened. Free speech was not allowed, and, if it had been, he would not have known how to use it. He walked between rubrics, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left; and the living lily was a thing for funeral wreaths. For the altars, artificial flowers were good enough, as they did not require renewing, and they looked real to the congregation, and how they were regarded elsewhere did not concern him; and whether they had been made by sweated labour did not concern him, because he was not allowed to think, and he himself was artificial, neither man nor animal, but a side-growth of supernaturalism.

"Let me go on now I have begun," said Searell. "I am leaving here, and my words will not live after me. I am a man who has tested life, who has been through every experience, and I have discovered that what morality calls bad is often good, and that which we call virtue sometimes springs from vice. The purest water runs upon mud, only you must not rake it up. In my youth I served as a soldier, and upon leaving the army I sought the Church, partly to find a rest, chiefly, perhaps, because my mind was mystical. But nothing was revealed, and nothing could be, for the mystic must be free; and the priest is a soul in prison, and the book of his captivity is always before him. Here he must join his hands; there he must lift his eyes to Heaven, prostrate himself, kiss the altar, until the time comes when he feels alone, cut off from the Creator of his dreams by these mechanics, horribly alone among images; and he seems to hear a voice asking sorrowfully, 'What is this rule you are following? Who told you to do this? Go out upon the hills and into the woods, for I am there.' But he cannot move, for the time has come to join his hands again, and the revelation passes unseen, because he has to keep his eyes shut. It is written so, and he must obey."

"I cannot answer you," muttered Damon; and it was true, for these words took him outside the well-worn groove and dropped him useless.

"If I found the man who could, I would follow him," came the answer, and the white-headed priest passed a hand across his eyes, as if trying to brush the fog away. "I have been longing to escape for years. The iron of the little mission-church has eaten into my soul. I ought to have resigned? Why so, when I performed all my duties? Without means I could not have faced the world, for the mystic is not a practical man, and these hands," he said, frowning, "they are hands to be despised, for they have done nothing. No, do not answer me, you cannot, you are bound. I am free. A year ago I was left money – "

"A curse."

"If you will, a curse to buy a pathway to my Heaven. There was a place I pined for, up on the heights of Dartmoor, a valley among mountains. I have bought it. They call it Pixyland."

"Paganism," cried the peasant-priest hoarsely, and crossed himself.

"Purity," said Searell, in his sweet voice. "Pure air, pure hills, pure loneliness. It is a place of rocks, of heather and large-rooted ferns, and it is very steep, terrace rising upon terrace to the heights. At the bottom of the valley are trees; here also is a wild path and a wild stream broken upon the rocks, and becoming whole again at the foot of a glen. For centuries the place has been haunted in men's imagination, and they have avoided it because it is a garden of – angels. I am going now to make it bloom, I am going to grasp that solitude and weave with it a mantle of light. I am going to walk on my pixy-path and watch the shadows creeping up and down my pixy-glen; and the growth will come, the growth of knowledge, and of consciousness; and there I may meet my Gardener, driven out of the world by violence, out of the Church by violence, revealing Himself, not tortured, cross-laden, and frowning, and not awful, but as the smiling Guardian of the flowers."

There was hardly a sound in the cold room, stiff with the antique pictures of quaint saints, dark with that dull peasant born to be ruled; and yet Searell was going out with a haunted face, passing like a phantom from the house of poverty, and the wet board with Mass notices, and the waste of ground heaped up with rubbish. There was a pear-tree leaning from the waste, a tree which the builders had forgotten, and from the tree hung a broken branch, and at the end of that branch, beneath the buds of spring, were two black leaves neglected by the winter, side by side, struggling with one another; for there was wind down the street which made them struggle; but neither dropped, and they fought on silently while the wind lasted.

"Violence even in dead things," Searell murmured; and, reaching up his hand, he quieted those two restless leaves for ever.

II

Oliver Vorse was lying among the wood-anemones, and he was drunk. He would have looked like a monster had his condition been rare; but it was common, therefore Vorse was not abnormal, only a fool. He did not know where he was, in the pixy-path upon the wind-flowers, crushing so many with his sodden carcase, while the pure pixy-water trickled underneath. He had come the wrong way at the turning of the path; instead of ascending to the house, which was the way of difficulty, he had stepped downwards choosing the path of ease, as men will, even when sober. The state of his body was nothing, as nobody would see him except Sibley, his wife. The master was expected tomorrow, and then he would have to pretend to be a man.

The moon was young, a cradle of silver, and the stars were wrapped in sleep-compelling clouds; and all the light that there was seemed to come from the anemones which Vorse was defiling. The little white things were lanterns, retaining light, but not giving it forth, and a stickle of water shone like a shield. There was such a wonderful purity in Nature apart from the man. Everything seemed to bear the mark of beauty and holiness except him. It was out of the world in that fairy garden hanging between the cities and the clouds, and the vices of the world were out of place; and yet there was no barrier which they could not leap across.

A light appeared thick and heavy, putting out the eyes of the flowers. It wobbled down the natural terraces, weather-hewn from granite, and with it came a voice suggesting more violence, harsh and angry, not a voice of the clouds, but of the street-corner, where faces are thin and fierce, and the paving-stones seem cruel. Sibley was searching for her husband, not because she loved him, nor requiring his company for any reason except the selfish one that the loneliness above frightened her, and her small spirit quailed before the heaving moorland. Any sort of a brute was better than the God of the mountains. She stumbled over an obstacle, lowered the lantern, but it was a mass of granite carved cynically by centuries of rain into the semblance of a tombstone. Again she stumbled, and now it was the trunk of a tree, phosphorescent with rottenness. A third time she stumbled, and so found her master with the rottenness of the fallen tree, without the strength of the granite.

She kicked him, struck him with the greasy lantern, and swore.

"Get up, dirty swine. Get up, will ye? Mind what the master told yew? and he'm coming in the morning."

Oliver only growled and snored. This was his form of mysticism, and it was a kind of happiness. If master had dreams, why not he? Master could dream at one end of creation, he at the other. There was plenty of time. Sibley was only twenty-four, Oliver not much older. When life is young the end of it is a myth, and passion is the god.

There was another light down the pixy-path, very steady and soft. Had it been blue it might have been a thing of the bog, looking for the body it had thrown away, but it was white, and it flickered hardly at all, for the night was smothered up and the winds were slumbering. It came up the path with a kind of gliding rather terrible and there was not a sound around it. The master was approaching in the night. Having completed the last duty sooner than he had anticipated, he acted on the impulse. There was time to escape, so why wait for the morning? And there would be the glamour of passing through the dark towards clouds and mistland. The preparations of a man in earnest take no time. He must put a taper in his pocket, the last relic of the church he was leaving, as the night would be heavy upon the pathway, and he must walk there and see the wood-anemones in flower and feel the peace settling upon his eyelids. There was no time to be lost, for he was old, and still a child, with everything to learn.

Sibley saw the figure, and screamed, supposing it to be a spirit doing penance for past sins with the lighted candle; while her husband heaved and called for drink.

Searell stood upon the path. The wind-flowers were out, but their heads were hanging in shame; there was no spiritual life in them, they were already dead like the two black leaves upon the pear tree, and the destroyed of life was that heap of flesh upon them. He had come away from the world to forget its violence, and here it was upon his mystic pathway. He had come to find his God upon the flowers, and had found a drunken man instead.

He was calm, to Sibley he looked divine, as he placed the candle in the niche of a gaping boulder, and she wondered at his restraint. He was a god, for he had made her, had saved her from street life, and might still save Oliver if he could bear with him. They were not of his religion, they were only devil-worshippers, and yet he had stooped down and dragged them almost by violence from the rubbish-pit.

"Forgive 'en this once, master," she cried. "I'll see he don't fall again. Us didn't look vor ye till the morning, and Oliver went down, and this be how he comed back."

There was a flat rock above the pixy-water, and here Searell seated himself, saying, "Do not speak. Your voice is harsh."

For some moments the only sounds were the deep breathing of Vorse and the tinkling of the stream. The flame of the candle did not flicker, and Sibley remained as motionless, her hands clasped before her, looking down. Then Searell spoke:

"I walked along a street, and at a dark end of it a man and woman were fighting. They were young and fierce. As I came near, the man threw the woman down and thumped her in the back, I separated them by violence. They respected my profession, and did not greatly resent my interference. So there was good in them, but, like young beasts, they had run wild, and no man had tamed them. You know of whom I am speaking?"

"Yes, master, I reckon," she whispered.

"At that time they were living together, although unmarried. I told them I should be requiring a couple to attend to me and my home, and I promised to engage them if they would be legally wedded. But conditions were imposed. One of them has been broken tonight."

"It won't ever happen again, master."

"I have myself to think of. There must be selfishness," said Searell. "There is no escaping from it. If one condition is broken, another may be. You remember the other?"

"Yes, master – no children."

The words sounded harsh, in that fairy place, and they seemed to agree rather with the breathing of the drunken man than with the ringing of the stream.

"Perhaps I am hard, but I have my peace of mind to consider. A child's cry, a child's mischievous ways, would destroy it. There is no room in my house for children, and this is not the place for them. I have a search to make," he murmured. "The scream of infants would lead me far astray. You will remember?"

"Us ha' no other home, master."

"You will remember?"

"Yes, master."

"I will forget what has happened tonight," said Searell, bending from the rock, dipping his hand into the pixy-water. "Let this be a time of regeneration for us all. Do you respect a ceremony?"

"Yes, master, I reckon," she said again, though she could not understand him.

"We will lead a new life," he said, with a smile which was visible in the light of candle and lantern.

Sibley stepped forward as Oliver lifted himself with heavy movements, and muttered a half-conscious "Ask your pardon, master."

Searell brought up a little of the bright water, and sprinkled the woman, then the man, without any other sign, and with the words in his soft mystic voice, "I receive you into the new life."

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