

Blackmore Richard Doddridge

Clara Vaughan. Volume 3 of

3



Richard Blackmore

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Содержание

BOOK IV. (continued)	5
CHAPTER X	5
CHAPTER XI	9
CHAPTER XII	13
CHAPTER XIII	16
CHAPTER XIV	20
CHAPTER XV	24
CHAPTER XVI	27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

R. D. Blackmore

Clara Vaughan, Volume 3 (of 3)

BOOK IV. (*continued*)

CHAPTER X

STORY OF EDGAR VAUGHAN

Child Clara, for your own dear sake, as well as mine and my sweet love's, I will not dwell on that tempestuous time. If you cannot comprehend it without words, no words will enable you. If you can, and I fear you do, no more words are wanted; and, as an old man weary of the world, I know not whether to envy or to pity you.

Hither and thither I was flung, to the zenith star of ecstasy or the nadir gulf of agony, according as my idol pet chose to smile or frown. Though she was no silly child, but a girl of mind and feeling, she had a store, I must confess, of clouds as well as dazzling sunlight in the empyrean of her eyes. Her nature, like my love, was full of Southern passion. It is like the air they breathe, the beauty they behold. One minute of such love compresses in a thunder flood all the slow emotions stealing through the drought-scrimped channel, where we dredge for gold deposits, through ten years of Saxon courtship. Instead of Lily-bloom, she should have been called the Passion-flower.

My life, my soul-how weak our English words are-she loved me from the first, I can take my oath she did, although her glory was too great for her to own it yet, though now and then her marvellous eyes proved traitors. Sometimes when she was racking me most, feigning even, with those eyes cast down, her pellucid fingers point to point, and her little foot tapping the orchid bloom, feigning, I say, in cold blood, to reckon her noble lovers-long names all and horribly hateful to me-suddenly, while I trembled, and scowled like a true-born Briton, suddenly up would leap the silky drooping lashes, and a spring of soft electric light would flutter through them to the very core of my heart.

As for me, I abandoned myself. I made no pretence of waiting a moment. I flung my heart wide open to her, and if she would not come in, desert it should be for ever.

She did come. That life-blood of my soul came in, and would and could live nowhere else for ever.

It was done like this. One August evening, when the sun was sinking, and the air was full of warmth and wooing sounds, the cicale waking from his early nap, the muffro leaping for the first dew-drop, the love-birds whispering in the tamarind leaves, Fiordalisa sat with me, under a giant cork-tree on the western slope. The tower was still in Vendetta siege, and the grave and reverend Signor knew better than to come out, when the Sbirri were gone to the town. Lily-bloom was sitting by me in a mass of flowers; her light mandile was laid by, that her glorious hair might catch the first waft of the evening breeze. All down her snow-white shoulders fell the labyrinth of tresses, twined by me with red Tacsonia, and two pale carnations. Her form was pillowed in rich fern, that feathered round her waist; of all the fronds and plumes and stems, not one so taper, light, and rich as that. The bloom upon her cheeks was deepened by my playing with her hair, and her soft large eyes were beaming with delicious wonder.

We knew, as well as He who made us, that we loved one another. None who did not love for ever could interchange such looks. Suddenly, and without a word, in an ecstasy of admiration, I passed my

left arm round her little waist, drew her close to me—she was very near before—and looking full into her wondrous eyes, found no protest but a thrill of light; then tried her lips and met her whole heart there. Darling, how she kissed me! No English girl can do it. And then the terror of her maiden thoughts. The recollection of her high-born pride, and higher because God-born innocence. How she wept, and blushed, and trembled; trembled, blushed, and wept again; and then vouchsafed one more entrancing kiss, to atone for the unwitting treason. Even thus I would not be content. I wanted words as well.

"Do you love me, my own Lily, with every atom of your heart?"

"I have not left one drop of blood for all the world besides."

And it was true. And so it was with me. I told her father that same night. And now in the heaven of gladness and wild pleasure, beyond all dreams of earth, opened the hell of my wickedness and crime; which but for mercy and long repentance would sever me from my Lily in the world to come. To some the crime may seem a light one, to me it is a most atrocious sin, enhanced tenfold by its awful consequences.

By my crime, I do not mean my sinful adoration, as cold men may call it, of a fellow mortal. Nature has no time to waste, and unless she meant my Lily to be worshipped, she would not have lavished all her skill in making her so divine. No, I mean my black deceit, in passing for my brother. Oh, Clara, don't go from me.

Like many another ruinous sin, it was committed without thought, or rather without deliberation. No scheme was laid, not even the least intention cherished; but the moment brought it, and the temptation was too great. Who could have that loving pet gazing at him so, and not sell his soul almost to win her to his arms?

Laurence Daldy was a lazy ass. I do not want to shift my blame to him, but merely state a fact. If he had not been a lazy ass, your father would be living now—ay, and my Fiordalisa. When he chose, he could write very good Italian, and a clear, round hand, and oh, rare accomplishment for an officer, he could even spell. But his letter to Signor Dezio, scrawled betwixt two games of pool, was a perfect magpie's nest of careless zigzag, wattles, and sand slap-dash. In those days a hasty writer used to flick his work with sand, which stanchd but did not dry the ink. The result was often a grimy dabble, like a child's face blotched with blackberries.

Lily and I had quite arranged how we should present ourselves. Like two children we rehearsed it under the twilight trees. "And then, you know," my sweet love whispered, "I shall give you a regular kiss beneath the dear father's beard, and you will see what an effect it will have. Thence he will learn, oh sweetest mine, that there is no help for it; because we Corsican girls are so chary of our lips."

"Are you indeed, my beautiful Lily? I must teach you liberality, to me, and to me alone."

"Sweetest mine," she always called me from the moment she confessed her love; and so, no doubt, she is calling me now in heaven.

The curtain hung in heavy folds across the narrow doorway of the long dark room. The hospitable board was gay with wine and dainty fruit, melons, figs, and peaches, plums of golden and purple hue, pomegranates, pomi d'oro, green almonds, apricots, and muscatels from the ladders of Cape Corso. Through them and upon them played the mellow light from a single lamp, with dancing lustres round it. All the rest of the room was dark. At the head of the table sat Signor Dezio Della Croce, waiting for his guest and daughter. Posted high at the end window on a ledge of rough-hewn board, stood the ancient warder, who had lived for fifty years among them, and whose great fusil commanded the only approach to the castle.

As we entered timidly, the maiden's right hand on my neck, my left arm round her ductile waist, our other hands clasped firmly, I glanced toward that noxious sentinel.

"Never mind him, sweetest mine. Don't believe that he is there. Grandpapa, I call him, and he knows all my secrets."

Signor Dezio looked amazed, as we glided towards him. His life had been one series of crushing blows from heaven. Three brave sons had been barbarously murdered in Vendetta, and his graceful

loving wife had broken her heart and died. The sole hope of his house, his petling Fiordalisa, though she called herself a woman and was full sixteen, he looked upon her still in his trouble-torn chronology, as only ripe enough to be dandled on his lap. Still he called her his "Ninnina," and sang nannas to her, as he had been obliged to do after her mother's death.

As he sat there, too astonished to smile, or frown, or say a word, Lily dropped upon her knees before him, as a Grecian maiden would. We English are not supple-jointed; but for Lily's sake, I could not stand beside her. Then she placed her soft right hand in the centre of my hard palm, flung the other arm round my neck, and with her eyes upon her father's, gave me a long affectionate kiss. This done, she drew her father's head down, and kissed his snow-white beard. Now, she told me, after this, any father who is obdurate, must according to institution blame himself and no one else, if harm befall the maiden.

All this time, I spoke not, and thought of nothing except to screen my Lily. Signor Dezio kept a stately silence, but the tears were in his eyes, and the long white beard was quivering. Lily bent her head, and waited for his words.

"Mother of God! My little child, what are you thinking of?"

"Only thinking of being married, father."

"And set another Vendetta afoot, and be killed yourself! Signor" – turning haughtily to me – "this lady is betrothed, from her early infancy, to her cousin Lepardo Della Croce."

"Oh, I hate him," cried Fiordalisa, clasping her hands piteously. "Ah, Madonna, I hate him so; and thank our Lady, no one has seen him for six years. He is dead no doubt in some Cannibal Island. Saints of mercy, keep him. I saw it in the Spalla, in the Shepherd's Spalla, and I saw my own love there, the eve before he came."

"Grace of Holy Mary! Who read the Spalla for you?"

"The hoary goatherd from Ghidazzo." And up sprang Fiordalisa, flew to an inner room, and fetched from the dark niche in the wall the box of holy relics. With these she knelt before her father, and placed her right hand on the box.

"My child, it is not needful. I believe you without an oath. Never yet have you passed the boundary of truth."

The old chief bowed his head in thought. He had lost his last surviving son by neglecting the Spalla's decree. The Spalla is the shoulder blade of a goat, polished, and used for divination; upon it had been read Sampiero's death, and the destiny of Napoleon. The old man who had forecast the latter was still alive, and of immense renown, and traversed the island now like an ancient prophet. He was the hoary goatherd of Ghidazzo.

Lily saw that she was conquering; she leaped upon her father's knee and hugged him; and her triumph was complete. While she wept upon his breast, and told him all her little tale, and whispered in his ear, and while he kissed, and comforted her, and thought of her dear mother, I rushed out and leaped the Vinea, and wept beneath the olive-trees.

At last the old man rose and called me, he durst not venture from the door; but he did what was far better, he sent my own love after me. At length when we returned, and we found cause not to hurry, -

"Signor Vogheno," he began, "I have observed you well. I am a man of very keen observation" – Lily's eyes gave me a twinkle full of fun – "or I should not be alive this moment. I have observed you, sir, and I approve your character. I cannot say as much, sir, of all the Englishmen I have been privileged to meet. There is about them very much of the nature of a dog. Forgive me, sir; pray interrupt me not. I only judge by what I have seen. God forbid that I should say so to you, while you were my guest. Now you are one of my family, and entitled to the result of my observations. Of the little island itself I know nothing at all, though I am informed that its institutions are of a barbarous character."

"Vendetta for instance," was on my lips, but Lily's glance just saved it. And I thought of his three brave sons.

"But, Signor beloved, you are different from them; indeed you have the nobility of the Corsican nature. And what is most of all, my little child has fixed her heart upon you. But she is very young, sir, quite a child you see." I saw nothing of the sort, but a blooming maiden figure, growing lovelier every day. Poor Lily dropped her long eyelashes, and smiled through a glowing blush. So blushed Lavinia under the eyes of Turnus.

"This darling child is now the heiress to these lands of mine. And if her cousin Lepardo, whose death she has seen on the Spalla, be indeed removed from us, she is the very last of all the Della Croce. I cannot easily read the billet of your brother. He does not write good Corsican of our side of the mountains, but some outlandish Tuscan. There is something first which I cannot well decipher, and then I see your name Signor Valentine Vogheno, and that you are the lord of very large estates, in some district called Gloisterio?" He looked at me inquiringly.

Instead of explaining that I was only the brother of the great Signor Valentino, I bowed, alas I bowed with a hot flush on my cheeks. What could it matter, and why should I interrupt him, if he chose to deceive himself? Lily charmed away all hesitation, by clapping her little hands, and crying, "Sweetest mine, I am so glad."

"Then, upon two conditions I will give you my daughter. The first, that you leave this island, and do not see our Lily, write to, or even hear from her, for a period of six months. If she has not outgrown her love, she will then be almost old enough to wed. I mean, of course, if Lepardo does not appear. The other condition is that you shall promise on the holy relics, and you as well, my flower, never to part with these old estates, but keep them for Lily while she lives, and transmit them to her second child."

A load of terror was off my heart-I thought he was going to bind me to the accursed Vendetta. Even for my Lily, I could hardly have taken that pledge. So I assented readily to the last stipulation, though it was based upon a virtual lie of mine. But with Lily's eyes upon me, brimming as they were with tears at the first condition, and her round arms trembling to enfold me, could I stick at anything short of downright murder? The first proviso I fought against in vain. Even Lily coaxed and cried, without any good effect.

When at last we yielded to the stern decree, the venerable father, as we knelt before him, joined our hands together, and poured a blessing on us, which I did not lack. He had given me my blessing.

After this we sat down to supper, and the trusty musketeer, who had watched the whole scene grimly, and without hearing all, knew what the result was, he, I say, upon his perch began to improvise, or haply to adapt, and sing to a childish air, some little verses upon the glad occasion. Having exhausted his stock, down he leaped without permission, and drank our health in a bumper of Luri wine.

Lily was now in due course of promotion. No longer was she the handmaid, whose eyes created and rejoiced in countless mistakes of mine. Now she was sitting by my side, as she had good right to be, and was lost in pretty raptures at my gallant attentions. They were very nice, she owned, but thoroughly un-Corsican. How I wished her father and the old fusileer away!

CHAPTER XI

"Six long months to be away from Lily! And perhaps forget her, and find some lovelier maiden."

"By Lily's side, all maids are burdocks. And yet what if I do?"

She showed a small stiletto toy with a cross upon the handle, and ground her pearly teeth together.

"Will it be for me, or her?"

"Both; and Lily afterwards."

"Oh you wholesale little murderer! Three great kisses directly, one for every murder."

"Only if you promise, on the relics, never to look twice at a pretty maiden."

And so we spent the precious time, – ten days allowed me to prepare my yacht-in talking utter nonsense, and conning fifty foolish schemes, to make us seem together. I was for departing at once, that the period might begin to run; but Lily was for keeping me to the last possible moment, and of course she had her way. It was fixed that I should sail on the 10th day of September. My little boat, now called the "Lily flower," was brought from Calvi, and moored in a secluded cove, where my love could see it from her bedroom window. It was no longer Corsican law that I should live in the castle. The privileges of a guest were gone; and the rigorous code of suitorship began. But to me and my own darling it made very little difference. I never left Vendetta tower, as I lightly named it, until my pet was ordered off to bed; and every morn I climbed the heights, after a long swim in the sapphire ripple, and met my own sweet Lily sparkling from the dew of her early toilet. How she loved me, how I loved her; which more than other let angels say; for we could not decide. That ancient Corsican her father, albeit little versed in books, was as upright and downright a gentleman as ever knew when his presence was not required. Therefore he took my word of honour for his Lily's safety; and left her to her own sweet will; and her sweet will was to spend with me all her waking hours. For her as yet there was no fear of the blood-avenger. According to their etiquette they cannot shoot the daughter, until they have shot the father. As to the sons the restriction does not hold. The feud we were concerned in had lasted now 120 years, and cost the lives of 130 people. It lay between the ancient races of Della Croce, and De Gentili, and owed its origin to the discovery of a dead mule on the road to church. The question was which family should be exterminated first. For many years the house of Della Croce had been in the ascendant, having produced a long succession of good shots and clever bushmen. At one time all the hopes of the De Gentili hung upon one infant life, which was not thought worth the taking. Fatal error—that one life had proved a mighty trump. One after one the Della Croce fell before that original artist, who invented a patent method of trunking himself in olive bark and firing from a knot-hole. Many a story Lily told me of his devilish wiles; and in those stories I rejoiced, because she clung around my neck, and trembled so that I must hold her. Happily now this olive-branch was dead, having received his death-wound while he administered one to Lily's youngest brother. Ever since that, the feud had languished, and strict etiquette required that the Della Croce should perpetrate the next murder. But her father, said my Lily, with her sweet head on my breast and her soft eyes full of fire, her father did not seem to care even to shoot the cousin of the man who had shot her brothers.

Darling Lily, my blood runs cold, even with your beauty in my arms, to hear you talk of murder so. Own pet, I shall change you. You heaven meant for love, and softness, and delight: human devilry has tainted even you. It was not an easy task to change her. Of all human passions revenge is far the strongest. Clara, how your eyes flash. You ought to have been a Corsican. It was not an easy task; but love loves difficulties. In my ten short days of delicious wretchedness, almost I taught Fiordalisa to despise revenge. And what do you think availed me most? Not the Bible. No, her mind and soul were swathed by Popery in the rags of too many saints. What helped me most, and the only thing that helped me at all, except caresses, was the broad and free expanse of the ever changing sea. Her nature was all poetry, her throbbing breast an Idyl. Upon my little quarter-deck I had a cushioned

niche for her, and there we sat and steered ourselves while the sailors slept below. Alone upon the crystal world, pledged for life or death together, drinking deepest draughts of passion and thirsting still for more, what cared we for petty hatreds, we whose all in all was love? How she listened as I spoke, how her large eyes grew enlarged.

At last those eyes, pure wells of love, were troubled with hot tears. The fatal day was come. Tokens we had interchanged, myriad vows, and countless pledges, which even love could scarce remember. With all the passion of her race, and all the fervour of the clime, she bared her beautiful round arm, the part that lay most near the heart and touched it with the keen stiletto, then she threw her breast on mine, and I laid the crimsoned ivory on my lips. How the devil—excuse me, Clara—how the devil I got away, only phlegmatic Englishmen can tell. No Frenchman, or Italian, would have left that heavenly darling so. We put it off to the last moment, till it was quite dangerous to pass the rocky jaws. As my bad luck would have it, there was a purpling sunset breeze. My own love on the furthest point, her white feet in the water, growing smaller and smaller yet, and standing upon tiptoe to be seen for another yard; my own darling love of ages, she loosed her black hair down her snowy vest, for me to know her from the rocks behind; then she waved and waved her sweet palm hat, fragrant of my Lily, — I had kissed every single inch of it, — until she thought I could not see her; and then, as my telescope showed me, back she fell upon a ledge of rocks, and I could see or fancy her delicious bosom heaving to the fury of her tears. We glided past the cavern mouth, and the silver beach beyond it, whence we had often watched the sunset; and then a beetling crag took from me the last view of Lily.

However long the schoolboy may have bled from some big coward's bullying, or the sway of the rustling birch and the bosky thrill that follows, however sore he may have wept while hung head-downwards through the midnight hours, with a tallow candle between his teeth, or in the pang of nouns heteroclite and brachycatalectic dinners; yet despite these minor ills, his fond heart turns through after life to the scene of foot-ball and I-spy, to the days when he could jump or eat any mortal thing. And so it is with bygone love. Even the times of separation or of bitter quarrel, the aching heart whereon the keepsake lies, the spasms of jealousy, the tenterhooks of doubt; remembrance looks upon them all as treasures of a golden age.

Over the darkening sea, we bore away for Sardinia. Hours and hours, I gazed upon the cushions, where my own pet darling used to lean and love me. To me they were fairer than all the stars, or the phosphorescent sea. From time to time our Corsican pilot kept himself awake, by chanting to strangely mournful airs some of the voceros or dirges, the burden of many ages in that lamenting land. Fit home for Rachel, Niobe, or Cassandra, where half a million gallant beings, twice the number of the present population, have fallen victims to the blood-revenge. So Corsican historians tell; a thousand violent deaths each year, for the last five centuries. Sometimes the avenger waits for half a lifetime, lurking till his moment comes. Before his victim has ceased to quiver, or the shot to ring down the rocky pass, he is off for the bush or the mountains, and leads thenceforth a bandit's life.

They tell me, Clara, that things are better now, and this black stain on a chivalrous race is being purged by Christian civilization. Be it as it may, I love the island of my Lily still; and hope, please God, to see it once more, before I go to her.

Banished though I was, for the present, from the only place I cared for, it seemed still greater severance to go further than I could help. Therefore instead of returning to England, I spent the winter in cruising along the western coast of Italy, and the south of Spain; and coasted back to Genoa. To Seville, and other places famed for beautiful women, I made especial trips, to search for any fit to compare with my own maiden. Of course I knew none could be found; but it gave me some employment, and bitter pleasure, to observe how inferior were all. To my eyes, bright with one sweet image, no other form had grace enough to be fit pillow for my charmer's foot. How I longed and yearned for some fresh token of her: all her little gifts I carried ever in my bosom, but never let another's eyes rest one moment on them. Not even would I tell my friends one word about my love; it seemed as if it would grow common by being talked about. To Peter Green I wrote, resigning my

commission, although I did not tell him that I had found the olives. No, friend Peter, those olives are much too near my Lily; and I won't have you or any other stranger there. I know she would not look at you; still I would rather have you a thousand miles away. Free trade, if you like, when I have made my fortune; which by the bye is somewhat the maxim of that school. My fortune, not in olives, oil, or even guineas-all that rubbish you are welcome to-but my fortune where my heart and soul are all invested, and now, no more my fortune, but my certain fate in Lily.

At length and at last my calendar-like a homesick pair at school, we had made one for each other, thanking God that it was not a leap-year-my calendar so often counted, so punctually erased, began to yield and totter to the stubborn sap of time. My patience long ago had yielded, my blood was in a fever. Another thing began to yield, alas it was my money. Green, Vowler, and Green had behaved most liberally; but of course the expenses of my vessel had been heavy on me; and now my salary had ceased. Peter Green wrote to me in the kindest and most handsome manner, pressing me, if tired (as he concluded) of those murderous Corsicans, to accept another engagement in Sardinia. Even without imparting my last discovery, I had done good service to the firm. I smiled at the idea of my being weary of Corsicans: even now the mere word sends a warm tide to my heart.

It was not for the beauty of the scene, or the works of art, that I remained in Genoa; but because it was the likeliest place to see the Negro's head. As we lay at the end of the mole, my glass commanded all that entered; and every lugger or xebec that bore the sacred emblem-off my little dingy pushed from our raking stern, and with one man, now my friend because a thorough Corsican, I boarded her, at all hazards of imprisonment; and craved for tidings of the sacred land. Although, of course, I would not show the nest of all my thoughts, yet by beating about the bush, I got some scraps of news. The great Signor was flourishing, and had harvested an enormous crop of olives: his lovely daughter, now becoming the glory of the island, had been ill of something like marsh-fever, but was now as blooming as the roses. They did say, but the captain could not at all believe it, that she had been betrothed to some foreign olive-merchant. What disgrace! The highest blood and the sweetest maid in Corsica, to be betrayed to an oilman! Plenty of other news I gathered-the good people are great gossips-but this was all I cared for. Meanwhile your father, Clara dear, replied most warmly to my letter, sending me a sum on loan, which quite relieved me from cheese-paring. And now the wind was in the north, and it was almost time to start for the arms of Lily. If I waited any longer, I should be too mad to bear the voyage. At the break of day we left the magnificent harbour, and the cold wind from the maritime Alps chilled all but the fire of love. Up and down the little deck, up and down all day and night; sleep I never would again, until I touched my Lily. On the evening of the 8th of March, we were near Cape Corso; next day we coasted down the west to the lively breeze of spring, and so upon the 9th we moored to the tongue of Calvi. At midnight we were under way, and when the sun could reach the sea over the snowy peaks, we glided past the mountain crescent that looks on the Balagna. In the early morning still, when the dew was floating, we rounded the gray headland of Signor Dezio's cove, and I climbed along the bowsprit to glance beyond the corner.

What is that white dress I see fluttering at the water's edge? Whose is that red-striped mandile tossed on high and caught again? And there the flag-staff I erected, with my colours flying! Only one such shape on earth-only two such arms-out with the boat or I must swim, or run the yacht ashore. The boat has been towing alongside for the last six hours: Lily can't wait for the boat any more than I can. From rock to rock she is leaping; which is the nearest one? Into the water she runs, then away in blushing terror-she forgot all about the other men. But I know where to find her, she has dropped her little shoe, she must be in my grotto.

There I press her to my heart of hearts, trembling, weeping, laughing, all unable to get close enough to me.

"Sweetest mine, ten thousand times, I have been so wretched." Her voice is like a silver bell.

"My own, I am so glad to hear it. But how well you look!"

If she were lovely when I left her, what shall I call her now? There is not one atom of her but is pure perfection. I hold her from me for one moment, to take in all her beauties. She has a most delicious fragrance that steals upon my senses. Toilet bottles she never heard of; what she has is nature's gift, and unperceived except by love. I have often told her of it, but she won't believe it. It is not your breath, you darling; your breath is only violets; it comes from every fibre of you, even from your hair; it is as when the wind has kissed a lily of the valley.

The ancient Signor being a man of very keen observation, did not delay our wedding any longer than could be helped. That evening we hauled down the family fusileer, gave him a goblet of wine, and sent him about his business: for one night we would take our chance even of Vendetta. At supper-time the Signor was in wonderful spirits, and drank our health with many praises of our constancy and obedience. One little fact he mentioned worth a thousand propinations; his daughter's fever had been cured by some chance news of me. He even went away to fetch a bottle of choicest Rogliano, when he saw how I was fidgetting to get my arm round Lily. Then after making his re-entrance, with due clumsiness at the door, he quite disgraced himself, while drawing the cork, by even winking at me, as he said abruptly,

"Fiordalisa, when would you like to be married?"

My Lily blushed, I must confess, but did not fence with the question.

"As soon as ever you please, papa. That is, if my love wishes it." But she would not look at me to ask. In the porch she whispered to me, that it was only from her terror of the bad Lepardo coming. Did the loving creature fancy that I would believe it?

Once more we sailed together over the amethyst sea; she was as fond of the water as a true-born Briton. In her thoughts and glances was infinite variety. None could ever guess the next thing she would say. Thoroughly I knew her heart, because I lived therein, and sweeter lodgings never man was blessed with. But of her mind she veiled as yet the maiden delicacies, strictly as she would the glowing riches of her figure. What amazed me more than all, was that while most Corsican girls are of the nut-brown order, no sun ever burned the snowy skin of Lily: she always looked so clear and clean, as if it were impossible for anything to stain her. Clara, you are always talking of your lovely Isola. I wonder where she got her name: it is no stranger to me. Something in your description of her reminds me of my Lily. I long to see the girl: and you must have some reason for so obstinately preventing me.

CHAPTER XII

Though Lily and I were most desirous to keep things as quiet as possible, by this time our engagement was talked of in every house of the Balagna. That paternal fusileer and my merry yachtsmen, although they looked the other way whenever we approached, would not permit the flower of Corsica, as she was now proclaimed, to blush with me unseen. My sailors attended to her far more than to their business, and would have leaped into the water for one smile of Lily.

It is the fashion of the island to make a wedding jubilee; and the Signor was anxious to outdo all that had ever been done. We, absorbed in one another, did our best to disappoint him; but he scorned the notion of any private marriage. I never shall forget how he knit his silver brows when I made a last attempt to bring him to our views. "Signor Vogheno, to me you appear to forget whose daughter it is that loves you. Perhaps in your remote, but well regarded island maidens may be stolen before their fathers can look round. Indeed, I have heard that they leap over a broomstick. That is not the custom here. Fiordalisa Della Croce is my only child—the child of my old age; and not altogether one to be ashamed of. I can afford to be hospitable, and I mean to be so."

The Corsicans are a most excitable race, and, when affronted, seem to lash their sides as they talk. By the time the good Signor had finished his speech, every hair of his beard was curling with indignation. But his daughter sprang into his arms and kissed away the tempest, and promised, if it must be so, to make herself one mass of gold and coral. So the Parolanti, or mediators, were invoked; an armistice for a week was signed, and honour pledged on either side. Free and haughty was the step of the Signor Dezio as he set forth for the town to order everything he could see; and very wroth again he was, because I would not postpone the day for him to get a shipload of trumpery from Marseilles. This time I was resolved to have my way. Besides the fervour of my passion and my dread of accidents, the one thing of all others I detest is to be stared at anywhere. And it is far worse to be stared at by a foreign race. The Corsicans are gentlemen by nature, but they could not be expected to regard without some curiosity the lucky stranger who had won their Lily.

I will not weary you, as I myself was wearied, with all the ceremonies of the wedding-day. All I wanted was my bride, and she wanted none but me: yet we could not help being touched by the hearty good-will of the commune. The fame of Lily's beauty had spread even to Sardinia, and many a handsome woman came to measure her own thereby. Clever as they are at such things, not one of them could find a blemish or defect in Lily, and our fair Balagnese told them to go home and break their mirrors.

It was a sweet spring morning, and amid a fearful din of guns and trumpets, mandolins and fiddles, I waited with a nervous smile under the triumphal arch in front of my fictitious house. A sham house had been made of boards, and boughs, and flowers, because it is most essential that the bride should be introduced to the bridegroom's dwelling. Here I was to receive the procession, which at last appeared. First came fifty well-armed youths, crowned with leaves and ribbons; then four-and-twenty maidens dressed alike, singing and scattering flowers, and then a boy of noble birth, mounted on a pony, and carrying the freno, symbol of many scions. None of them I looked at; only for my Lily. On a noble snow-white palfrey, decked from head to foot with flowers, her father walking at her side, came the bloom, the flower, the lily of them all, arrayed in clear white muslin, self-possessed, and smiling. One glorious wreath was round her head; it was her own black hair by her own sweet fingers twined with sprigs of myrtle. A sash, or fazoletto, of violet transparent crape, looped at the crown of her head, fell over the shy lift of her bosom, parting like a sunset cloud, where the bodice opened below the pear-like waist. To me she looked like a white coralline rising through an amethyst sea. Behind her came the authorities of the commune. The sham keys were already hanging at her slender zone. It was my place to lift her down and introduce her formally. This I did with excellent grace, feeling the weight of eyes upon me. But when I got her inside, I spoiled the folds of the fazoletto.

I heard the old man shouting, "Who are ye gallant sons of the mountain, who have carried off my daughter? To me, indeed, ye seem to be brave and noble men, yet have ye taken her rather after the manner of bandits. Know ye not that she is the fairest flower that ever was reared in Corsica?"

"Yes, old fellow, I know that well enough; and that's the very reason why I have got her here." One more virgin kiss, and with Lily on my arm, forth I sally to respond.

"Friends we are, who claim some hospitality. We have plucked the fairest flower on all the strands of Corsica, and we bear her to the priest, fit offering for Madonna."

"Bide on, my noble friends; then come and enjoy my feast."

No more delay. The maids have got all they can do to keep in front of us with their flowers. The armed youths stand on either side at the entrance to the church. The tapers are already lit, the passage up the little church is strewn with flowering myrtle. Lily, holding her veil around her, walks hand in hand with me.

Fiordalisa Della Croce now is Lily Vaughan; amidst a world of shouting, shooting, and cornamusas, we are led to the banqueting-room; there they seat us in two chairs, and a fine fat baby is placed on Lily's lap, to remind her of her duties. She dandles it, and kisses it as if she understood the business, and then presents it with a cap of corals and gay ribbons. Now Lily Vaughan throws off her fazoletto, and gives me for a keepsake the myrtles in her hair. Then all who can claim kin with her, to the fortieth generation, hurry up and press her hand, and wish the good old wish. "Long life and growing pleasure, sons like him, and daughters like yourself."

After the banquet, we were free to go, having first led off the ballo in the Cerca dance. Thank God, my Lily is at last my own; she falls upon my bosom weary and delighted. Clara, remember this: the little church in which we were married is called St. Katharine's on the cliff; and I signed the record in my proper name, Edgar Malins Vaughan: the Malins, very likely, they did not know from Valentine, for I always wrote it with a flourish at the end. The Signor, with all his friends, escorted us to the limits of his domain; there we bade them heartily farewell, and they returned to renew the feast. My little yacht was in the bay, and we saw the boat push off to fetch us as had been arranged. We were to sail for Girolata, where the Signor had a country-house, lonely enough even for two such lovers. Three or four hours would take us thither, and the sun was still in the heavens. As no one now could see us, Lily performed a little dance for my especial delight. How beaming she looked, how full of spirits, now all the worry was over. Then she tripped roguishly at my side to the winding rocky steps that lead to St. Katharine's cove. The cove was like a well scooped in the giant cliffs. As we descended the steep and narrow stairs, my Lily trembled on my arm. The house and all the merry-makers were out of sight and hearing. Of course we stopped every now and then, for the boat could not be at the landing yet, and we had much to tell each other.

As we stepped upon the beach, and under the eaves of a jutting rock, a tall man stood before us. His eyes and beard were black as jet, and he wore the loose dress of a Southern seaman. Three sailors, unmistakably English, were smoking and playing cards in the corner shade of the cliff. Lily started violently, turned pale, and clung to me, but faced the intruder bravely. He was quite amazed at her beauty, I at his insolent gaze.

"Fiordalisa Della Croce," he said with a pure Tuscan accent, "behold me! I am come to claim you."

He actually laid his small, but muscular hand upon my Lily's shoulder. She leaped back as from a snake. I knew it must be Lepardo.

"Sir," I said, as calmly as I could, "oblige me by allowing my wife to pass."

The sneering, supercilious look which he hardly deigned to spare me, was honest, compared to his foul stare at her.

"Signor, she is too beautiful. I must have my rights. Come for her when I am tired, if any can tire of her."

And he thrust his filthy, hairy lips under my own pet's hat. My muscles leaped, and my soul was in the blow. Down he went like a flail, and I thought he was stunned for an hour; but while I was bearing my pet to the boat, which now was close to the beach, up he leaped, and rushed at me with a dagger-a dagger like one which you know. I did not see him, but Lily did over my shoulder; she sprang from my arms and flung herself between us. He thrust her aside, and leaped at me like a panther, aiming straight at my heart. How he missed me I cannot tell, but think it was through Lily. Before he recovered, I closed with him, wrested away the weapon and flung it far into the sea. But one main thing I omitted; I ought to have stunned him thoroughly. Into the boat with Lily-I caught up an oar, and away we dashed. The three English sailors were running up. As a wave took the boat about, one of them grasped the stern; down on his knuckles crashed my oar, and with a curse he let go. All right, all clear, off for the yacht for your lives. I would show fight, for my blood is up, but what would become of Lily? And we are but three against four, and none of us have arms.

Meanwhile, that black Italian, I can never call him a Corsican, sneaked away to a tuft of sea-grass for his double-barrelled fusil. Bowing with all my might, I saw him examine the priming, lay his red cap on a rock, and the glistening gun on the cap, and, closing one eye, take steady aim, not at me, but at Lily. Poor Lily sat on the thwart at my side, faintly staring with terror. No time to think; oar and all I dashed in front of my darling. A ping in the air, a jar on my wrist, a slight blow on my breast, and at my feet dropped the bullet. It had passed through the tough ash handle. Down, Lily, down, for God's sake; he is firing the other barrel. I flung her down in the bilge water; the brute cannot see her now. Not quite so easily off. Up a steep rock he climbed like a cat, the cursed gun still in his hand. He won fifty feet of vantage, and commanded the whole of the boat. We were not eighty yards away. There he coolly levelled at my prostrate Lily. I had grey hairs next morning. Forward, I threw myself, over my wife; me he might kill if he chose. One lurch of the boat-a short sea was running-and my darling's head was shown. He saw his chance and fired. Thank God, he had too little powder in; my own love is untouched. The ball fell short of Lily, and passed through my left foot, in at the sole and out below the instep. Luckily I had retained my dancing shoes, or my thick boots would have kept the ball in my foot. The brute could not see that he had hit any one, and he cursed us in choice Italian.

Poor Lily had quite swooned away, and knew nothing of my wound. Over the side of the yacht I lifted her myself, standing upon one leg. No one else should touch her. So furious I was with that cold-blooded miscreant, that if I could only have walked, I would have returned to fight him. My men, too, were quite up for it. But when Lily came to herself, and threw her arms round me and wept, and thanked God and her saints, I found my foot quite soaked in a pool of blood, and stiffening. Poor little dear! what a fuss she did make about it! I would have borne ten times the pain for the smiles and tears she gave me. One thing was certain-under the mercy of God, we owed our lives to each other, and held them henceforth in common.

As, with a flowing sheet, we doubled the craggy point, concealed close under the rocks we saw a low and snake-like vessel, of the felucca build. She was banked for three pair of sweeps, and looked a thorough rover. This was, of course, Lepardo's boat. We now bore away for Ajaccio, dear Lily having implored me not to think of Girolata, where no medical aid could anyhow be procured. Moreover, she wanted to fly from that dark Lepardo; and I am quite willing to own that, despite my delicious nursing, I was not ambitious to stand as target again during our honeymoon.

CHAPTER XIII

At first I thought a great deal more of the pain than the danger of my wound; but when I showed it to the French surgeon at Ajaccio, he surprised me by shrugging his shoulders formidably, and declaring that it was the good God if I kept my foot. Being of a somewhat sceptical turn, I thought at first that he only wanted to gild the frame of his work; but when I began to consider it, I found that he was quite right. The fact was, that I had thought much more of my bride than of my metatarsals. Two of these were splintered where the bullet passed between them, and it was a question whether it had not been poisoned. Many of the mountaineers are skilled in deadly drugs, and use them rarely for the bowl, not so rarely for the sword and gun.

At one time there were symptoms even of mortification, and my wife, who waited hand and foot upon me, joined the surgeon in imploring me to submit to amputation.

"Sweetest mine! do you suppose that I shall love you any the less because you walk on crutches, and all through your love of me? And what other difference can it make to either of us? I shall cry a great deal at first, for I love your little toe-nails more than I do my own eyes; but, darling, we shall get over it."

As she loved my toes so much, I resolved to keep them, if it was only for her sake; and, after a narrow crisis, my foot began to get better. To her care and tenderness I owed my recovery, far more than to the skill of the clever surgeon. Six months elapsed before I could walk again, and our little yacht was sent to Calvi to explain the long delay. Fond as I was of the "Lily-flower," I was anxious now to sell her; but my darling nurse, although she knew before our marriage that I was not a wealthy man, would not listen to the scheme at all; for the doctor ordered me, as I grew stronger, to be constantly on the water.

"Not by any means, my own, will we sell our little love-boat. I should cry after it like a baby; and another thing, far more important, you can bear no motion except on board our *Lily*. Papa has got great heaps of money, and he never can refuse me anything when I coax in earnest."

Conscious as I was of my vile deceit, I would rather have died than apply to Signor Dezio, albeit I am quite sure that he would soon have forgiven me. So I wrote again to my good-natured brother and banker, and told him all that had happened, but begged him not to impart it even to your mother. I have strong reason for suspecting that he did not conceal it from her; but as I never alluded to the subject before her, she was too much a lady ever to lead me towards it. My motive for this reserve was at first some ill-defined terror lest my fraud upon Signor Dezio should come to light prematurely. Also I hate to be talked about among people whom I despise. Afterwards, as you will perceive, I had other and far more cogent reasons.

I need not say that your father-dear Clara, I ought to love you, if only on his account! – your father wrote me a kind and most warm-hearted letter, accompanied by a most handsome gift-no loan this time, but a wedding-gift, and a very noble one. Also he pressed me to come home with my bride the moment I could endure the voyage. Ah! if I had only obeyed him, not Lily and Henry, but myself would have been the victim.

We returned as soon as possible to Vendetta tower, and found the good Signor in excellent spirits, delighted to see his sweet daughter again, and still more delighted by hope of a little successor to the gray walls and the olive groves. When this hope was realized, and a lusty young grandson was laid in his arms, he became so wild in his glory, that he went about boasting all over the commune, feasting all who came near him, forgetting the very name of the blood-revenge. Many a time we reminded and implored him to be more careful. He replied, that his life was of no importance now; he had come to his haven among his own dear ones, and was crowning the old ship with flowers. Moreover, he knew that the De' Gentili were of a nobler spirit than to shed the blood of a gray-haired man, when institution did not very loudly demand it. And so I believe they were.

Alas! the poor old man! – a thorough and true gentleman as one need wish to see—choleric albeit, and not too wide of mind; but his heart was in the right place, and made of the right material, and easy enough to get at. He was free to confess his own failings, and could feel for a man who was tempted. Deeply thankful I am that, before his white beard was laid low, I acknowledged to him my offence, and obtained his hearty forgiveness. Little Henry was on his lap, going off into smiles of sleep, with his mother's soft finger in his mouth. At first my confession quite took the poor Signor aback; for I did not attempt to gloss the dishonour of what I had done; but I told him truly that the meanness was not in my nature, and although I had won my pet Lily, the road ran through hemlock and wormwood. And now I perceived how uncalled-for and stupid the fraud had been.

When the old man recovered a little from the shock caused by the dishonesty-towards which recovery the tears of his daughter and the smiles of his grandson contributed—he was really glad to find that I was not a landed Signor. He rubbed his hands and twitched his beard with delight, for now his little Enrico would never be taken away to the barbarous English island. Was he not rightful successor to the lands of the Della Croce? and what more could he possibly want? What could he care for the property in Gloisterio? However, he made us promise that if the present remarkable baby, Master Henry Vaughan, should ever enjoy the property in the unpronounceable county, Lily's second child, if she had one, should take the Corsican lordships; for his great fear was, that the Malaspina and Della Croce estates should become a servient tenement to the frozen fields of the North. To express and ensure his wishes, he had a deed-poll prepared according to his own fancy, read it to us and some witnesses, then signed, sealed, and enrolled it. This was one of the documents which you, my brave Clara, rescued from that vile, stealthy ghost.

And now, for a short time, we enjoyed deep, quiet, delicious happiness. The crime which had haunted me was confessed and forgiven. Amply possessed of the means, and even the abundance of life, I was blessed with strong health again, and freedom among the free. Richest and best of all blessings, I had a sweet, most lovely, and most loving wife, and loved her once and for all. No more beautiful vision has any poet imagined than young Lily Vaughan sitting under the vine-leaves, her form more exquisite than ever, her soft-eyed infant in her lap wondering at his mother's beauty, while her own deep-lustred eyes carried to her husband's, without the trouble of thinking, all that flowed into her heart—joy at belonging to him, hope of bliss to come, fear of over-happiness, pride in all the three of us, and shame at feeling proud. Then a gay coquettish glance, as quick youth warms the veins, and some humorous thought occurs, a tickle for the baby, and a feint of cold-shouldering me. But, jealous as I was, desperately jealous, for my love was more passionate than ever, I can honourably state that Lily's one and only trial to arouse my jealousy was an ignominious failure, recoiling only on the person of the dear designer. However exacting little Harry might be, I never grudged him his double share of attention. In the first place I looked upon him as a piece of me, still holding on; and, in the next place, I knew that all he laid claim to was only a loan to him, and belonged in fee simple to his father.

At this time I wrote to my brother again, announcing the birth of our boy, and that we had made him his namesake; dispensing, too, with all further reserve on the subject of our marriage. This letter was never delivered to your dear father. That much I know, for certain; and at one time I strongly suspected that our cold-blooded, crafty foe contrived to intercept it. But no; if he had, he would have known better afterwards.

After that cowardly onslaught upon my bride and myself, I had of course learned all I could of the history of this Lepardo. He was the only son of the Signor's only brother, but very little was known of him in the neighbourhood, as he came from Vescovato on the east side of the island. He was said to have great abilities and very great perseverance, and under the guardianship of his uncle had been intended and partly educated for the French Bar. But his disposition was most headstrong and sullen; and at an early age he displayed a ferocity unusual even in a Corsican. Neither had he the great redeeming trait of the islanders, I mean their noble patriotism. One good quality, however, he

did possess, and that was fidelity to his word. With one of the contradictions so common in human nature, he would even be false in order to be true: that is, he would be treacherous wherever he was unpledged, if it assisted him towards a purpose to which he was committed. While he was yet a boy, his intended career was cut short by an act of horrible violence. He disliked all the lower animals, horses and mules especially; and one day he was detected by a master of the Paoli College, screaming, and yelling at, and lashing, from a safe distance, a poor little pony whom he had tied to a fence. The master, an elderly man, very humane and benevolent, rebuked him in the most cutting manner, and called him a low coward. The young villain ran off, with his eyes flashing fire, procured a stiletto, and stabbed the poor man in the back. Then he leaped on the horse he had been ill-treating, and pricking him with the dagger, rode away furiously in the direction of Bastia. The pursuers could not trace him through the wild mountain district, but it was believed that he reached the town and took refuge in an English brig, which was lying off the harbour, and sailed for Genoa that evening. The pony was found dead, lying by the roadside with the brute's dagger in its throat. No wonder Lily, who told me all this, with true Corsican rage in her eyes, no wonder my Lily hated him. Even as a little girl, for she was but ten years old when he disappeared, she always felt a strong repugnance towards him. He was about six years older than Fiordalisa, and four years younger than I; so when he shot at Lily, he must have been three-and-twenty. It was reported that after his disappearance he took to a sea-faring life, and made himself very useful, by his knowledge of languages, in the English merchant service. Quarrelling with his employers, he was said to have resorted to smuggling in the Levant, if not to downright piracy.

Clara, for reasons I cannot explain, I wish you to follow my story step by step in its order, noting each landing-place. To do this with advantage, you must have the dates carved upon each of the latter: therefore I beg you to copy them as you pass.

I arrived in Corsica, as you heard, during the month of May, 1829. On the 12th of August in that same year I first beheld my Lily. That day I remember, beside other reasons, because I had wondered, as I rode idly along, whether my brother was opening his usual Highland campaign, and whether he would like to shoot the muffrone. Lily and I were married on the 21st of March, 1830, when I was twenty-seven years old: and our little Henry first saw the light on the 24th of December following, more than two years before your birth. Your father having no children as yet, I looked upon my Harry as heir presumptive to these estates. Although your birth appeared to divest him of the heirship, it has since, through causes then unknown to me, proved otherwise; and if he were living now, he would in strict law be entitled to this property after my death. But if he were alive, he never should have an inch of it, that is if I could prevent it; because in strict righteousness all belongs to you. And now I hold the property in fee simple, under an Act which abolishes fines and recoveries; for I have suffered so much from remorse, ever since your dear mother's death, that even before you saved my life, dearest child, I enrolled a deed in Chancery, which gives me disposing powers; and as I think you know, I made thereupon a will devising the lands to you. This also was one of the documents you caught that vile hypocrite stealing.

To return to the old Signor. He was now as happy as the day was long, and desirous, as an old man often is, to set on foot noteworthy schemes, which might survive his time. Of this desire I took advantage to inoculate him with some English views. It was rather late to learn another catechism, at threescore years and five; but a green old age was his, hale and hearty as could be. "Why should all those noble olives shed, and rot upon the ground, all those grapes of divers colours be of no more use than rainbows? Why should all the dazzling marbles slumber in the quarry, the porphyry of Molo, the verde antique of Orezza, the Parian of Cassaconi, the serpentine near Bastia, and the garnets of Vizzavona-nay even the matchless white alabaster-

"Mother of our Lord, I have got such pretty stuff in my cavern on the gulf of Porto. Some one told me it was the very finest alabaster. But then it would require cutting out." The last thought seemed a poser.

"Well, father" – so I called him now-"when Harry has finished his tooth, suppose we go all together in the yacht and see it."

And so we did; and it was worth a voyage all the way from London only to look at it. Pillars of snow, pellucid, and fancifully veined, like a glacier shot with sea-weed; clean-working moreover, and tough, and of even texture, as I proved to my Lily's delight. There is now a small piece in the drawer of my walnut-wood desk. But I took home a square block with me, and under my wife's most original criticisms, worked it into a rough resemblance of the baby Henry. Perhaps I have a natural turn for sculpture, perhaps it was a wife's flattery; but at any rate the young mother was so charmed with it, that in one of her pensive moments she even made me promise, that if she died soon and alone, I would have the little recumbent figure laid upon her breast.

Meanwhile the Signor was gayer than ever: he told us to have no anxiety about anything less than a score of children; to such effect would he work his great olive grounds, quarries, and vineyards. Some ingenious plan he formed, which delighted him hugely, but was past my comprehension. As fast as he quarried his alabaster, he would plant young vines in the holes, and every one knew how the vine delighted to run away over the rocks. So at once he must set off for Corte, the central town of the island, to procure a large stock of tools well-tempered in the Restonica. That turbulent little river possesses a magic power. Its water is said to purify steel so highly that it never can rust again. I have even heard that the cutlers of Northern Italy import it, for the purpose of annealing their choicest productions. For my part, little as I knew of commerce, I strongly recommended that arrangements for shipping and selling the alabaster should be made, before it was quarried. But the Signor scorned the idea.

Having in prospect all the riches of Croesus, and in possession enough to make us happy, and having worked, as we thought, uncommonly hard, we all four indulged in a tour through Sicily and Italy, proposing to visit and criticise the principal marble quarries. By the time we had done all this and enjoyed it thoroughly-dear me, how my wife was admired in the sculptor's studio! – and by the time we had fallen to work again, surveyed and geologised all the estates, taken, or rather listened to, long earfuls of advice, settled all our plans summarily over the Rogliano, and reopened them all the next morning, by this time, I say, nearly three years of bliss had slipped by, since my recovery from the lingering wound; and it was now the summer of 1833. My loving wife was twenty years old, and we were looking forward to the birth of a brother or sister for Harry. Meanwhile we had heard of your birth, which delighted us all, especially my Lily. She used to talk, in the fond way mothers discover, to Harry, now gravely perched up on a stool, about his little sweetheart away in the dark north country.

It was in the month of July 1833 that the Signor found he could no longer postpone his visit to Corte. Alone he would go, riding his favourite jennet, as sure-footed as a mule, and as hardy as a mustang. Behind him he slung his trusty fusil, with both barrels loaded, for he had to traverse a desert and mountainous district haunted by banditti. He was to travel through by-ways to Novella, and so on to the bridge where the roads from Calvi and Bastia meet, put up in rude quarters there for the night, and follow the steep descent to the town of Corte next day. In vain we begged him to take some escort, or at least to let me go with him. No, I must stop to guard the Lily and the little snow-drop; could he possibly take me at such a time from home, and did I think a Della Croce was afraid of bandits? It was a Monday morning when he left the tower, and he would be back on Saturday in good time for supper. He kissed and blessed his Lily, and the little snow-drop as he called young Harry, who cried at his departure; and then he gave me too an earnest trembling blessing. By this time he and I had come to love each other, as a father and a son.

I went with him quite to the borders of the commune; and there, in a mountain defile, I lit for him his cigar. With some dark foreboding, I waited till I saw him reach and pass the gap at the summit of the rise. There he turned in the saddle to wave his last adieu, and his beard, like a white cloud, floated on the morning sky.

CHAPTER XIV

On the Saturday night, an excellent supper was ready: the Signor's own particular plate was at the head of the table, and by it gleamed, in a portly bottle, his favourite Rogliano. Little Harry, who could say anything he was told, and knew right well what was good, or at least what tasted good—that beloved child was allowed to stop up, that grandpapa might kiss him; this was a sovereign specific, believed in the nursery creed, to ensure sweet sleep for both.

That silver beard never kissed the chubby cheek again. All night we waited and wondered: Harry was sent to bed roaring; no grandpapa appeared. The olives rustled at midnight, and out I ran; the doors creaked afterwards, and I opened them, all in vain; the sound of hoofs came up the valley before the break of day; but no step or voice of man, no bark of his favourite mountain hound, no neigh of the jennet to her sleepy brother-horses.

All Sunday we remained in terrible uneasiness, trying to cheer each other with a hundred assurances that the dear old man must have turned aside to see an ancient friend living now at Prato. When Monday morning came, but brought no tidings of him, I set off, amid a shower of tears, to seek the beloved father. The old fusileer was left on guard, and I took two young and active men, well acquainted with the mountain passes. All well mounted, and well armed, we purposed to ride hard, and search the track quite up to the town of Corte. There, if indeed he had ever arrived, we should be sure to hear of him. But it proved unnecessary to go so far from home.

Along that dreary mountain road, often no more than a shepherd's walk difficult to descry, we found no token of any traveller either living or dead, until we came to the Ponte Leccia, where the main roads meet. Here our fears were doubled, and the last hope nearly quenched; for on asking at the shepherd's hut, where Signor Dezio meant to put up, we found that he had slept there on the Friday night, as he was returning from the town. The shepherd's wife, who had known him for years, assured us that he was in wonderful spirits and health, insisted upon her supping with them—which is contrary to Corsican usage—and boasted much of the great things he would do, and still more of his beautiful grandson. His goatskin wallet was full of sample tools, which were to astonish his English son, and he had a toy gun no bigger than the tail of a dog, with which he intended to teach the baby to shoot. Telling us all these little things, and showing us her presents, the poor woman cried at the thought of what must have happened to him. Right early on Saturday morning he set off, as impatient as a child, to see his beloved ones again, and exhibit all his treasures. For love of the Della Croce her husband had groomed the mare thoroughly, and she neighed merrily down the hill at thought of her stable friends. Moreover, the shepherd's wife told us that there had been in those parts no bandit worth the name, since the death of the great Teodoro, king of the mountains, whose baby still received tribute.

After resting our horses awhile, with heavy hearts we began to retrace our steps through that awful wilderness. Instead of keeping together, as we had done in the morning, we now rode in parallel lines, right and left of the desert track, wherever the ground permitted it. All this district is very barren and rugged, and the way winds up and down, often along the brink of crags, or through narrow mountain gorges. The desolation and loneliness grew more oppressive, as the shadows lengthened.

We had thoroughly searched two-thirds of the distance homeward, and had crossed some granite heights whence the sea was visible; the sun was low over Cape Bevellata, and the vapours from the marsh were crouching at the mountain's foot. Here as I rode to the left of my two companions, I heard the faint bay of a dog far down a deep ravine, that trended leftward from our course. Putting my jaded animal to his utmost speed, I made for the hollow which echoed the dismal sound—a feeble bark prolonged into a painful howl. Turning the corner sharply I scared two monstrous vultures, who were hovering over and craning at a dog. The dog so gaunt and starved, that at every bark the ribs seemed bursting the skin, still was fighting past despair with his loathsome enemies. He stood across the breast of the noble Signor Dezio. There lay that gallant cavalier, stark and rigid, with his eyes

wide open, and his white beard tipped with crimson. There he lay upon his back, his kingly head against a rock, his left hand on his clotted breast and glued thereto with blood; his right hand hung beside his chin whence it had slipped in death, and in it still securely grasped was a trinket newly made, containing a little sheaf of the baby's flossy hair tied with a black wisp of the mother's. The poor old man had dragged himself thither to die, and died with that keepsake on his lips. The fatal shot had been fired from above, and passed completely through his body. It pierced his lungs, and I believe that he felt little pain, but gasped his simple life away. Near him was his wallet, with the tools still in it; I think he had been playing with the toy gun when he received the wound; at any rate it lay separate from the rest, and at the old man's side.

Examining by the waning light, with icy awe upon me, the scene of this damned atrocity, I found that the hoary traveller must have dismounted here, to eat his frugal dinner. A horn cup and a crust of bread were on a rocky shelf, and a little spring welled down the dingle, with the mark of the dog's feet here and there. The craven foe had been sneaking along behind, and took advantage of the old man's position, as he sat upon a stone to make certain of him from the granite loophole. We found the very place where the murderer must have crouched, but the cliff-side kept no footprint. The victim's gun was gone, and so was the Spanish mare: no other robbery seemed to have been committed.

This glen led to a shorter but more difficult track towards home, which the Signor, in his impatience, must have resolved to try. Reverently we laid him on the freshest horse; while I with the faithful mountain dog on my saddle—for he was too exhausted to walk—rode on to break the melancholy news, and send assistance back.

To break bad news—the phrase is a failure, the attempt it implies a much worse one. Lily knew all in a moment, and in her delicate state she received so appalling a shock, that for a week she lay on the very threshold of death. At the end of that time, and three days after the old man's funeral—at which for his daughter's sake I allowed no wailings or voceros—a lively little girl was born, who seemed to be none the worse for her mother's bitter sufferings. Her innocent caresses, or some baby doings optimised by her mother—though even as a new-born babe she seemed a most loving creature—all those soft endearing ways, which I could not understand, did more to bring my Lily's spirit back than even my fond attentions.

But as yet, though able to walk again, and nurse her child, whom she would not commit to another, my wife remained in a fearfully sensitive and tremulous condition. The creak of a door, the sound of a foot, the rustle of the wind—and she, so brave and proud of yore, started like a cicale, and shook like a forest shadow. In everything she feared the ambush of that sleuth cold-blooded reptile, on whom alone, truly or not God knows, she charged the blood of her venerable father. But still she had the comfort of a husband's love, a husband even fonder than when the flowers fell on his path; and still she had the joy of watching, with a mother's tender insight, the budding promise of two sweet infants. Infants I call them, why Master Harry was now a thorough chatterbox! With all this love around her, she by far the loveliest, the pride and glory of all, was sure to find her comfort soon upon the breast of time, even as small Lily found it in her own sweet bosom. Deeply and long we mourned that ancient Signor, chivalrous and true gentleman, counsellor of all things. Every day we missed him; but could talk of it more as time flowed on. Rogliano had no sparkle, Luri not the tint of old: never could I pour out either from his favourite flagon, without a thought of him who taught us the proper way to do it; who ought to be teaching us still, but was lying foully murdered in his lonely grave at St. Katharine's on the Cliff.

We had done our utmost to avenge him: soon as I could leave my wife, I had scoured all the neighbourhood. The Sbirri too had done their best, but discovered nothing. Brave fellows they are, when it comes to fighting, but very poor detectives. Only two things we heard that seemed at all significant. One of these was that a Spanish jennet, like the Signor's favourite "Marana," but dreadfully jaded and nearly starved, had been sold on the Friday after the murder, being the very day of the funeral, at the town of Porto Vecchio on the south-eastern coast. I sent my coxswain Petro,

an intelligent and trusty Corsican, to follow up this clue; for I durst not leave my wife as yet. Petro discovered the man who had bought the mare, and re-purchased her from him, as I had directed: but the description of the first seller did not tally with my recollections of Lepardo. However, it proved to be the true Marana; and glad she was to get home once more.

The other report, that seemed to bear upon the bloody mystery, was that a swift felucca, flush-built and banked for triple sweeps, had been seen lying close in shore near point Girolata, during the early part of the week in which the Signor left home. And it was even said that two Maltese sailors, belonging to this felucca, had encamped on shore in a lonely place near Otta, and were likely to be found there still.

Lily being stronger now, I determined to follow this last clue myself; and so I put the little yacht into commission again, and manned her with Calvi men, for all my English crew had been dismissed long ago. Leaving my wife and children under the care of the old fusileer, away I sailed from St. Katharine's, intending to return in three days' time. All this coast I now knew thoroughly, and Otta was not far beyond the poor Signor's cave of alabaster. It is a wild and desert region, far away from any frequented road, and little visited except by outlaws.

We found no trace of any tent, no sign of any landing, and an aged fisherman, whom we met, declared that no felucca or vessel of any sort had lately been near the bay. I began to fear that, for some dark purpose, I had been beguiled from home, and despatched upon a fool's errand. The dreary coast was still the home of solitude, the alabaster cave untouched since our pic-nic survey; the marks of which were undisturbed except by wind and weather. So I crowded sail, and hurried back to St. Katharine's, with a strange weight on my heart. To add to my vexation, a strong north wind set in, and smartly as our cutter sailed, we were forced to run off the land. When at last we made the cove, it was unsafe for the yacht to anchor, and so I was compelled to send her on to Calvi.

It was nearly midnight on the 2d of October, when Petro and myself plodded up the wooded hill on which the old tower stands. Weary and dispirited, though glowing every now and then with the thought of all my darlings, in vain I called myself a fool for fearing where no fear was. When we reached the brow of the hill, my vague alarm was doubled. The rude oil-lamps that marked the entrance, why were they unlighted? I had especially ordered that they should be kindled every night, and Lily had promised to see to it herself. No challenge from the watchman, no click of the musket hammer, even the vinea was not in its place. In vain we knocked and knocked at the old chesnut doors; no one answered, no one came to open. None of the loopholes showed a light; the house was dark and silent as the ivy. Wild with terror I ran to the little side-door, whence first my Lily met me. This too was locked, or fastened somehow; and only the echo of my knock was heard. Petro and I caught up a great bough of ilex, which myself had lopped last week, rushed at the door with the butt, and broke it in with one blow. Shrieking for Lily, Lily, I flew from room to room, tumbling over the furniture, blundering at the doorways. No voice of wife, no cry of child, no answer of domestic; all as silent as if ten fathoms under water.

Having dashed through every room, I turned to rush off to the hamlet, when my foot struck something-something soft and yielding; was it a sack or bolster? I stooped to feel it; it was Lily, laid out, stiff and cold Dead, my Lily dead! Oh, God can never mean it; would He let me love her so?

For all intents of actual life, for all that we are made for, for all the soul's loan of this world, I died that very moment; and yet a mad life burned within me, the flare of hope that will not die. How I forced her clenched hands open, bowed her rigid arms around me, threw myself upon her, breathed between her lips and listened, tore her simple dress asunder and laid my cheek upon her heart; feeling not a single throb, flooded her cold breast with tears, and lay insensible awhile. Then, as if awaking, felt that she was with me, but somehow not as usual; called her all our names of love, and believed we were in heaven. But there stood Petro with a light, sobbing, and how his beard shook! – What right had he in heaven? Would they let him in without shaving? I rose to order him out; when he restored my wits awhile by pointing with his finger.

"Look, look, Signor! She is not dead, I saw her eyelid tremble."

Wide she opened those glorious eyes, looked at me with no love in them, shuddered, and closed them again.

Mad with rapture, I caught her up, sent Petro headlong lamp and all, and kissed her enough to kill her. She was not dead, my Lily, my pet of eternal ages. There she fell trembling, fluttering, nestling in my arms, her pale cheek on my breast, her white hand on my shoulder; then frightened at her nest shrunk back, and gazed with unutterable reproach, where love like the fallen lamp was flickering: then clung to me once more, as if she ought to hate, but could not yet help loving. She died the next morning. Clara, I can't tell you any more now.

CHAPTER XV

Before my own and only love departed, she knew, thank God, she knew as well as I did, that I had never wronged her pure and true affection. But it was long before I learned what had so distressed her. Though she appeared quite sensible, and looked at me, every now and then, with the same reproachful harrowing gaze, it seemed to me ages, it must have been hours, before she could frame her thoughts in words. In an agony of suspense for her, for our children, for our love, I could hardly repress my impatience even at her debility. Many a time she opened her trembling lips, but the words died on them. At last I caught her meaning from a few broken sentences.

"How could he do it? How could he so betray her? And his own Lily that loved him so-no, she must not be Lily any more, she was only Fiordalisa Della Croce. How could he come and pretend to love her, and pretend to marry her, when all the while he had a young wife at home in England? Never would she have believed it but for the proofs, the proofs that hateful man had shown her. How could he shame his own love so, and his children, and the aged father-there was no hope for her but to die-to die and never see him more; and then perhaps he would be sorry, for he must care about her a little."

Then she burst into such a torrent of tears, and pressed both hands on her bounding heart, and grew white with terror. Then as the palpitation passed, she looked at me and knew me, and crept close to me, forgetting all the evil, – and seemed to sleep awhile. Of course I saw what it was; dazed as I was and wild at her sorrow and danger, I slowly perceived what it was. The serpent-like foe had been there, and had hissed in her ear what he thought to be true-that I had done her a dastard's wrong; had won her passionate maiden love, and defiled her by a sham marriage, while my lawful wife was living.

When once I knew my supposed offence, it did not take long to explain the murderer's error, an error which had sprung from my own deceit. But my children, where are my children, Lily?

In her ecstatic joy, she could not think for the moment even of her children; but pressed me to her tumultuous heart, as if I were all she wanted. Then she began to revile herself, for daring to believe any ill of her noble husband.

"And even if it had been true, which you know it never could be, dear, – I must have forgiven you, sweetest darling, because you couldn't have helped it, you did love me so, didn't you?"

This sweet womanly logic, you, Clara, may comprehend-But where are the children, my Lily?

"Oh, in bed I suppose, dear: let me get up, we must go and kiss the darlings. When I first came in, I could not bear to go near them, poor pets; but now-Oh my heart, holy Madonna, my heart!"

She leaped up as if she were shot, and a choking sound rose in her throat.. Her fresh youth fought hard in the clutches of death. "Oh save me, my own husband, save me. Hold me tighter; I cannot die yet. So young and so happy with you. It is gone; but the next pang is death. Hold me so till it comes again. God bless you, my own for ever. You will find me in heaven, won't you? You can never forget your own Lily."

Her large eyes rested on mine, as they did when she first owned her love; and her soul seemed trying to spring into the breast of mine. Closer to me she clung, but with less and less of strength. Her smooth, clear cheek was on mine, her exhausted heart on my wild one. I felt its last throb, as the death-pang came, and she tried to kiss me to show that it was not violent. Frantic, I opened my lips, and received the last breath of hers.

The crush of its anguish her heart might have borne, but not the rebound of its joy.

Her body, the fairest the sun ever saw, was laid beside her father's in the little churchyard at St. Katharine's, with the toy baby on her breast; her soul, the most loving and playful that ever the angels visited, is still in attendance upon me, and mourns until mine rejoins it.

You have heard my greatest but not my only distress. For more than three months, my reason forsook me utterly. I recognised no one, not even myself, but sought high and low for my Lily. At night I used to wander forth and search among the olive-trees, where we so often roved: sometimes the

form I knew so well would seem to flit before me, tempting me on from bole to bole, and stretching vain hands towards me. Then as I seemed to have overtaken and brought to bay her coyness, with a faint shriek she would vanish into hazy air. Probably I owed these visions to capricious memory, gleaming upon old hexameters of the Eton clink. True from false I knew not, neither cared to know: everything I did seemed to be done in sleep, with all the world around me gone to sleep as well. One vague recollection I retain of going somewhere, to do something that made me creep with cold. This must have been the funeral of my lost one; when the Corsicans, as I am told, fled from my ghastly stare, and would only stand behind me. They are a superstitious race, and they feared the "evil eye."

All the time I was in this state, faithful Petro waited on me, and watched me like a father. He sent for his wife, old Marcantonio, who was famed for her knowledge of herbs and her power over the witches, who now beyond all doubt had gotten me in possession. Decoctions manifold she gave me at the turn of the moon, and hung me all over with amulets, till I rang like a peal of cracked bells. In spite of all these sovereign charms, Lepardo might at any time have murdered me, if he had thought me happy enough to deserve it. Perhaps he was in some other land, making sure of my children's lives.

Poor helpless darlings, all that was left me of my Lily, as yet I did not know that even they were taken. Petro told me afterwards that I had asked for them once or twice, in a vacant wondering manner, but had been quite content with some illusory answer.

It was my Lily, and no one else, who brought me back to conscious life. What I am about to tell may seem to you a feeble brain's chimera; and so it would appear to me, if related by another. But though my body was exhausted by unsleeping sorrow, under whose strain the mental chords had yielded, yet I assure you that what befell me did not flow from but swept aside both these enervations.

It is the Corsican's belief, that those whom he has deeply mourned, and desolately missed, are allowed to hover near him in the silent night. Then sometimes, when he is sleeping, they will touch his lids and say, "Weep no more, beloved one: in all, except thy sorrow, we are blessed as thou couldst wish." Or sometimes, if the parting be of still more tender sort, (as between two lovers, or a newly wedded couple) in the depth of darkness when the lone survivor cannot sleep for trouble, appears the lost one at the chamber door, holds it open, and calls softly; "Dearest, come; for I as well am lonely." Having thrice implored, it waves its cerements like an angel's wing, and awaits the answer. Answer not, if you wish to live; however the sweet voice thrills your heart, however that heart is breaking. But if you truly wish to die, and hope is quenched in memory; make answer to the well-known voice. Within three days you will be dead, and flit beside the invoking shadow.

Perhaps old Marcantonio had warned me of this appeal, and begged me to keep silence, which for my children's sake I was bound to do. All I know is that one night towards the end of January, I lay awake as usual, thinking-if a mind distempered thus can think-of my own sweet Lily. All the evening I had sought her among the olive-trees, and at St. Katharine's Church, and even on the sad sea-shore by the moaning of the waves. Now the winter moon was high, and through the embrasured window, the far churchyard that held my wife, and the silver sea beyond it, glimmered like the curtain of another world. Sitting up in the widowed bed, with one hand on my aching forehead-for now I breathed perpetual headache-I called in question that old church of one gay wedding and two dark funerals. Was there any such church at all; was it not a dream of moonlight and the phantom love?

Even as I sat gazing now, so on many a moonlight night sat my Lily gazing with me, whispering of her father's grave, and looking for it in the shrouded distance. Her little hand used to quiver in mine, as she declared she had found it; and her dark eyes had so wondrous a gift of sight, that I never would dare to deny, though I could not quite believe it. Had she not in the happy days, when we roamed on the beach together, waiting for the yacht and pretending to seek shells, had she not then told me the stripes and colours of the sailors' caps, and even the names of the men on deck, when I could hardly see their figures?

Ah, could she tell my own name now, could she descry me from that shore which mocks the range of telescope, and the highest lens of thought; was she permitted one glimpse of him from whom

in life she could hardly bear to withdraw those gentle eyes? Answer me, my own, in life and death my own one; tell me that you watch and love me, though it be but now and then, and not enough to break the by-laws of the disembodied world.

Calmly as I now repeat it, but in a low melodious tone, sweeter than any mortal's voice, a tone that dwelt I knew not where, like the sighing of the night-wind, came this answer to me:

"True love, for our children's sake, and mine who watch and love you still, quit this grief, the spirit's grave. All your sorrow still is mine, and would you vex your darling, when you cannot comfort her? Though you see me now no more, I am with you more than ever; I am your image and your shadow. At every sigh of yours, I shiver; your smiles are all my sunshine. Let me feel some sunshine, sweetest; you know how I used to love it, and as yet you have sent me none. I shall look for some tomorrow. Lo I, for ever yours, am smiling on you now."

And a golden light, richer than any sunbeam, rippled through the room. I knew the soft gleam like the sunset on a harvest-field. It was my Lily's smile. A glow of warmth was shed on me, and I fell at once into a deep and dreamless sleep. You, my child, who have never known such loss-pray God you never may-very likely you regard all this incident as a dream. Be it so: if it were a dream, Lily's angel brought it.

CHAPTER XVI

The next day I was a different man. All my energy had returned, and all my reasoning power; but not, thank God, the rigour of my mind, the petty contempt of my fellow-men. Nothing is more hard to strip than that coat of flinty closeness formed upon Deucalion's offcast in the petrifying well of self. Though I have done my utmost, and prayed of late for help in doing it, never have I quite scaled off this accursed deposit. This it was that so estranged your warm nature, Clara; a nature essentially like your father's, but never allowed free scope. You could not tell the reason, children never can; but somehow it made you shiver to be in contact with me.

Petro and Marcantonio would have been astonished at my sudden change, but they had lately dosed me with some narcotic herb, procured, by a special expedition, from the Monte Rotondo, and esteemed a perfect Stregomastix; so of course the worthy pair expected my recovery. No longer did they attempt to conceal from me the truth as to my poor infants, who had been carried off on the day of my return. What I learned of the great calamity, which then befell me, was this.

Towards sunset, my dear wife, with her usual fondness, went forth to look for the little yacht returning from the gulf of Porto. Our darling Harry, then in his third year, was with her, and the young nurse from Muro. Lily sat upon the cliff, watching a sail far in the offing, probably our vessel. Then as she turned towards the tower, a man from the shrubbery stood before her, and called her by her maiden name. She knew her cousin Lepardo, and supposed that he was come to kill her. Nevertheless she asked him proudly how he dared to insult her so, in the presence of her child and servant. He answered that it was her name, and she was entitled to no other. Then he promised not to harm her, if she would send the maid away, for he had important things to speak of. And thereupon he laid before her documents and letters.

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