

Blackmore Richard Doddridge

# Clara Vaughan. Volume 2 of

3



Richard Blackmore

**Clara Vaughan. Volume 2 of 3**

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# **R. D. Blackmore**

## **Clara Vaughan, Volume 2 (of 3)**

### **BOOK II. (*continued*)**

#### **CHAPTER XVII**

Late in the evening of that same day, I sat in my room by the firelight only (for I could not work) and tried to look into myself, and find out the cause of my strange attraction or rather impulsion towards Isola. Somehow or other I did not wonder so much that she should be drawn quite as strongly towards me, although an impartial observer would perhaps have wondered far more. After puzzling myself in vain with this inquiry, my thoughts began to move, in their usual gloomy train.

Eight years had now elapsed, and what had I discovered? Nothing; but at long dark intervals some impress of the deed itself, more than of the doer. Had I halted in pursuit, or had my vengeance cooled? To the former question my conscience answered "yes," to the latter "no." Gentle influences had been shed around me, sorrow had bedewed the track of hate, intercourse with happy harmless people, and gratitude for unmerited kindness; it was not in human nature, however finely constitute for evil, entirely to repulse these powers.

I could not deny, that the religion of my heart, during the last twelvemonth, had been somewhat neglected. For my devotion to dear mother, no plea was required. But the time since that, what business had I with laughing children, and snug firesides, with dickybirds, and Sandy the squirrel? Even sweet Isola caused me a pang of remorse; but no, I could not quite abandon her. But now, thank God, I was in the right road again, and plodding resolutely as my father could expect. To his spirit, ever present with me, I knelt down and poured out my remorse; and swore to make amends, whatever it might cost me. Yet even then, a gentle shadow seemed to come as well, and whisper the words that calmed the face of death.

My musings, if so mild a word may suit them, were roughly interrupted by a loud step on the stairs. Inspector Cutting, who could walk when needful like a cat, loved to redress this injury to the Goddess Echo, by making double noise when not on business. Farmer Huxtable, a man of twice the weight, would have come up those stairs at half the expense in sound.

When he entered the room, he found himself in a semi-official state again, and I saw that he was not come for nothing. In a few brief words, he told me what he had done, which was not very much; or perhaps my suspicion was right, that he only told me a part of it. Then he said abruptly,

"Miss Valence, I know pluck when I see it."

"What do you mean, Mr. Cutting?"

"Excuse me, I forgot that you have been reared in the country. What I mean is, that I believe you possess an unusual share of courage."

"As to that, I cannot say, having never been severely tried; but in such a cause as mine, I could go through a good deal."

"And not lose your presence of mind, even in real danger?"

"That again I cannot say, and for the same reason. But I am quite ready to make the trial."

I felt the colour mounting in my cheeks. How glad I should be to prove to myself that I was not ignoble. He observed me closely, and appeared quite satisfied.

"What I have to propose to you, is attended with no little danger."

"I will do my utmost not to be afraid. I am more impulsive perhaps than brave, but what is life worth to me? I will try to think of that all the time. No doubt you have a good reason for exposing me to danger."

"Certainly I have, Miss Valence. For your own purpose it is most important that you should be able to identify certain persons, whom I shall show you to-night; that is, unless I am misinformed."

"To-night! so late as this?" And I began to tremble already.

"Yes, we must go to-night, or wait for another fortnight; and then it would be no earlier, even if we got such a chance again. And for your sake it is better than to be in a fright for a fortnight."

"Inspector Cutting, I am in no fright whatever. At least I mean no more so than any other girl would be, who felt a vague danger impending. I hope and trust that my father's memory and the justice of God will be with me."

"Young lady, I see that I may safely venture it. If you had boasted, I should have hesitated, though I have had some proof already of your determination. The chief, and indeed the only danger, is lest you lose your presence of mind, and that most females would do, if placed as you will be. Now I wish you to make deliberate choice, and not to be carried away by impulse vindictiveness, or the love of adventure; which, when the spirit is high like yours, too often leads young females into trouble, from which it is not always possible even for the most capable members of the force to extricate them."

"Of course I know all that. How much longer are we to talk? Must I disguise myself? When am I to be ready? And where are we going?"

"Now you are growing impatient. That is not a good sign. Remember, I can easily procure another witness; but for your own sake I wish to give you the chance. Probably you will see to-night the man who killed your father."

As he spoke my flesh was creeping, and my blood ran cold, then suddenly flushed through my system like electric fluid. He began again as coolly as if he were reporting a case of some one discovered "drunk and incapable." From force of habit, he touched his forehead, and stood at attention, as he spoke. "In consequence of information which I have received, I have been induced to make certain inquiries, which have resulted in the conviction that the criminal I am in search of will be present at a certain place this night, at a certain hour. It is therefore my intention to embrace the opportunity of—"

"Catching him!" cried I in a breathless hurry.

"To embrace the opportunity," continued the Inspector, like a talking oak, "of conducting my investigations personally, and in the presence of a witness. The effect thereby produced upon my mind shall be entered duly, the moral effect I should have said, and the cause of justice will be promoted as rapidly as is consistent with the principles of our glorious constitution."

"Do you mean to say that you will let him go?"

"No, I shall not let him go, Miss Valence, for the simple reason that I shall not apprehend him. I see that you are inclined to take the law into your own hands. That will never do for me."

"Oh no, I am not. A year ago I would have done so. But I am older and wiser now."

I was thinking of dear mother; and began to feel already that my character was changing.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Inspector Cutting gave me some minute instructions, and in less than half an hour we set forth upon our enterprise. I was wrapped in a loose grey cloak having a hooded cape; and carefully hidden I carried for self-defence a very keen stiletto. I had procured it indirectly from the best cutler in London, but neither workmanship nor material could be compared to that of Italy.

The night was dark and cold, the streets were almost deserted, and all the shops except the chemists' and the public-houses closed. We walked straightway to the nearest cabstand, where Mr. Cutting ordered a vehicle, and put me inside, himself riding with the driver. So little did I know as yet of London, that after the first turn or two, I could not even guess what direction we were taking. I had such confidence in my guide, a staid respectable man with a grown up family, that I never thought there could be harm in my journeying with him at night. And even had I thought so, most likely I should have done it all the same. Ever since the time he wounded me, or allowed me to wound myself, his manner towards me had been most kind, considerate, and respectful; though he found it his duty now and then to repress my impetuosity.

With all my perception alert, I kept a sharp look-out from the window, but vainly strove to find anything that might serve for a landmark. Once we stopped for about five minutes, at a police-station somewhere in Clerkenwell, where, by the light of a lamp, I read, without leaving the cab, the ghastly descriptions of all the dead bodies recently found in London and waiting identification. Hereupon my courage began to ooze, and the weather seemed much colder. The type was hard to read at that distance, and the imagination had fair play, as it does when words come slowly.

Anon the inspector reappeared, so altered in dress and countenance, that I did not know him until he made me a bow. With a glance of encouragement, and a little grin of dry humour, he mounted the box again. After another long drive, in the course of which we ran silently over a wooden road, – probably High Holborn, – we stopped in a broad but deserted thoroughfare, very badly lighted. Here Mr. Cutting opened the door, helped me out, and discharged the cab, but whispered something to the driver before he let him go.

"Now take my arm, Miss Valence, if you please. I have escorted many a lady of higher birth than yours."

"Of higher title perhaps, Mr. Cutting; and their grandfathers money-lenders, or perhaps far worse."

"I am sure I don't know; we must take things as we find them. I thought you despised such nonsense. But the cabbage that runs to seed is the tallest in the field. No Englishman sees the nonsense of it, unless he happens to be a detective or a grave-digger."

"Do you mean to say that those of lofty birth are worse than those of low birth?"

"No, I mean nothing of the sort. But I do mean that they ought to be better, and on the whole are not so. Nature holds the balance, and temptation and education chuck into the opposite scales, and I think the first chucks fastest. At any rate I would rather have a good drunken navvy than a lord to take to the station. I mean of course when my own rank was not what it is."

This little dissertation was meant to divert my thoughts. I made no reply, being ignorant of such matters; neither did I care to talk about them then. Nevertheless, I believe Inspector Cutting was wrong. As we entered a narrow street he suddenly turned and looked at me.

"Poor child! how you tremble! Draw your cape more forward; the bitter cold requires it. Are you trembling from fear?"

"No; only from cold." But I tried in vain to think so.

"A steady hand and steadfast nerve are wanted for your task. If you cannot rely on them, say so at once. In five minutes you will have no retreat."

"I shall be better directly. But I am so cold. Inspector Cutting, it must be freezing hard-ten degrees, I should think."

"It does not freeze at all. I see we must warm you a little. But no more 'Inspector Cutting,' if you please, until to-morrow."

Hereupon he led me into a little room, fenced off from the bar of some refreshment-house. A glorious fire was burning, by which he set and left me. Presently he returned, with a small glass in his hand.

"Drink this, young lady. It will warm you, and brace your nerves."

I saw by the firelight that it was brandy, or some dark-coloured spirit.

"No, I thank you. Do you suppose that I require Dutch courage?"

I threw such emphasis on the personal pronoun, and looked at him so indignantly, that he laughed outright.

"I thank you in turn. You suppose that I do. I will justify your discernment." And with that he tipped it off, and then returned to business, all the graver for the interlude.

"Now, if you are really warm, we will start again. Stop one moment. I have heard you cough two or three times. Can you keep it under?"

I assured him that I could very easily do so, and that it was nothing but the sudden effect of the cold. Forth we went again into the winter night, after I had learned from him that we were now in Whitechapel, not far from Goodman's Fields.

After another short walk, we came to the end of a narrow by-street, where there was an archway. Passing through this archway, we descended some steep and broken steps. Then the Inspector produced a small lamp brightly burning, which he must have lit at the public-house. It was not what is called a bull's-eye, but a reflector-lamp. By its light I saw that the chief entrance to the house must be round the corner, and perhaps in another street. With a small key which he took from his pocket, Mr. Cutting unlocked a little iron gate, and we entered a narrow passage. At the end of it was a massive door studded with great nails. Here my guide gave a gentle knock, and hid the lamp as before.

Presently we heard a shrill sound from the keyhole, like a dryad's voice. The Inspector stooped thereto, and pronounced the password. Not without some difficulty the lock was turned and the bolts withdrawn, and we stood inside. A child, under-sized and unnaturally sharp, stared at us for a moment, then dodged away from the lamp, as if more accustomed to darkness. Mr. Cutting closed the door and refastened it, then led me through some basement rooms unpaved and unfurnished, until we came to an iron step-ladder. This he ascended, and helped me up, and we found ourselves in a small dark lobby, containing no furniture, except a high three-legged stool. When he closed his lamp all around was dark, but on the rafters overhead a faint patch of light appeared-ceiling there was none.

"Do you see that light?" he whispered to me, pointing, as I could just perceive, to a narrow glazed opening high in the wall, whence the faint gleam proceeded.

"Then jump upon this stool, and do your best to see through."

He cast the light of his lamp upon the stool for a moment, while I did as he bade me. Standing there, I found that I was tall enough to look through; but the narrow pane which formed the window was thickly covered with size, or some opaque integument. All I could tell was, that the space beyond was lighted.

"I know you can't see now," he said, as I came down despairing, "but you shall see by and by. The fools who were here before sized the glass on the wrong side, and this lot, though much sharper, have not corrected the error. They keep that window for escape in the last resort. Now take this bottle and this camel's-hair brush; it will make the glass transparent without the smallest noise. The men are not there yet. We could easily rub it clear now, but they will examine it. When the time comes, use the liquid most carefully and lightly, and don't spread it higher than an inch from the bottom of the frame. The lights are at this end; the shadow of the sill will allow you just an inch."

"And how far may I go horizontally?"

"The whole length of the glass, to command as much view as possible. The effect will pass in three or four minutes, but you must not do it again. If you do, the glass will fly, and you will be in their hands. Desperate men they are, and though I shall be near, I might be too late to save you. See all you can, to be able to swear to them all."

"How shall I know the one?"

"I cannot tell you. I must leave it to your instinct, or your intuition. I only know myself that he is one of the four. My information, such as it is, was obtained very oddly, and I trust to this night's work to make it more precise. One thing more: No noise, if you value your life. Keep the bottle stopped. Don't let the stuff drop on you; don't put your eyes to it, or it will blind you for ever. There is very little of it, because it is so deadly."

"When shall I do it?"

"In one hour from this time. Take this repeater. I have shown you how to use it. Look well at it now, while you have the light."

I looked at the watch; it was nearly midnight.

"Am I to be left in the dark—all in the dark here, by myself?"

"Yes. I must be seen elsewhere, or the whole thing fails. They know me even in this dress, and they watch me as I do them. But for to-night I believe I have misled them. When it is over, wait here till I come for you, or the little girl you saw."

"Oh! I wish I had never come; and all so vague and indecisive!"

"You can go back now, if you please; though ever that would be dangerous."

"I will not go back. No doubt I shall know him. When will you secure him?"

"When my evidence is completed. Now, remember, you have to deal with men keen as hawks, and stealthy as tigers. But there is no real danger, if you keep your self-command. Observe all four as narrowly as you can, both for your own sake and for mine. Be careful to stand on the centre of the stool. But you had better not get upon it until they have searched the room. Now, good-bye. I trust to your courage. If any harm comes, I will avenge you."

"A comfort that! What good will it be to me?"

"If vengeance is no good, what are you doing here?"

"Thank you. That is no business of yours. Don't let me detain you."

He told me afterwards that he had vexed me on purpose to arouse my mettle. And I am sure I needed it.

"Ah! now you are all right. If your caution fails you, the man who slew your father will be sure to escape us."

"If it fails me, 'twill be from anger, not from terror."

"I know it. Let me look at you."

He threw the full light on my face. The burnished concave was not brighter or firmer than my eyes.

"Pale as death, and quite as resolute. Rely only upon yourself."

"God and myself," I whispered, as he glided out of sight along the vaults below. I could see no other entrance to the place in which I sat; but how could I tell?

For a minute excitement kept me hot; but as the last gleam of the light died upon the wall below, my heart began to throb heavily, and a chill came over me. The pulse thumped in my ears, like a knocking in the cellar. "Was it fear?" I asked myself, in scorn that I should ask. No, it was not fear, but horrible suspense. The balance of life and death, of triumph and disgrace, swung there before me in the dark, as if my breath would turn it. No dream of a child, no vagary of the brain—the clear perception of strong will and soul poised upon this moment.

The moment was too long; the powers began to fail, the senses grew more faint and confused at every heavy throb. Little images and little questions took the place of large ones. In vain I looked for even a cobweb, or the skeleton of a fly, where the dull light flickered through the pane of glass.

In vain I listened for a mouse. Even a rat (much as I hate him) would have been welcome then. The repeater was purposely made so low of tick, that I got no comfort thence. All was deep, unfathomable silence, except the sound of my rebel heart.

As a forlorn hope, I began to reckon sixty slowly, as a child keeps with a ticking clock.

It would not do. My heart was beating louder than ever, and my hands were trembling; even my teeth rattled like dice in a box as the time approached.

The nerves will not be hoodwinked; the mind cannot swindle the body. I once slapped the cheeks of my governess. I cannot treat nature so. Try the sweet influence, and the honest coin of reason. It will not do. All trembling, I strike the repeater. Five minutes more, and the trial must come. My heart is fluttering like a pigeon's throat. The long suspense has been too much. Oh! why was I submitted to this cruel ordeal? The walls are thick. I can hear no movement in the secret room.

There comes a creeping, fingering, sound, as of one whose candle is out, groping for the door. It passes along the pane of glass, and a shadow is thrown on the rafter. Who can it be? What stealthy hand but that of my father's murderer?

The word-the thought is enough. What resolution, reason, justice, all in turn, have failed to do, passion has done at once-passion at myself, as well as at my enemy. Is it Clara Vaughan, who, for eight long years of demon's reign, has breathed but for this moment-is Clara Vaughan to shake like the wooden-legged blackbird now her chance is come?

A rush of triumph burned, like vitriol, through my veins. Every nerve was braced, every sense alert and eager. Against the light of that window, dull as it was, I could have threaded the finest needle that ever was made.

I struck my repeater again. It was the hour, the minute, when my father died. With the mere spring of my instep I leaped upon the stool. I could see it clearly now. I dipped the broad camel's-hair brush in the flat phial, holding it carefully at arm's length, and then drew it lightly along the pane, quite at the bottom, from corner to corner. One more dip, one more stripe above, a steam hovered on the glass, and there was a gazing-place, clear as crystal, and wide enough to show most of the narrow room. Of the room itself I took no heed; the occupants were my study.

Only four in all. One man at a high desk writing rapidly; three men sitting round a small table, talking earnestly, and with much gesticulation, but the tone too low for me even to guess their language. From the appearance, manner, and action of the speakers, I felt sure that it was not English, and I thought that it was not French. Why, I cannot say; but my attention fixed itself upon the man who was writing at the top of the room. Perhaps it was because I could see him best, for he stood with his face full towards me.

He was a man of middle age and stature, strongly framed, closely knit, and light of limb, with a handsome, keenly oval face, broad forehead, black eyes, glancing quickly and scornfully at his three comrades, long hair of an iron grey, falling on his shoulders, and tossed back often with a jerk of the head. His hands were white and restless, quick as light in their motion. On the left thumb flashed a large red jewel. Though I could not see the paper, I knew by the course of the quill that the writing was very small. But one minute I watched him, for the film was returning upon the glass, and I must scan the others; yet in that time he had written several lines, half of them without looking at the paper, but with his eyes upon the other three.

I knew him now he was in clear light, I could swear to him anywhere again. The last glance I could spare him sent a shudder through me, for in his impatience he shifted one foot from the shade of the desk. It was small, pointed, and elegant.

The film was thickening, like frost upon the pane, when I began to observe the others. But I saw enough to print their faces on my memory, or those at least of two. The third I could not see so well. He seemed older than the rest. All the men wore loose grey tunics, with a red sash over the left shoulder. I judged that the three were debating hotly, as to some measure, upon which the fourth had resolved. Every now and then, they glanced at him uneasily.

At him I gazed again, with deadly hatred, cold as ice, upon my heart. I felt my dagger handle. Oh for one moment with him! In my fury I forgot the Inspector's warning. The film was closing over. I touched the glass with my lashes. A flash of agony shot through my eyes. With a jerk I drew back, the stool rocked under me, one foot of it struck the wall. I clutched the window sill, and threw my weight inwards. Down came the foot of the stool, loud as the bang of a door.

I thought it was all over. How I stifled a scream I know not; had it escaped me, I should never have told this story. I had the presence of mind to stand still, and watch, though my eyes were maddening me, what the cut-throats would do. Through the agony, and the dimness, I could just see them all start, and rush to the door at the side of the room. The writer stood first, with his papers thrust anyhow into his bosom, a pistol in one hand, a poniard in the other. Did I know the shape of it? The other three were armed, but I could not see with what. They crouched behind a heavy screen, presenting (I supposed) their pistol muzzles at the door. Finding no attack ensue, they began to search. Now was the real danger to me. If they searched that window before the size returned, my life ended there. Fear was past. Desperation seized me. If I was doomed to blindness, just as well to death. But I clutched my dagger.

My left ear was against the wall. I heard a hand graze the partition inside, then a chair placed under the embrasure, and a step upon it. I was still upon the stool, stooping close beneath the window frame. Suddenly the light streak vanished, the size flew over it, as the breath flies over glass in the hardest frost. The hand felt along the window frame, the dull shadow of a head flitted upon the beam. It was within a foot of mine. The searcher passed on, without suspicion.

Strange it was, but now the deadliest peril was over, triple fear fell upon me. The heat flew back to my heart, just now so stanch and rigid; my hair seemed to creep with terror. Dear life, like true love scorned, would have its way within me. Quietly I slid down from the stool, and cowered upon it, in a storm of trembling. My eyelids dropped in agony, I could not lift them again, but blue and red lights seemed to dance within them. I had made up my mind to blindness; but not, oh not just yet, to death.

How long I remained in this abject state, scorning myself, yet none the braver, is more than I can tell, or even cared to ask. May it never be the lot of any, not even the basest murderer! Worn out at last, in a lull of pain and terror, I fell into deep sleep, from which I was awakened by a hand upon my shoulder.

I tried to look up, but could not. Sight was fled, and as I thought for ever. But I felt that it was a friend.

"Ah, I see how it is" – the voice was Inspector Cutting's- "my poor child, there is now no danger. Give me your hand: " he tried to lift me, but I fell against the wall.

"Take a sip of this, we must restore circulation. It is the cold as much as anything; another sip, Miss Vaughan." He used my true name on purpose; it helped to restore me. He was most humane and kind; he did not even remind me of Dutch courage.

## BOOK III

### CHAPTER I

In the morning I dreamed of Isola. Across a broad black river, I saw her lovely smile. Thick fog rose from the water, in which two swans were beating a dog, and by snatches only could I see my darling. She waved her little hand to me, and begged me, with that coaxing smile which bent cast iron and even gold, to come across to Isola. In vain I looked for a boat, even in my dream I knew that I could not swim, and if I could, the lead upon my eyelids would have sunk me. So I called to her to come to me, and with that cry awoke.

It was striking ten-my own little clock which my father gave me. I counted every stroke. What was Mrs. Shelfer doing, that she had not called me yet? What was I doing, that I lay there so late; for I always get up early? And what was the sun about, that no light came into the room? I knew it was ten in the morning.

I felt all round. I was in my little bed, the splinter at the side of the head-board ran into my finger as usual. There I was, and nowhere else. Was it a tremendous fog? If it was, they should have told me, for they knew that I liked fogs. At least they thought so, from the interest I felt.

I groped for the little bell-pull, a sleezy worsted cord, which meant to break every time, but was not strong enough to do it. I jerked with all my strength, which seemed very little somehow. What a pleasure! The bell rang like a fire-peal. I fell back on the pillow, exhausted, but determined to have it out with Mrs. Shelfer. I put my hands up to arrange my hair, to look a little more like Clara Vaughan, when the light should enter, and to frighten Mrs. Shelfer.

There was something on my head. I never wear a night-cap; my long black hair would scorn it. Am I in a madhouse, is this put to keep me cool? Cold it is, and my brain so hot. All Wenham lake on Dives, and he will only hiss. While I am pulling at it, and find it streaming wet, in comes-I know her step-Mrs. Shelfer. But there is no light from the passage!

"Mrs. Shelfer, what do you mean by this?"

"By what, my dear good soul? I have done all the blessed things I was told to do for you. You might have put a ostrich feather or a marabout to my mouth, Miss Valence, and tucked me up, and a headstone, and none the wiser, when Uncle John brought you home last night."

"I suppose I am dreaming. But I am sure I rang the bell."

"Miss Valence, you did so, and no mistake. Bless me! I started in my shoes. A good job, Shelfer wasn't home, he's so nervous. He'd have gone for gin straightways. Now get up, that's a dear good soul, and when you have had some breakfast, we'll talk over it, Miss Valence. Let me see how your eyes are. Uncle John said they was bad, and I was to keep them covered. I expects him here every minute. Now turn them up to the light. What large eyes you have, to be sure. Bless me! Where are your long black lashes?"

"Mrs. Shelfer, there is some strange mistake. Let the light into the room."

I had risen in the bed, and her breath was on my forehead.

"Light, dear child, I can't let more. The sun is on your face."

I fell back upon my pillow, and could rise no more. The truth had been tingling through me, all the time she talked. I was stone-blind. I flung the bandage from me, and wished my heart would break. Mrs. Shelfer tried some comfort. She seemed to grieve for my eyelashes, more than for my eyes; and addressed her comfort more to my looks than sight. Of course, I did not listen. When would the creature be gone, and let me try to think?

Poor little thing! I was very sorry; what fault was it of hers? Who and what am I, blind I, to find fault with any one who means me well? I drop my eyelids, I can feel them fall; I lift them, I can

feel them rise; a full gaze, a side gaze, a half gaze; with both eyes, with one; it is all the same; gaze there may be, but no sight. Henceforth I want no eyelids.

The sun is on my face. I can feel his winter rays, though my cheeks are wet. What use is he to me?

I have the dagger somewhere by which my father died. Let me find it, if I can.

I could have sworn that the box was in that corner carefully concealed. I strike against a washing-stand. Ah, now I have it; the box is locked, my keys are in the top-drawer. I bear the box to the bed, and go groping for the chest of drawers. Already I can tell by the sun-warmth on my face, which way I am going. Surely, if I wait, I shall have the instinct of the blind.

What care I for that? The coward love of life suggested that poor solace. Now I have the keys. Quick unlock the box.

At length I throw the cover back. The weapon handle is to the right. I stoop to seize it. I grasp a square of colour. Pretty instinct this! I have got my largest drawing box.

Oh paints, my paints, so loved but yesterday, that ape the colours I shall never see, my hot tears make you water-colours indeed! If God has robbed my eyes of sight, He has not dried my tears.

The gushing flood relieves me. What right have I to die? Even without asking if my case be hopeless! Who knows but what these lovely tints may glow for me again? May I not once more intone the carmine damask of the rose, the gauzy green of April's scarf? Softening scenes before me rise. I lay my box of colours by, and creep into my bed for warmth.

Presently the doctor comes. Inspector Cutting has chosen him, and chosen well. From his voice I know that he is a gentleman, from his words and touch instinctively I feel that he understands the case.

When he has finished the examination he sees me trembling for the answer which I dare not seek.

"Young lady, I have hopes, strong hopes. It is quite impossible to say what course the inflammation may pursue. All depends on that. At present there is a film over the membrane, but the cornea is uninjured. Perfect quiet, composure, so far as in such a case is possible, cold applications, and the exclusion of light, are the simple remedies. All the rest must be left to nature. Avoid excitement of any kind. Diet as low as possible. Do not admit your dearest friends, unless they will keep perfect silence. Even so, they are better away, unless you pine at loneliness."

"Oh no. I am quite accustomed to that."

"That is well. I shall make a point of calling daily, but shall not examine your eyes every time. The excitement and the effort would strain the optic nerve. Our object is to keep the inflammation from striking inwards. I should not tell you all this, but I see that you have much self-command. On that and your constitution, under Providence, the cure depends. One question. I am not a professed ophthalmist, would you prefer to have one?"

"Oblige me with your opinion."

"It is a delicate point for me. There is no operation to perform. It is a medical, not a surgical case. I have dealt with such before. Were you my own child I would call in no ophthalmist, but as you are a stranger to me, I wish you to decide for yourself."

"Then, I will have none. I have perfect confidence in you."

He seemed gratified, and took his leave. "Please God, Miss Valence, you shall look me in the face ere long."

## CHAPTER II

"Composure is my only chance." What chance have I of composure until I know the meaning of what I saw last night? Blind though I am, one face is ever before me. No thickening of the membrane can exclude that face. Inspector Cutting is still below; I will send for him at once.

Mrs. Shelfer remonstrates. "It will excite you so, my good friend. The doctor said perfect quiet."

"Just so. I can have none, until I have spoken to your Uncle John. Let him stay in my sitting-room, open the folding-door a little, and then, Mrs. Shelfer, please to go down stairs."

I hear the Inspector's step, not so heavy this time. He asks how I am, and expresses his sorrow. I feel obliged to him for not reminding me that the fault was all my own. Then I implore him, if he wishes me ever to see again, to tell me all he knows about the men I saw last night.

Thus entreated, he cannot refuse me, but first looks up and down the stairs, as I know by the sound of his steps; then he shuts the door of the sitting-room. All he knows is not very much. They are refugees, Italian refugees; two political and two criminal exiles, leaders now of a conspiracy to revolutionize their country.

"But why does he not arrest them?"

"Simply because he has no right. As for the political refugees, of course, we never meddle with them; as for the two criminals, they have not been demanded by their Government. Wonderful now, isn't it? The two fellows who have committed murder their Government would not give sixpence for them; but the two men who have only spouted a little, it would give a thousand pounds for either of them. He can't understand such a system."

And Inspector Cutting sucks his lips-I know it by the sound-he always does it when he is in a puzzle. Being a true Englishman, he knows no more of serfdom, than of the dark half of the moon. I mean, of course, political serfdom. Of social slavery we have enough to last ten generations more.

"Would he be afraid to arrest them? He said they were desperate men."

"He should rather hope he wouldn't. They had got their knives, and pistols, and all that humbug. But it was more show than fight. They were desperate men in a private quarrel, particular when they could come round a corner, and when women were concerned; but as for showing honest fight, he would sooner come across three of them, than one good Irish murderer."

"What was his proof against my enemy? I need not ask him which it was."

The excitement of this question sent needles through my eyes. And I could not see him, to probe his pupils.

"Well, his proof was very little. In fact it was no proof at all as yet. But he was not like a juryman. He was quite convinced; and his eyes should never be off that man, until he had him under warrant, and the whole case clear. Would that satisfy me?"

He spoke with such hearty professional pride, that I could not help believing him. But as for being satisfied-why should his evidence be a mystery to me? "Catch him at once," was my idea; but a hot and foolish one. "Get up the evidence first," was Inspector Cutting's, "I can catch him at any time." That was the whole gist of it. Could he always catch him?

He scorned the idea of there being any difficulty about it. The man could leave for no part of the Continent; he was a political refugee. America was his only bourne beyond the Inspector's jurisdiction. And thither he could not try to go without the Police being down upon him at once.

By this time I was worn out, though my reasons were not exhausted. In a word, I was only half satisfied, but I could not help myself. If, in my helpless blindness, I offended Inspector Cutting, the whole chance disappeared. Only one question remained. "Why did he take me thither?"

"For excellent reasons. As to the one, it was most important that I should always know him again. Moreover, it saved my energies from waste. As to the other three, he had his own reasons for requiring an intelligent witness about their proceedings."

I thought of the thousand pounds, and said no more. Inspector Cutting was an Englishman, and proud, in his way, of English freedom. But, like nine-tenths of us, he thought that we alone understand what freedom is. What good was it to such fellows as those? They would only be free of one another's throats. And like all of us, with most rare exception, next to freedom, he valued money. For our love of this, many foreigners jeer us. All we can say is, that with us it is second, with them it is first. But we are of such staple, our second is stronger than their first.

When the Inspector was gone, I formed a very sensible resolve. Since there was nothing more to be done or learned at present, my only care should be the recovery of my sight. If I were to be blind till death, the purpose of my life was lost, and I might as well die at once. But now the first blind agony, the sudden shock, was over; and I had too much of what the Inspector denominated "pluck," to knock under so.

In the afternoon, when all was quiet, lovely Isola came. Strict orders had been given that no one should be admitted. But Mrs. Shelfer was not proof against the wiles of Isola.

"She smiled so bootiful, when I opened the door, Miss, it fetched out all my hair pins; and when I told her you was ill in bed, and struck stone blind along of some chemical stuff, two big tears came out of her long blue eyes, same as the wet out of a pennorth of violets, Miss; and as for stopping her, she threw her muff at me, and told me to stop that if I liked, and to run and tell you that she was coming, quick, quick!

"To be sure, and here I am!" cried the cheery voice I loved so well. "Oh, Clara dear, dear Clara!" The little darling flung her soft warm arms around me, utterly forgetful of her dress, forgetful of all the world, but that little bit of it she held. Her delicious breath came over my fevered cheek, her cool satin flesh was on my burning eyelids. What lotion could be compared to this? How long she stayed, I cannot tell; I only know that while I heard her voice, and felt her touch, blindness seemed no loss to me. She pronounced herself head nurse; and as for doctors, what were they, compared to her own father? If she could coax him, he should come next day, and deliver his opinion, and then the doctor might betake himself to things he understood, if indeed he understood anything, which she did not believe he did, because he had said she was not to come. My drawings too she admired, much more than they deserved, and her brother Conrad must come and see them, he was so fond of drawing, and there was nothing he could not do. She was so sorry she must go now, but old Cora must be tired of patrolling, and she herself had a lecture to attend upon the chemical affinity of bodies. What it meant she had no idea, but that would not matter the least; some of the clever girls said they did, but she would not believe them; it took a man, she was sure, to understand such subjects. She would bring her work the next day, such as it was, and the nicest bit of sponge that was ever seen, it could not be bought in London; and she would answer for it I should be able to paint her likeness in a week; and she would not go till it was dark; and then the Professor should come for her when his lectures were over, and examine me; he knew all about optics, and retinas, and pencils of light, and refraction and aberration, and she could not remember any more names; but she felt quite certain this was a case of optical delusion, and nothing else.

How I wished I could have seen her, when she pronounced this opinion, with no little solemnity. She must have looked such a sage! The thought of that made me laugh, as well as the absurdity of the idea. But I only asked how the Professor was to examine my eyes, if he did not come till dark.

To be sure! She never thought of that. What a little goose she was! But she would make him come in the morning, before his work began; and then old Cora would fetch her home to tea. And she had very great hopes, that if she could only persuade her papa to deliver a lecture in my room, it would have such an effect on my optic nerves, that they would come all right directly, at any rate I should know how to treat them.

Delighted with this idea, she kissed me, and hugged me, and off she ran, after telling me to be sure to keep my spirits up, and the bandage not too tight.

The latter injunction was much easier to obey than the former. She had enlivened me wonderfully, as well as nursed me most delicately; but now that she was gone, the usual reaction commenced. Moreover, although as the saying is, the sight of her would have been good for sore eyes, the effort at seeing her, which I could not control, when she was present, was, I already felt, anything but good for them. And the loss, when she was gone, was like a second loss of light.

Light! What million thoughts flash through me at that little word! Swiftest thing the mind has met, too like itself to understand. Is it steed or wing of mind? Nay, not swift enough for that. Is it then the food of life, prepared betimes ere life appeared, the food the blind receive but cannot taste? If so, far better to be blind from birth. Well I know the taste from memory; shall I never taste it else? Has beauty lost its way to me? The many golden folds of air, the lustrous dance of sunny morn, the soft reclining of the moon, the grand perspective of the stars (long avenue to God's own home), are these all blank to me, and night made one with day?

Oh God, whose first approach was light, replenisher of sun and stars, whence dart anew thy gushing floods (solid or liquid we know not), whose subtle volume has no bourne or track; light, the dayside half of life, leaping, flashing, beaming; glistening, twinkling, stealing; light! Oh God, if live I must, grudge me not a ray!

## CHAPTER III

Low fever followed the long prostration to which the fear of outer darkness had reduced my jaded nerves. This fever probably redeemed my sight, by generalizing the local inflammation, to which object the doctor's efforts had been directed. Tossing on my weary bed, without a glimpse of anything, how I longed for the soft caresses and cool lips of Isola! But since that one visit, she had been sternly excluded. The Professor had no chance of delivering his therapeutic lecture. In fact he did not come. "Once for all," said Dr. Franks, when he heard of that proposal, "choose, Miss Valence, between my services, and the maundering of some pansophist. If you prefer the former, I will do my utmost, and can almost promise you success; but I must and will be obeyed. None shall enter your room, except Mrs. Shelfer and myself. As to your lovely friend, of whom Mrs. Shelfer is so full, if she truly loves you, she will keep away. She has done you already more harm than I can undo in a week. I am deeply interested in this case, and feel for you sincerely; but unless you promise me to see-I mean to receive-no one without my permission, I will come no more."

It sounded very hard, but I felt that he was right.

"No crying, my dear child, no crying! Dear me, I have heard so much of your courage. Too much inflammation already. Whatever you do, you must not cry. That is one reason why I will not have your friend here. When two young ladies get together in trouble, I know by my own daughters what they do. You may laugh as much as you like, in a quiet way; and I am sure Mrs. Shelfer can make any one laugh, under almost any circumstances. Can't you now?"

"To be sure, my good friend, I have seen such a many rogues. That is, when I know Charley's a-coming home."

"Now good bye, Miss Valence. But I would recommend you not to play with your paints so. There is an effluvium from them."

"Oh, what can I do, what am I to do to pass the endless night? I was only trying to build a house in the dark."

"Sleep as much as you can. I am giving you gentle opiates. When you can sleep no longer, let Mrs. Shelfer talk or read to you, and have a little music. I will lend you my musical box, which plays twenty-four tunes: have it in the next room, not to be too loud. And then play on the musical glasses, not too long at a time: you will soon find out how to do that in the dark."

He most kindly sent us both the boxes that very day; and many a weary hour they lightened of its load. Poor Isola came every day to inquire, and several times she had her brother with her. She made an entire conquest of Mrs. Shelfer, who even gave her a choice canary bird. I was never tired of hearing the little woman's description of her beauty, and her visit to the kitchen formed the chief event of the day. Mrs. Shelfer (who had Irish blood in her veins) used to declare that the ground was not good enough for them to walk on.

"Such a pair, Miss! To see her so light, and soft, and loving, tripping along, and such eyes and such fur; and him walking so straight, and brave, and noble. I am sure you'd go a mile, Miss, to see him walk."

"You forget, Mrs. Shelfer, I may never enjoy that pleasure."

"No, no. Quite true, my good friend. But then we may, all the same."

Exactly so. There lay all the difference to me, but none to any other. This set me moralising in my shallow way, a thing by no means natural to me, who was so concentrated and subjective. But loss of sight had done me good, had turned the mind's eye inward into the darkness of myself. I think the blind, as a general rule, are less narrow-minded than those endowed with sight. Less inclined, I mean, to judge their neighbours harshly, less arrogant in exacting that every pulse keep time with their own. If eyes are but the chinks through which we focus on our brain censoriousness and bigotry, if rays of light are shafts and lances of ill will; then better is it to have no crystalline lens. Far better to be

blind, than print the world-distorted puppets of myself. I, that smallest speck of dust, blown upon the shore of time, blown off when my puff shall come; a speck ignored by moon and stars; too small (however my ambition leap) for earth to itch, whate'er I suck; and yet a speck that is a mountain in the telescope of God; shall I never learn that His is my only magnitude; shall I wriggle to be all in all to my own corpuscle?

## CHAPTER IV

Is there any Mocha stone, fortification agate, or Scotch pebble, with half the veins and mottlings, angles, flux and reflux, that chequer one minute of the human mind? Was ever machine invented to throw so many shuttles?

At present I am gauged for little threads of thought—two minutes since, the smallest thing I could think of was myself. Now it is the largest. Must I grope from room to room, shall I never be sure where the table is, where my teacup stands; never read, or write, or draw; never tell when my hands are clean, except by smelling soap; never know (though small the difference) how my dress becomes me, or when my hair is right; never see my own sad face, in which I have been fool enough to glory, never—and this is worst of all—never catch another's smile?

Here am I, a full-grown girl, full of maiden's thoughts and wonderings, knowing well that I am shaped so but to be a link in life; must I never think of loving or of being loved, except with love like Isola's; sweet affection, very sweet; but white sugar only?

When my work is over, and my object gained, when my father's spirit knows the wrong redeemed, as a child I used to think I would lay me down and die. But since I came to woman's fulness, since I ceased to look at men and they began to look at me, some soft change, I know not what, has come across my dream.

Is my purpose altered? Is my tenor broken? Not a whit of either. Rather are they stronger set and better led, as my heart and brain enlarge. Yet I see beyond it all, a thing I never used to see, a glow above the peaks of hate, a possibility of home. "Saw" I should have said, for now what have I to do with seeing?

On the fourteenth morning, I had given up all hope. They told me it was bright and sunny; for I always asked about the weather, and felt most cruelly depressed upon a sunny day. By this time I had learned to dress without Mrs. Shelfer's aid. Still, from force of habit I went to the glass to do my hair, and still drew back, as far as was allowed, the window curtain.

Off with my wet bandage, I am sick of it; let me try no longer to delude myself.

Suddenly a gleam of light, I am sure of it; faint indeed, and like a Will of the Wisp; but I am quite sure it was a gleam of light. I go nearer the window and try again. No, there is no more for the present, it was the sudden change produced it. Never mind; I know what I have seen, a thing that came and cheated me in dreams; this time it has not cheated me; it was a genuine twinkle of the sun.

I can do nothing more. I cannot put another stitch upon me. I am thrilling with the sun, like Memnon. I fall upon my knees, and thank the Father of light.

When the Doctor came that day, and looked into my eyes, he saw a decided change.

"Miss Valence, the crisis is over. With all my heart I congratulate you. Another fortnight, and you will see better than ever."

I laughed, and wept, and, blind as I was, could hardly keep from dancing. Then I wanted to kiss the Doctor, but hearing Mrs. Shelfer's step, made a reckless jump and had it out upon her.

"Bless me, why bless me, my good soul, if I was a young gentleman now—"

"Why, Miss Valence, I am perfectly astonished," said Doctor Franks, but I knew he was laughing; "if I had been requested, only two minutes ago, to pick out the most self-possessed, equable, and courageous young lady in London, I should have said, 'I don't want any looking, I know where to find her,' but now, upon my word—"

"If you are asked to point out the most delighted, grateful, and happy girl in London, you know where to come for her. Let me kiss you, Dr. Franks, only once. I won't rob your daughters. It is to you I owe it all."

"No, to Providence, and yourself, and an uncommonly good conjunctiva. Now be prudent, my dear child; a little ecstasy must be forgiven; but don't imperil your cure by over-excitement. It is, as I

hoped it would be, a case of epiphytic sloughing" (I think that was what he said), "and it may become chronic if precipitated. The longer and more thorough the process, the less chance of recurrence."

"Oh I am satisfied with one eye, or half an eye. Can you promise me that?"

"If you will only follow my directions, I can promise you both eyes, more brilliant than ever; and Mrs. Shelfer says they were wonderfully bright. But what I order must be done. Slow and sure."

He gave me short directions, all upon the same principle, that of graduation.

"And now, Miss Valence, good-bye. Henceforth I visit you only as a friend; in which I know you will indulge me, from the interest I feel in the case, and in yourself. Mrs. Shelfer's wonderful young lady may be admitted on Thursday; but don't let her look at your eyes. Girls are always inquisitive. If there is any young gentleman, lucky enough to explain your strange anxiety to see, you will make short work of him, when your sight returns. Your eyes will be the most brilliant in London; which is saying a great deal. But I fear he will hardly know you, till your lashes grow; and all your face and expression are altered for the time."

"One thing will never alter, though it can find no expression, my gratitude to you."

"That is very pretty of you, my dear child. You kissed me just now. Now let me kiss you."

He touched my forehead and was gone. He was the first true gentleman I had met with, since the loss of Farmer Huxtable.

## CHAPTER V

When Isola came on the Thursday, and I obtained some little glimpse of her, she expressed her joy in a thousand natural ways, well worth feeling and seeing, not at all worth telling. I loved her for them more and more. I never met a girl so warm of heart. Many women can sulk for days; most women can sulk for an hour; I believe that no provocation could have made Isola sulky for two minutes. She tried sometimes (at least she said so), but it was no good.

And yet she felt as keenly as any of the very sulkiest women can do; but she had too much warmth of heart and imagination to live in the folds of that cold-blooded snake. Neither had she the strong selfishness, on which that serpent feeds.

In the afternoon, as we still sat together, in rushed Mrs. Shelfer with her bonnet on, quite out of breath, and without her usual ceremony of knocking at the door. I could not think where she had been all the day; and she had made the greatest mystery of it in the morning, and wanted to have it noticed. Up she ran to me now, and pushed Isola out of the way.

"Got 'em at last, Miss. Got 'em at last, and no mistake. No more Dr. Franks, nor bandages, nor curtains down, nor nothing. Save a deal of trouble and do it in no time. But what a job I had to get them to be sure; if the cook's mate hadn't knowed Charley, they would not have let me had 'em, after going all the way to Wapping." She holds up something in triumph.

"What is it, Mrs. Shelfer? I am sorry to say I cannot see."

"And right down glad of it, I am, my good friend. Yes, yes. Or I should have had all my journey for nothing. But Miss Idols knows, I'll be bound she does, or it's no good going to College."

"Let me look at it first," says Isola, "we learn almost everything at college, Mrs. Shelfer; but even we senior sophists don't know every thing without seeing it yet."

"Then put your pretty eyes on them, Miss Idols; I'll be bound it will make them caper. I never see such fine ones, nor the cook's mate either. Why they're as big as young whelks."

"Mollusca, or Crustacea, or something!" exclaims Isola, with more pride than accuracy, "what queer little things. I must take them to my papa."

"Now, young ladies," cried Mrs. Shelfer in her grandest style, "I see I must explain them to you after all. Them's the blessed shells the poor sailors put in their eyes to scour them out, and keep them bright, and make them see in the dark against the wind. Only see how they crawls. There now, Miss Valence, I'll pick you out two big lively fellows, and pop one for you in the corner of each eye; the cook's mate showed me how to lift your eyelids."

"How kind of him, to be sure!"

"And it will crawl about under the lid, you must not mind its hurting a bit; and it won't come out till to-morrow when the clock strikes twelve, and then it will have eaten up every bit, and your eyes will be brighter than diamonds. Charley has seen them do it ever so many times, and he says it's bootiful, and they don't mind giving five shillings a piece for them, when they are scarce."

"Did Mr. Shelfer ever try them? His eyes are so sharp: perhaps that is the reason."

"No. I never heard that he did, Miss. But bless you he never tells me half he does; no, nor a quarter of half." At this recollection, she fetches a little short sigh, her nearest approach to melancholy, for she is not sentimental. "Care killed the cat," is her favourite aphorism.

"Then when he comes home, Mrs. Shelfer, pop one of these shells, a good big one, into each of his eyes; and let us know the effect to-morrow morning, and I'll give you a kiss, if you do it well."

This is the bribe Isola finds most potent with everybody.

"Lor, Miss Idols, bless your innocent heart, do you suppose he would let me? Why he thinks it a great thing to let me tie his shoe, and he won't only when he has had a good dinner."

"Well," cries Isola, "I am astonished! Catch me tying my husband's shoes! I shall expect him to tie mine, I know; and he shall only do that when he is very good."

With a regal air, she puts out the prettiest foot ever seen. Mrs. Shelfer laughs.

"Lor, Miss, it's all very well for girls to talk; and they all does it, till they knows better. Though for the likes of you, any one would do anything a most. Pray, Miss Idols, if I may make so bold, how many offers of marriage have you received?"

"Let me think! Oh I know! it's one more than I am years old. Eighteen altogether, Mrs. Shelfer; if you count the apothecary's boy, and the nephew of the library; but then they were all of them boys, papa's pupils and that, a deal too young for me. They were all going to die, when I refused them; but they are all alive so far, at any rate. Isn't it too bad of them?"

"Well, Miss Idols, if you get as good a husband as you deserve, and that is saying a deal, he'll tie your shoe may be for a month, and then he'll look for you to tie his."

"And long he may look, even if he has shellfish in his eyes. Why look, Mrs. Shelfer, they're all crawling about!"

"Bootiful, isn't it? Bootiful! I wish Miss Valence could see them. And look at the horns they goes routing about with! How they must tickle your eyelids. And what coorious eyes they has! Ah, I often think, Miss Idols, I likes this sort of thing so much, what a pity it is as I wasn't born in the country. I should never be tired of watching the snails, and the earywigs, and the tadpoles. Why, I likes nothing better than to see them stump-legged things come to table in the cabbage. I have not seen one now for ever so long. Oh that Charley, what dreadful lies he do tell!"

"What about, Mrs. Shelfer?"

"Why, my good friend, he says them green things with stripes on, and ever so many legs, turns to live butterflies, after they be dead. But I was too many for him there. Yes, yes. The last one as I boiled, I did not say a word about it to him, but I put it by in a chiney-teacup, with the saucer over, in case it should fly away. Bless your heart, young ladies, there it is now, as quiet as anything, and no signs of a butterfly. And when he tells me any lies, about where he was last night, I just goes to the cupboard, and shows him that; and never another word can he say. And so, Miss Valence, you won't try these little snails, after my journey and all!"

"Of course I won't, Mrs. Shelfer. But I am sincerely obliged to you for your trouble, as well as for all your kind nursing, which I can never forget. Now let me buy those shellfish from you, and Miss Isola will take them as a present to her papa."

"No, no, unless he will put them in his eyes, Miss. I won't have them wasted. Charley will sell them again in no time. He knows lots of sailors. Most likely he'll get up a raffle for them, and win them himself."

Away she hurries to take off the bonnet she has been so proud of, for the last two and twenty years. Though I declined the services of the ophthalmist snails, my sight returned very rapidly. How delicious it was to see more and more every day! Plenty of cold water was the present regimen. Vision is less a vision, every time I use it. In a week more, I can see quite well, though obliged to wear a shade.

One morning, dear Isola runs upstairs, out of breath as usual; but, what is most unusual, actually frowning. Has Cora tyrannised, or what? Through the very shade of her frown, comes her sunny smile, as she kisses me.

"Oh, I am so vexed. I have brought him to the door; and now he won't come in!"

"Who, my darling?"

"Why, Conny, to be sure. My brother Conrad. I had set my heart on showing him to you, directly you could see."

"Why won't he come in?"

"Because he thinks that you ought not to see strangers, until you are quite well. He has not got to the corner yet. I can run like a deer. Send word by me, that you are dying to see him."

"Not quite that. But say how glad I shall be."

"I'll say that you won't get well till you do."

"Say what you like. He will know it's only your nonsense."

Off she darts; she is quick as light in her movements, and soon returns with her brother.

I lift my weak eyes to his bright ones, and recognise at once the preserver of my mother and myself. But I see, in a moment, that he has not the faintest remembrance of me. My whole face is altered by my accident, and even my voice affected by the long confinement. When he met me in the wood, he seemed very anxious not to look at me; when he saved my life from the rushing mountain, he had little opportunity. Very likely he would not have known me, under another name; even without this illness. So let it be. I will not reveal myself. I thanked him once, and he repulsed me; no doubt he had a reason, for I see that he is a gentleman. Let that reason hold good: I will not trespass on it.

He took my hand with a smile, the counterpart of Isola's. He had heard of me so constantly, that I must excuse the liberty. A dear friend of his sister's could be no stranger to him. A thrill shot through me at the touch of his hand, and my eyes were weak. He saw it, and placed a chair for me further from the light. On his own face, not the sun, for the "drawing-room" windows look north, but the strong reflection of the noon-day light was falling.

How like he is to Isola, and yet how different! So much stronger, and bolder, and more decided, so tall and firm of step. His countenance open as the noon, incapable of concealment; yet if he be the same (and, how can I doubt it?), then at least there seemed to be some mystery about him.

Isola, with the quickness of a girl, saw how intently I observed him, and could not hide her delight.

"There now, Clara dear, I knew you would like him. But you must not look at him so much, or your poor eyes will be sore."

Little stupid! As I felt my pale cheeks colouring, I could almost have been angry, even with my Isola. But she meant no harm. In spite of lectures and "college," she was gentle nature personified; and no Professors could make anything else of her. All these things run in the grain. If there is anything I hate, I am sure I hate affectation. But there is a difference between us.

Probably it is this: I am of pure English blood, and she is not. That I know by instinct. What blood she is of, I am sure I cannot tell. Gentle blood at any rate, or I could not have loved her so. How horribly narrow-minded, after all my objectivity! Well, what I mean is, that I can like and love many people who are not of gentle, but (I suppose) of ferocious blood; still, as a general rule, culture and elegance are better matches for nature, after some generations of training. My father used to say so about his pointers and setters. The marvel is that I, who belong to this old streak, seem to have got some twist in it. My grandmother would have swooned at the names of some people I love more than I could have loved her. My mother would not. But then she was a Christian. Probably that is the secret of my twist.

All this has passed through my mind, before I can frown at Isola. And now I cannot frown at all. Dear little thing, she is not eighteen, and she knows no better. I have attained that Englishwoman's majority three weeks ago; and I am sorry for Isola.

To break the awkwardness, her brother starts off into subjects of art. He has heard of my drawings, may he see them some day? I ask him about the magnificent stag. Yes, that is his, and I have no idea how long it took him to do. He speaks of it with no conceit whatever; neither with any depreciation, for the purpose of tempting praise. As he speaks, I observe some peculiarity in his accent. Isola's accent is as pure as mine, or purer. Her brother speaks very good English, and never hesitates for a word; but the form of his sentences often is not English; especially when he warms to his subject; and (what struck me first, for I am no purist as to collocation of words) his accent, his emphasis is not native. The difference is very slight, and quite indescribable; but a difference there is. Perhaps it is rather a difference of the order of thought than of language, as regards the cast of the sentence; but that will not account for the accent; and if it would, it still shows another nationality.

There is a loud knock at the door. I am just preparing (with Isola's help) my little hospitalities. If London visits mean much talk and no food, I hold by Gloucestershire and Devon. I have a famous North Devon ham, and am proud of its fame. Surely no more visitors for me.

No; but one for Mrs. Shelfer. The Professor has heard of the eyeshells; and what politeness, humanity, love of his daughter failed to do, science has effected. He is come to see and secure them. His children hear his voice. Of course, we must ask him to come up. Mr. Conrad rises. Isola runs to fetch her father. Isola loves everybody. I do believe she loves old Cora. Conrad is of sterner stuff: but surely he loves his father. As for me-we were just getting on so well-I wanted no Professor. Isola's brother will not tell a lie. He does not remember, all at once, any pressing engagement. He holds out his hand, saying simply,

"Miss Valence, I heartily beg your pardon for leaving so suddenly; and just when we were giving you so much trouble. It would be impertinence for me to tell you the reason. It is a domestic matter. I trust you will believe me, that no light reason would make me rude. May I come again with Isola, to see your drawings soon?"

He meets the Professor on the stairs. The latter enters the room, under evil auspices for my good opinion.

## CHAPTER VI

If Professor Ross entered my room under evil auspices, it was not long before he sent the birds the other way. For the first time, since my childhood, I met a man of large and various knowledge; a man who had spent his life in amassing information, and learning how to make the most of it. A little too much perhaps there was of the second, and more fruitful branch, of the sour-sweet tree. Once I had been fool enough to fancy that some of my own little bopeeps at nature were original and peculiar. To Thomas Kenwood, Farmer Huxtable, and even Mr. Shelfer, a gardener, I had been quite an oracle as to the weather, the sky, and the insects about. Moreover, in most of the books I had read, there were such blunders, even in matters that lie on nature's doorsteps, that, looking back at them, I thought I had crossed her threshold.

As the proverb has it, nature always avenges herself; and here was I, a mere "gappermouth" (I use a Devonshire word), to be taught that I had not yet cropped even a cud to chew. True, I did not expect (like Mr. and Mrs. Shelfer) that a boiled caterpillar would become a live butterfly; neither did I believe, with Farmer Huxtable, that hips and haws foretell a hard winter, because God means them for the thrushes; but I knew no more than they did the laws and principles of things. My little knowledge was all shreds and patches. It did not cover even the smallest subject. Odd things here and there I knew; but a person of sound information knows the odd and the even as well. My observations might truly be called my own; but instead of being peculiar to me, nearly all of them had been anticipated centuries ago. I was but a gipsy straying where an army had been.

All this I suspected in less than ten minutes from the Professor's entrance; he did not leave me long in doubt about it. It is just to myself to say that the discovery did not mortify me much. My little observations had been made, partly from pure love of nature's doings, partly through habits drawn from a darker spring. At first I had felt no pleasure in them, but it could not long be so. Now they were mine as much as ever, though a thousand shared them with me.

As the Professor laid bare my ignorance and my errors, and proved that the little I did know was at second hand—which it certainly was not—I attempted no reply; I was too young for argument, and too much interested to be impatient. So he demolished my ham and myself, with equal relish and equal elegance of handling. He seemed to have no intention of doing either, but managed both incidentally, and almost accidentally, while he opened his mental encyclopædia.

At length, Isola, who was tired of lectures, such as she got and forgot every day, felt that it was high time to assert her prerogative, and come to my rescue.

"Come, Pappy, you fancy you know everything, don't you?"

He was just beginning to treat of mosses; and I knew that he was wrong upon several points, but did not dare to say so.

"My dear child, of the million things I never shall discover, one is the way to keep you at all in order."

"I should hope not, indeed. Come now, here is another thing you don't know. How long did it take to boil this delicious ham? Clara knows, and so do I."

"Upon that matter, I confess my total ignorance."

"Hear, hear! Pappy, you can lecture by the hour upon isothermic laws, and fluids, and fibrine, and adipose deposits, and you can't tell how long it took to set this delicate fat. I'll tell you what it is, Pappy, if you ever snub me in lecture again before the junior sophists, as you dared to do yesterday, I'll sing out, 'Ham, Pappy, ham!' and you'll see how the girls will laugh."

"No novelty, my dear, for them to laugh at you. I fear you never will learn anything but impertinence."

His words were light, and he strove to keep his manner the same; but his eyes belied him.

Isola ran round, and administered her never-failing remedy. There was that sweetness about her nobody could resist it. Returning to her seat, she gave me a nod of triumph, and began again.

"Now, Papples, when you are good again, you shall have a real treat. Clara will show you her cordetto, won't you, dear? It is twice as big as yours, and more than twice as pretty."

I took it from my neck, where it had been throughout my illness. Isola told me continually that it had saved my sight; and so old Cora devoutly believed, crossing herself, and invoking fifty saints. Long afterwards I found that Cora knew it to be the heart of the Blessed Virgin, perpetuated in the material which her husband used. If so, it had been multiplied as well.

Dr. Ross took my pretty gordit, and examined it narrowly, carrying it to the window to get a stronger light.

"Beyond a doubt," he said at last, "it is the finest in Europe. I have only seen one to compare with it, and that had a flaw in the centre. Will you part with it, Miss Valence?"

"No; I have promised never to do that."

"Then I must say no more; but I should have been proud to add it to my collection."

"To carry it about with you, you mean, Pappy. You know you are a superstitious old Pappy, in spite of all your learning."

Weak as my eyes were, I could see the scowl of deep displeasure in his. Isola was frightened: she knew she had gone too far. She did not even dare to offer the kiss of peace. No more was said about it, and I turned the conversation to some other subject. But when he rose to depart, I found a pretext for keeping Isola with me.

"Good-bye for the present, Miss Valence," Dr. Ross said gracefully—he did everything but scowl with an inborn grace—"I hope that your very first journey in quest of natural history will terminate at my house. I cannot show you much, but shall truly enjoy going over my little collection with you whenever you find that your sight is strong enough. Meanwhile, let me earnestly warn you to abstain from chemical experiments" – this was the cause of my injury assigned by Mrs. Shelfer—"until you have a competent director. Isola, good-bye. I will send Cora for you in good time for tea. Your attendance at lecture will be excused."

All my interest in the subjects he had discussed, and in his mode of treating them, all my admiration of his shrewd intellectual face, did not prevent my feeling it a relief when he was gone. He was not at all like his children. About them there was something so winning and unpretentious, few could help liking them at first sight. They did all they could to please, but without any visible effort. But with the Professor, in spite of all his elegance and politeness, I could not help perceiving that he was not doing his best, that he scorned to put forth his powers when there was neither antagonist nor (in his opinion) duly qualified listener. Nevertheless I could have told him some things he did not know concerning lichens and mosses.

When I was left with my favourite Isola, that gentle senior sophist seemed by no means disconsolate at her Papa's departure. She loved him and was proud of him, but there were times, as she told me, when she was quite afraid of him.

"Would you believe it, dear, that I could be afraid of old Pappy?" – his age was about four and forty—"It is very wicked I know, but how am I to help it? Were you like that with your Papa, when he was alive?"

"No, I should think not. But I am not at all sure that he wasn't afraid of me."

"Oh, how nice that must be! But it is my fault, isn't it?"

I could not well have told her, even if I had known it, that the fault in such cases is almost always on the parent's side.

## CHAPTER VII

That same evening, when dear "Idols" was gone, and I felt trebly alone, Mrs. Shelfer came to say that her uncle John was there, and would be glad to see me. Though he had been several times to ask how I was, he had not seen me since the first day of my blindness.

After expressing his joy and surprise at my recovery, he assured me that I must thank neither myself nor the doctor, but my luck in not having touched the liquid until its strength was nearly expended.

"Have you any news for me?" I asked abruptly. As my strength returned, the sense of my wrong grew hotter.

"Yes; and I fear you will think it bad news. You will lose my help for awhile in your pursuit."

"How so? You talk of my luck; I am always unlucky."

"Because I am ordered abroad on a matter too nice and difficult for any of my colleagues. Tomorrow I leave England."

"How long shall you be away?"

"I cannot tell. Perhaps one year; perhaps two. Perhaps I may never return. Over and above the danger, I am not so young as I was."

I felt dismayed, and stricken down. Was I never to have a chance? All powers of earth and heaven and hell seemed to combine against me. Then came a gleam of hope, obscured immediately by the remembrance of his words.

"Are you going to Italy?"

"No. To Australia."

Thereupon all hope vanished, and for a time I could not say a word. At last I said-

"Inspector Cutting, the least thing you can do before you go, and your absolute duty now, is to tell me every single thing you found out, in the course of your recent search. Something you must have learned, or you would not have done what you did. All along I have felt that you were hiding something from me. Now you can have no motive. Now I am your successor in the secret; I, and no one else. To no other will I commit the case. How much I have suffered from your secresy, none but myself can know. Henceforth I will have no help. Three months you have been on the track, and I almost believe that you have discovered nothing."

I spoke so, partly through passion, partly in hope to taunt him into disclosure. His chief weakness, as I knew well, was pride in his own sagacity.

"You shall suffer no more. I had good reasons for hiding it, one of them your own hastiness. Now I will tell you all I know. In fact, as you well said, it has become my duty to do so, unless you will authorise me to appoint a successor before I go."

"Certainly not. My confidence in you cannot be transferred to a stranger."

"One chance more. Let me report the matter officially. It is possible that my superiors may think it more important than my new mission, which is to recover a large amount of property."

"No. I will not allow it. I have devoted myself to one object. I alone can effect it. It shall not pass to others. I feel once more that it is my destiny to unravel this black mystery; myself, by my own courage. In asking your aid I was thwarting my destiny. Since then I have had nothing but accidents. There is a proverb in some language, 'Who crosses destiny shall have accident.'"

"Miss Valence, I could never have dreamed that you were so superstitious."

"Now tell me all you have done, all you have discovered, and your own conclusion from it."

He told me all in a very few words, and his conclusion was mine. To any other except myself, the grounds on which he had based it, would have seemed insufficient. I took good care to secure every possible means of following up the frail clue. Ere he wished me good-bye, he offered one last suggestion. "If, during my absence, Miss Valence, you press your evidence far enough to require the

strong hand, or if before you have done so you require a man's assistance, apply at once to my son—you can always find him through Patty Shelfer. He is only a serjeant as yet, and not in the detective force; but he has qualities, that young man has, he has got all my abilities, and more! Ah, he will be at the top of the tree when I am in my grave, please God."

His shrewd eyes softened as he spoke, and I liked him ten times as well for this little flaw in his sheathing. Of course he knew that I could not entrust myself to a young man, as I could to him. When he was gone, with many good wishes on both sides, and a little keepsake from me, I felt that I had lost an intelligent, honest, and true friend.

## CHAPTER VIII

Vigorous and elastic as I am, I cannot deny that the air and weather have great dominion over me. It was always so with my own dear father. Two days spent indoors, without any real exercise, would make him feel as uneasy as a plant in a cellaret. Crusty and crabbed, nothing could ever make him-not even gout I believe, if he had lived long enough for it-but when he had lost his fishing, or shooting, or bit of gardening, too long, he was quite unlike himself. It was a bad time then to coax for anything-no song, no whistling, no after-dinner nap.

I too am not of a sedentary nature, though upon due occasion I can sit writing or drawing for some hours together. But how fine a thing all the while to see any motion outside-a leaf that can skip, or a cloud that can run! How we envy a sparrow his little hop, even across the gutter. It is now a long month since I have been out of doors, except just to sniff the air, without any bonnet on. I have never been boxed and pannelled so long since first I crawled out of my cradle. It is a sharp bright frost-it seems to freeze harder in London than in the west of Gloucestershire, but not half so cleanly.

Isola comes, like a tea-china rose bedded in poplin and ermine. Her close-drawn bonnet of velvet, mazarin blue, is freaked with snowdrops, nod, nod, nodding, not too many of them. I hail the omen of spring, and my spirits rise already. Idols is up for a lark (as the junior sophists express it) and she has set her heart upon leading me such a dance. Shall she ever set that sweet heart upon anything, and not obtain it at once? Who knows? Never, I am quite sure, when another heart is the object.

"Come, you grave old Grandmother. You are younger than me, I believe, in spite of all your stories; and you are old enough in your ways, for old mother Hubbard that lived in a cupboard. Oh my tippets and furbelows, if I wore as tall as you, and half as long in the waist, what a dress I would have. Fifteen guineas at least. Come along, you bed-ridden dump of a Clara; it's freezing like bricks and silica, and I am in such spirits, and Giudice is frightening Tom out of his life in the kitchen."

She danced round my little room, like a leaf when the wind is rising. The Pixie-king of my gordit could not have been lighter of foot, nor half so lovely of form. How she managed to spin so between the "sticks," none but herself can tell. What would poor Mrs. Shelfer have said? In spite of her fears for the furniture, she would have laughed, I believe, and blessed the pretty feet.

"Come along, Clara child. Do you think I am going to stand still here all day?"

"If you call that standing still, pray give me the senior sophist's definition of motion."

"Oh I want to skate, so dreadfully. And Pappy and Conrad won't let me. They say it isn't becoming. But what on earth can be more so? Wouldn't I skim on one foot? I'll skate, in spite of them, Clara, if you'll only keep me in countenance."

"Can you imagine me skating?"

"No. I know you won't do it, you are so fearfully grave. But there's more fun in you, when you like, or when you can't help yourself, as I've seen you once or twice, than there is in a hundred such Merry-Andrews as me. At any rate we'll go and see them. On with your bonnet now, I cannot wait a minute. Have something to cover your eyes. Conny 'll be there I know."

On went my bonnet, nothing loth to have an airing again. It was fading in the box.

"Now lots of warm things, darling. You have no idea how cold it is, and scarcely sun enough to thaw the long frost in your eyes. Let me look at them, Donna. Oh if mine were half as bright. You can't have got them in England."

"Now, Idols, don't talk nonsense. Every inch of me is English, and not an inch of you; although your eyes are so blue. You are Scotch all over, or else you are all Swiss."

For answer she began singing "the Merry Swiss Boy," and was going to dance to her song, when I danced her off down stairs. Giudice was in the kitchen, with Tom, from the top of the coffee-mill, sputtering anathemas at him. A magnificent dog he was, of the race of Maltese bloodhounds, now so scarce, fawn-coloured, long in the flank, deep in the jowl, pouch-eared, and grave of eye. He

regarded Tom no more than if he had been an old hat brushed the wrong way; and the birds, who were all in a flutter, he took for British butterflies. He came leisurely to me, walking one side at a time, and solemnly deposited his great moist nose in my hand. I knew him then as the friend who addressed me, long since, in the Villa Road.

"Why, you graven images" – a popular person always has fifty nicknames; Isola had a hundred at least, and she liked them all-"what depth of secresy and statecraft is this! You know how I love dogs, and you never even told me of this splendid fellow's existence!"

"Well, Donna dear, don't look so indignant. He doesn't belong to me, and he won't come with me unless he is told, and then he makes such a favour of it. See his long supple stride. He walks just like a leopard-don't you, you pious panther? I wonder he took to you so. He is not fierce at all, except when he ought to be; but he hardly ever makes friends."

"Whose dog is he?"

"Conrad's to be sure. And I do believe Conny thinks more of him than he does of me. Get along, you yellow mammoth! Why he would keep his head there all day?"

"All dogs love me, Idols. It was so when I was a child. They know how honest I am."

"Well, I believe you are, Donna; and too honest sometimes. But I am honest enough, and Giudice does not appreciate it. Come along, Judy. Are you going to stick there all day?"

Away we went, and the great dog walked behind, keeping his head most fairly adjusted between us, never shifting its place an inch, whether we walked or ran-as we did where the street was empty, and when we got into the Park.

Oh the cold air of heaven, fresh from the clear North Pole, where the Great Bear stalks round the Little Bear with the vigilance of a mother, how it tightens the clip of the joints, puts a sting into every step, flushes the cheeks with Aurora, and sparkles in young eyes! For the nonce we forget who we are, never think how our clothes blow about, our spirits are on the north wind, what are we more than snow flakes, let us glisten and lift on the air.

Crossing the Park (lightly furrowed with snow at the drains, like our hair when we part it) we came to a broad sheet of ice. We had heard a long way off a crisp musical hollow sound, like tapping a box with a hole in it. The ice was not like the old ice at Vaughan Park, but seamed and channeled, and up and down, and powdered light grey with scrapings from skates and shoes. Thousands of people were on it, some skating, some sliding, some rushing about and playing hot game with crooked sticks, some sweeping away with short brooms, some crying things for sale and offering skates for hire, many standing still and wistfully eyeing the land; but all in the height of good humour, laughing, chaffing, holloaing, drinking, and ordering more. Every now and then some great performer (in his own eyes) would sail by the women grandly (like a ship heeling over), with his arms folded and foot over foot, and a long cigar in his mouth. For these one devoutly desired a fall. The skaters of real eminence scorned this common show-off, and each had his special admirers forming a ring around him, where he had cut his own circus of smoother and greener ice.

Along the brink of firm land, stood nurses and children innumerable; the maids on the giggle at every challenge borne to them from the glazed waters, the little ones tugging, and kicking, and frantic to get on. The background of all the cold scene, whiter as it receded, and broken by gliding figures, was formed by some low fringed islets, with open water around them, and crane-necked wild fowl wheeling about, and warning boards, and icemen pushing flat-bottomed boats along. In the far distance, to the right, were two or three canvas tents, where they kept the range of the mercury, and the list of the accidents. The long vista was closed now and then, as high as hats and bonnets, by scuds of the drifting ice and snow.

Here as we stood on the bank, Giudice forsook us shamefully, and bounded over the ice, with a levity quite scandalous for a serious-minded dog, towards one of the charmed circles, where eminent skaters whirled, like peg-tops full of steam-engines. Was it likely that we, two girls of spirit, would halt ignobly there? First on the ice went I, holding Isola's hand, and tempting her nothing loth. In

spite of her boast about skating, Idols was frightened at first, and held very tightly by me, and wanted to run back. But the little feet grew braver at every step, and she ventured even to clap her hands and dance. To me the thing was no novelty, except from the number of people, and the puckering of the ice. I had even the courage to slide with one foot, but never with both at a time. As for the cracking and bending when some heavy man scoured by, on purpose, I dare say, to frighten us, I laughed with my heart in my mouth. Isola was amazed. She never could have conceived that I had so much effrontery. What cared I, if a hundred people stared at me? I was doing nothing unseemly, and dozens of ladies were there. The scene, and the air, and the spirits of youth set my blood all on the bound, and oh, blessing of blessings, my blessed sight was come back. How manly, and stirring, to feel, that a slip-and a limb may be broken; a crack-and one may be drowned.

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