

Blackmore Richard Doddridge

Clara Vaughan. Volume 1 of

3



Richard Blackmore

Clara Vaughan. Volume 1 of 3

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R. D. Blackmore

Clara Vaughan, Volume 1 (of 3)

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

I do not mean to describe myself. Already I feel that the personal pronoun will appear too often in these pages. Knowing the faults of my character almost as well as my best friends know them, I shall attempt to hide them no more than would those beloved ones. Enough of this: the story I have to tell is strange, and short as my own its preamble.

The day when I was ten years old began my serious life. It was the 30th of December, 1842; and proud was the kiss my loving father gave me for spelling, writing, and pronouncing the date in English, French, and Italian. No very wonderful feat, it is true, for a clever child well-taught; but I was by no means a clever child; and no one except my father could teach me a single letter. When, after several years of wedlock, my parents found new joy in me, their bliss was soon overhung with care. They feared, but durst not own the fear, lest the wilful, passionate, loving creature, on whom their hearts were wholly set, should be torn from their love to a distance greater than the void of death; in a word, should prove insane. At length they could no longer hide this terror from each other. One look told it all; and I vaguely remember my hazy wonder at the scene that followed. Like a thief, I came from the corner behind the curtain-loops, and trembled at my father's knee, for him to say something to me. Then frightened at his silence—a thing unknown to me—I pulled his hands from before his eyes, and found hot tears upon them. I coaxed him then, and petted him, and felt his sorrows through me; then made believe to scold him for being so naughty as to cry. But I could not get his trouble from him, and he seemed to watch me through his kisses.

Before I had ceased to ponder dreamily over this great wonder, a vast event (for a child of seven) diverted me. Father, mother, and Tooty—for so I then was called—were drawn a long way by horses with yellow men upon them: from enlarged experience I infer that we must have posted to London. Here, among many marvels, I remember especially a long and mysterious interview with a kind, white-haired old gentleman, who wore most remarkable shoes. He took me upon his lap, which seemed to me rather a liberty; then he smoothed down my hair, and felt my head so much that I asked if he wanted to comb it, having made up my mind to kick if he dared to try such a thing. Then he put all sorts of baby questions to me which I was disposed to resent, having long discarded Cock Robin and Little Red-riding-hood. Unconsciously too, I was moved by Nature's strong hate of examination. But my father came up, and with tears in his eyes begged me to answer everything. Meanwhile my mother sat in a dark corner, as if her best doll was dying. With its innate pugnacity, my hazy intellect rose to the situation, and I narrowly heeded every thing.

"Now go, my dear," the old gentleman said at last; "you are a very good little girl indeed."

"That's a great lie," I cried; for I had learned bad words from a flighty girl, taken rashly as under-nurse.

The old gentleman seemed surprised, and my mother was dreadfully shocked. My father laughed first, then looked at me sadly; and I did what he expected, I jumped into his arms. At one word from him, I ran to the great physician, and humbly begged his pardon, and offered him my very dearest toy. He came up warmly, and shook my father's hand, and smiled from his heart at my mother.

"Allow me, Mrs. Vaughan—allow me, my dear sir—to congratulate you cordially. The head is a noble and honest one. It is the growth of the brain that causes these little commotions; but the

congestion will not be permanent. The fits, that have so alarmed you, are at this age a good symptom; in fact, they are Nature's remedy. They may last for seven years, or even for ten; of course they will not depart at once. But the attacks will be milder, and the intervals longer, when she has turned fourteen. For the intellect you need have no fear whatever. Only keep her quiet, and never force her to learn. She must only learn when it comes as it were with the wind. She will never forget what she *does* learn."

Hereupon, unless I am much mistaken, my father and mother fell to and kissed and hugged one another, and I heard a sound like sobbing; then they caught me up, and devoured me, as if I were born anew; and staring round with great childish eyes, I could not catch the old gentleman's glance at all.

Henceforth I learned very little, the wind, perhaps, being unfavourable; and all the little I did learn came from my father's lips. His patience with me was wonderful; we spent most of the day together, and when he was forced to leave me, I took no food until he returned. Whenever his horse was ordered, Miss Clara's little grey pony began to neigh and to fidget, and Miss Clara was off in a moment to get her blue riding-skirt. Even when father went shooting or fishing, Tooty was sure to go too, except in the depth of winter; and then she was up at the top of the house, watching all round for the gun-smoke.

Ah, why do I linger so over these happy times-is it the pleasure of thinking how fondly we loved one another, or is it the pain of knowing that we can do so no more?

Now, the 30th of December was my parents' wedding-day, for I had been born six years exact after their affectionate union. And now that I was ten years old-a notable hinge on the door of life-how much they made, to be sure, of each other and of me! At dinner I sat in glory between them, upsetting all ceremony, pleasing my father, and teasing my mother, by many a childish sally. So genial a man my father was that he would talk to the servants, even on state occasions, quite as if they were human beings. Yet none of them ever took the smallest liberty with him, unless it were one to love him. Before dessert, I interred my queen doll, with much respect and some heartache, under a marble flag by the door, which had been prepared for the purpose. My father was chief-mourner, but did not cry to my liking, until I had pinched him well. After this typical good-bye to childhood, I rode him back to the dining-table, and helped him and my mother to the last of the West's St. Peter grapes, giving him all the fattest ones. Then we all drank health and love to one another, and I fell to in earnest at a child's delight. Dearest father kept supplying me with things much nicer than are now to be got, while my mother in vain pretended to guard the frontier. It was the first time I tasted Guava jelly; and now, even at the name, that scene is bright before me. The long high room oak-panelled, the lights and shadows flickering as on a dark bay horse, the crimson velvet curtains where the windows were gone to bed, the great black chairs with damask cushions, but hard and sharp at the edge, the mantel-piece all carved in stone which I was forbidden to kick, the massive lamp that never would let me eat without loose clouds of hair dancing all over my plate, and then the great fire, its rival, shuddering in blue flames at the thought of the frost outside; all these things, and even the ticking of the timepiece, are more palpable to me now than the desk on which I write. My father sat in his easy chair, laughing and joking, full of life and comfort, with his glass of old port beside him, his wife in front, and me, his "Claricrops," at his knee. More happy than a hundred kings, he wished for nothing better. At one time, perhaps, he had longed for a son to keep the ancient name, but now he was quite ashamed of the wish, as mutiny against me. After many an interchange, a drink for father, a sip for Tooty, he began to tell wondrous stories of the shots he had made that day; especially how he had killed a woodcock through a magpie's nest. My mother listened with playful admiration; I with breathless interest, and most profound belief.

Then we played at draughts, and fox and goose, and pretended even to play at chess, until it was nine o'clock, and my hour of grace expired. Three times Ann Maples came to fetch me, but I would not go. At last I went submissively at one kind word from my father. My mother obtained but a pouting kiss, for I wanted to wreak some vengeance; but my father I never kissed with less than all my heart and soul. I flung both arms around his neck, laid my little cheek to his, and whispered in his

ear that I loved him more than all the world. Tenderly he clasped and kissed me, and now I am sure that through his smile he looked at me with sadness. Turning round at the doorway, I stretched my hands towards him, and met once more his loving, laughing eyes. Once more and only once. Next I saw him in his coffin, white and stark with death. By-and-by I will tell what I know; at present I can only feel. The emotions-away with long words-the passions which swept my little heart, with equal power rend it now. Long I lay dumb and stunned at the horror I could not grasp. Then with a scream, as in my fits, I flung upon his body. What to me were shroud and shell, the rigid look and the world of awe? Such things let step-children fear. Not I, when it was my father.

CHAPTER II

How that deed was done, I learned at once, and will tell. By whom and why it was done, I have given my life to learn. The evidence laid before the coroner was a cloud and fog of mystery. For days and days my mother lay insensible. Then, for weeks and weeks, she would leap from her bed in fits of terror, stare, and shriek and faint. As for the servants, they knew very little, but imagined a great deal. The only other witnesses were a medical man, a shoemaker, and two London policemen. The servants said that, between one and two in the morning, a clear, wild shriek rang through the house. Large as the building was, this shriek unrepeatd awoke nearly all but me. Rushing anyhow forth, they hurried and huddled together at the head of the great staircase, doubting what to do. Some said the cry came one way, some another. Meanwhile Ann Maples, who slept with me in an inner room at the end of a little passage, in the courage of terror went straight to her master and mistress. There, by the light of a dim night-lamp, used to visit me, she saw my mother upright in the bed, and pointing towards my father's breast. My father lay quite still; the bed-clothes were smooth upon him. My mother did not speak. Ann Maples took the lamp, and looked in her master's face. His eyes were open, wide open as in amazement, but the surprise was death. One arm was stiff around his wife, the other lax upon the pillow. As she described it in West-country phrase, "he looked all froze." The woman rushed from the room, and screamed along the passage. The servants ran to her, flurried and haggard, each afraid to be left behind. None except the butler dared to enter. Whispering and trembling they peered in after him, all ready to run away. Thomas Kenwood loved his master dearly, being his foster-brother. He at once removed the bedclothes, and found the fatal wound. So strongly and truly was it dealt, that it pierced the centre of my dear father's heart. One spot of blood and a small three-cornered hole was all that could be seen. The surgeon, who came soon after, said that the weapon must have been a very keen and finely-tempered dagger, probably of foreign make. The murderer must have been quite cool, and well acquainted with the human frame. Death followed the blow on the instant, without a motion or a groan. In my mother's left hand strongly clutched was a lock of long, black, shining hair. A curl very like it, but rather finer, lay on my father's bosom. In the room were no signs of disorder, no marks of forcible entrance.

One of the maids, a timid young thing, declared that soon after the stable-clock struck twelve, she had heard the front balusters creak; but as she was known to hear this every night, little importance was attached to it. The coroner paid more attention to the page (a sharp youth from London), who, being first in the main corridor, after the cry, saw, or thought he saw, a moving figure, where the faint starlight came in at the oriel window. He was the more believed, because he owned that he durst not follow it. But no way of escape could be discovered there, and the eastern window was strongly barred betwixt the mullions. No door, no window was anywhere found open.

Outside the house, the only trace was at one remarkable spot. The time had been chosen well. It was a hard black frost, without, as yet, any snow. The ground was like iron, and an Indian could have spied no trail. But at this one spot, twenty-five yards from the east end of the house, and on the verge of a dense shrubbery, a small spring, scarcely visible, oozed among the moss. Around its very head, it cleared, and kept, a narrow space quite free from green, and here its margin was a thin coat of black mineral mud, which never froze. This space, at the broadest, was but two feet and ten inches across from gravel to turf, yet now it held two distinct footprints, not of some one crossing and re-crossing, but of two successive steps leading from the house into the shrubbery. These footprints were remarkable; the one nearest the house was of the left foot, the other of the right. Each was the impression of a long, light, and pointed boot, very hollow at the instep. But they differed in this—the left footprint was plain and smooth, without mark of nail, or cue, or any other roughness; while the right one was clearly stamped in the centre of the sole with a small rectangular cross. This mark seemed to have been made by a cruciform piece of metal, or some other hard substance, inlaid into

the sole. At least, so said a shoemaker, who was employed to examine it; and he added that the boots were not those of the present fashion, what he called "duck's bills" being then in vogue. This man being asked to account for the fact of the footprints being so close together, did so very easily, and with much simplicity. It was evident, he said, that a man of average stature, walking rapidly, would take nearly twice that distance in every stride; but here the verge of the shrubbery, and the branches striking him in the face, had suddenly curtailed the step. And to this, most likely, and not to any hurry or triumph, was to be ascribed the fact that one so wily and steadfast did not turn back and erase the dangerous tokens. Most likely, he did not feel what was beneath his feet, while he was battling with the tangle above.

Be that as it may, there the marks remained, like the blotting-paper of his crime. Casts of them were taken at once, and carefully have they been stored by me.

The shoemaker, a shrewd but talkative man, said unasked that he had never seen such boots as had left those marks, since the "Young Squire" (he meant Mr. Edgar Vaughan) went upon his travels. For this gratuitous statement, he was strongly rebuked by the coroner.

For the rest, all that could be found out, after close inquiry, was, that a stranger darkly clad had been seen by the gamekeepers, in a copse some half-mile from the house, while the men were beating for woodcocks on the previous day. He did not seem to be following my father, and they thought he had wandered out of the forest road. He glided quickly away, before they could see his features, but they knew that he was tall and swarthy. No footprints were found in that ride like those by the shrubbery spring.

I need not say what verdict the coroner's jury found.

CHAPTER III

Thus far, I have written in sore haste, to tell, as plainly and as briefly as possible, that which has darkened all my life. Though it never leaves my waking thoughts, to dwell upon it before others is agony to me. Henceforth my tale will flow perhaps more easily, until I fall again into a grief almost as dark, and am struck by storms of passion which childhood's stature does not reach.

When the shock of the household, and the wonder of the county, and the hopes of constables (raised by a thousand pounds' reward) had subsided gradually, my mother continued to live in the old mansion, perhaps because none of her friends came forward to remove her. Under my father's will she was the sole executrix; but all the estates (including house and park) were left to my father's nearest relative, as trustee for myself, with a large annuity to my mother charged upon them. There were many other provisions and powers in the will, which are of no consequence to my story. The chief estate was large and rich, extending three or four miles from the house, which stood in a beautiful part of Gloucestershire. The entire rental was about 12,000*^{l.}* a year. My father (whose name was Henry Valentine Vaughan), being a very active man in the prime of life, had employed no steward, but managed everything himself. The park, and two or three hundred acres round it, had always been kept in hand; the rest was let to thriving tenants, who loved (as they expressed it) "every hair on the head of a Vaughan." There was also a small farm near the sea, in a lonely part of Devonshire; but this was my mother's, having been left to her by her father, a clergyman in that neighbourhood.

My father's nearest relative was his half-brother, Edgar Vaughan, who had been educated for the Bar, and at one time seemed likely to become eminent; then suddenly he gave up his practice, and resided (or rather roved) abroad, during several years. Sinister rumours about him reached our neighbourhood, not long before my father's death. To these, however, the latter paid no attention, but always treated his brother Edgar with much cordiality and affection. But all admitted that Edgar Vaughan had far outrun his income as a younger son, which amounted to about 600*^{l.}* a year. Of course, therefore, my father had often helped him.

On the third day after that night, my guardian came to Vaughan Park. He was said to have hurried from London, upon learning there what had happened.

The servants and others had vainly and foolishly tried to keep from me the nature of my loss. Soon I found out all they knew, and when the first tit and horror left me, I passed my whole time, light or dark, in roving from passage to passage, from room to room, from closet to closet, searching every chink and cranny for the murderer of my father. Though heretofore a timid child, while so engaged I knew not such a thing as fear; but peered, and groped, and listened, feeling every inch of wall and wainscot, crawling lest I should alarm my prey, spying through the slit of every door, and shaking every empty garment. Certain boards there were near the east window which sounded hollow; at these I scooped until I broke my nails. In vain nurse Maples locked me in her room, held me at her side, or even bound me to the bed. My ravings forced her soon to yield, and I would not allow her, or any one else, to follow me. The Gloucester physician said that since the disease of my mind had taken that shape, it would be more dangerous to thwart than to indulge it.

It was the evening of the third day, and weary with but never *of* my search, I was groping down the great oak-staircase in the dusk, hand after hand, and foot by foot, when suddenly the main door-bell rang. The snow was falling heavily, and had deadened the sound of wheels. At once I slid (as my father had taught me to do) down the broad balustrade, ran across the entrance-hall, and with my whole strength drew back the bolt of the lock. There I stood in the porch, unfrightened, but with a new kind of excitement on me. A tall dark man came up the steps, and shook the snow from his boots. The carriage-lamp shone in my face. I would not let him cross the threshold, but stood there and confronted him. He pretended to take me for some servant's child, and handed me a parcel covered with snow. I flung it down, and said, looking him full in the face, "I am Clara Vaughan, and you are

the man who killed my father." "Carry her in, John," he said to the servant-"carry her in, or the poor little thing will die. What eyes!" and he used some foreign oath-"what wonderful eyes she has!"

That burst of passion was the last conscious act of the young and over-laboured brain. For three months I wandered outside the gates of sorrow. My guardian, as they told me, was most attentive throughout the whole course of the fever, and even in the press of business visited me three times every day. Meanwhile, my mother was slowly shaking off the stupor which lay upon her, and the new fear of losing me came through that thick heaviness, like the wind through a fog. Doubtless it helped to restore her senses, and awoke her to the work of life. Then, as time went on, her former beauty and gentleness came back, and her reason too, as regarded other subjects. But as to that which all so longed to know, not a spark of evidence could be had from her. The faintest allusion to that crime, the name of her loved husband, the mere word "murder" uttered in her presence-and the consciousness would leave her eyes, like a loan withdrawn. Upright she sat and rigid as when she was found that night, with the lines of her face as calm and cold as moonlight. Only two means there were by which her senses could be restored: one was low sweet music, the other profound sleep. She was never thrown into this cataleptic state by her own thoughts or words, nor even by those of others when in strict sequence upon her own. But any attempt to lead her to that one subject, no matter how craftily veiled, was sure to end in this. The skilful physician, who had known her many years, judged, after special study of this disease, in which he felt deep interest, that it was always present in her brain, but waited for external aid to master her. I need not say that she was now unfit for any stranger's converse, and even her most careful friends must touch sometimes the motive string.

As I recovered slowly from long illness, the loss of my best friend and the search for my worst enemy revived and reigned within me. Sometimes my guardian would deign to reason with me upon what he called "my monomania." When he did so, I would fix my eyes upon him, but never tried to answer. Now and then, those eyes seemed to cause him some uneasiness; at other times he would laugh and compare them pleasantly to the blue fire-damp in a coal-mine. His dislike of their scrutiny was well known to me, and incited me the more to urge it. But in spite of all, he was ever kind and gentle to me, and even tried some grimly playful overtures to my love, which fled from him with loathing, albeit a slow conviction formed that I had wronged him by suspicion.

Edgar Malins Vaughan, then about thirty-seven years old, was (I suppose) a very handsome man, and perhaps of a more striking presence than my dearest father. His face, when he was pleased, reminded me strongly of the glance and smile I had lost, but never could it convey that soft sweet look, which still came through the clouds to me, now and then in dreams. The outlines of my guardian's face were keener too and stronger, and his complexion far more swarthy. His eyes were of a hard steel-blue, and never seemed to change. A slight lameness, perceptible only at times, did not impair his activity, but served him as a pretext for declining all field-sports, for which (unlike my father) he had no real taste.

His enjoyments, if he had any-and I suppose all men have some-seemed to consist in the management of the estate (which he took entirely upon himself), in satiric literature and the news of the day, or in lonely rides and sails upon the lake. It was hinted too, by Thomas Kenwood, who disliked and feared him strangely, that he drank spirits or foreign cordials in his own room, late at night. There was nothing to confirm this charge; he was always up betimes, his hand was never tremulous, nor did his colour change.

CHAPTER IV

My life-childhood I can scarcely call it-went quietly for several years. The eastern wing of the house was left unused, and rarely traversed by any but myself. Foolish tales, of course, were told about it; but my frequent visits found nothing to confirm them. At night, whenever I could slip from the care of good but matter-of-fact Ann Maples, I used to wander down the long corridor, and squeeze through the iron gate now set there, half in hope and half in fear of meeting my father's spirit. For such an occasion all my questions were prepared, and all the answers canvassed. My infant mind was struggling ever to pierce the mystery which so vaguely led its life. Years only quickened my resolve to be the due avenger, and hardened the set resolve into a fatalist's conviction. My mother, always full of religious feeling, taught me daily in the Scriptures, and tried to make me pray. But I could not take the mild teachings of the Gospel as a little child. To me the Psalms of David, and those books of the Old Testament which recount and seem to applaud revenge, were sweeter than all the balm of Gilead; they supplied a terse and vigorous form to my perpetual yearnings. With a child's impiety, I claimed for myself the mission of the Jews against the enemies of the Lord. The forms of prayer, which my mother taught me, I mumbled through, while looking in her gentle face, with anything but a prayerful gaze. For my own bedside I kept a widely different form, which even now I shudder to repeat. And yet I loved dear mother truly, and pitied her sometimes with tears; but the shadow-love was far the deeper.

My father's grave was in the churchyard of the little village which clustered and nestled beyond our lodge. It was a real grave. The thought of lying in a vault had always been loathsome to him, and he said that it struck him cold. So fond was he of air and light and freedom, the change of seasons and weather, and the shifting of the sun and stars, that he used to pray that they still might pass over his buried head; that he might lie, not in the dark lockers of death, but in the open hand of time. His friends used to think it strange that a man of so light and festive nature should ever talk of death; yet so he often did, not morbidly, but with good cheer. In pursuance, therefore, of his well-known wish, the vaults wherein there lay five centuries of Vaughan dust were not opened for him; neither was his grave built over with a hideous ash-bin; but lay narrow, fair, and humble, with a plain, low headstone of the whitest marble, bearing his initials deeply carved in grey. Through our warm love and pity, and that of all the village, and not in mere compliance with an old usage of the western counties, his simple bed was ever green and white with the fairest of low flowers. Though otherwise too moody and reckless to be a gardener, I loved to rear from seed his favourite plants, and keep them in my room until they blossomed; then I would set them carefully along his grave, and lie down beside it, and wonder whether his spirit took pleasure in them.

But more often, it must be owned, I laid a darker tribute there. The gloomy channel into which my young mind had been forced was overhung, as might be expected, by a sombre growth. The legends of midnight spirits, and the tales of blackest crime, shed their poison on me. From the dust of the library I exhumed all records of the most famous atrocities, and devoured them at my father's grave. As yet I was too young to know what grief it would cause to him who slept there, could he but learn what his only child was doing. That knowledge would at once have checked me, for his presence was ever with me, and his memory cast my thoughts, as moonlight shapes the shadows.

The view from the churchyard was a lovely English scene. What higher praise can I give than this? Long time a wanderer in foreign parts, nothing have I seen that comes from nature to the heart like a true English landscape.

The little church stood back on a quiet hill, which bent its wings in a gentle curve to shelter it from the north and east. These bending wings were feathered, soft as down, with, larches, hawthorn, and the lightly-pencilled birch, between which, here and there, the bluff rocks stood their ground. Southward, and beyond the glen, how fair a spread of waving country we could see! To the left, our

pretty lake, all clear and calm, gave back the survey of the trees, until a bold gnoll, fringed with alders, led it out of sight. Far away upon the right, the Severn stole along its silver road, leaving many a reach and bend, which caught towards eventide the notice of the travelled sun. Upon the horizon might be seen at times, the blue distance of the Brecon hills.

Often when I sat here all alone, and the evening dusk came on, although I held those volumes on my lap, I could not but forget the murders and the revenge of men, the motives, form, and evidence of crime, and nurse a vague desire to dream my life away.

Sometimes also my mother would come here, to read her favourite Gospel of St. John. Then I would lay the dark records on the turf, and sit with my injury hot upon me, wondering at her peaceful face. While, for her sake, I rejoiced to see the tears of comfort and contentment dawning in her eyes, I never grieved that the soft chastenment was not shed on me. For her I loved and admired it; for myself I scorned it utterly.

The same clear sunshine was upon us both: we both were looking on the same fair scene—the gold of ripening corn, the emerald of woods and pastures, the crystal of the lake and stream; above us both the peaceful heaven was shed, and the late distress was but a night gone by—wherefore had it left to one the dew of life, to the other a thunderbolt? I knew not the reason then, but now I know it well.

Although my favourite style of literature was not likely to improve the mind, or yield that honeyed melancholy which some young ladies woo, to me it did but little harm. My will was so bent upon one object, and the whole substance and shape of my thoughts so stanch in their sole ductility thereto, that other things went idly by me, if they showed no power to promote my end. But upon palpable life, and the doings of nature I became observant beyond my age. Things in growth or motion round me impressed themselves on my senses, as if a nerve were touched. The uncoiling of a fern-frond, the shrinking of a bind-weed blossom, the escape of a cap-pinched bud, the projection of a seed, or the sparks from a fading tuberoses, in short, the lighter prints of Nature's sandalled foot, were traced and counted by me. Not that I derived a maiden pleasure from them, as happy persons do, but that it seemed my business narrowly to heed them.

As for the proud phenomena of imperial man, so far as they yet survive the crucible of convention—the lines where cunning crouches, the smile that is but a brain-flash, the veil let down across the wide mouth of greed, the guilt they try to make volatile in charity, — all these I was not old and poor enough to learn. Yet I marked unconsciously the traits of individuals, the mannerism, the gesture, and the mode of speech, the complex motive, and the underflow of thought. So all I did, and all I dreamed, had one colour and one aim.

My education, it is just to say, was neglected by no one but myself. My father's love of air and heaven had descended to me, and nothing but my mother's prayers or my own dark quest could keep me in the house. Abstract principles and skeleton dogmas I could never grasp; but whatever was vivid and shrewd and native, whatever had point and purpose, was seized by me and made my own. My faculties were not large, but steadfast now, and concentrated.

Though several masters tried their best, and my governess did all she could, I chose to learn but little. Drawing and music (to soothe my mother) were my principal studies. Of poetry I took no heed, except in the fierce old drama.

Enough of this. I have said so much, not for my sake, but for my story.

CHAPTER V

On the fifth anniversary of my father's death, when I was fifteen years of age, I went to visit (as I always did upon that day) the fatal room. Although this chamber had been so long unused, the furniture was allowed to remain; and I insisted passionately that it should be my charge. What had seemed the petulance of a child was now the strong will of a thoughtful girl.

I took the key from my bosom, where I always kept it, and turned it in the lock. No mortal had entered that door since I passed it in my last paroxysm, three weeks and a day before. I saw a cobweb reaching from the black finger-plate to the third mould of the beading. The weather had been damp, and the door stuck fast to the jamb, then yielded with a crack. Though I was bold that day, and in a mood of triumph, some awe fell on me as I entered. There hung the heavy curtain, last drawn by the murderer's hand; there lay the bed-clothes, raised for the blow, and replaced on death; and there was the pillow where sleep had been so prolonged. All these I saw with a forced and fearful glance, and my breath stood still as the wind in a grave.

Presently a light cloud floated off the sun, and a white glare from the snow of the morning burst across the room. My sight was not so dimmed with tears as it generally was when I stood there, for I had just read the history of a long-hidden crime detected, and my eyes were full of fierce hope. But stricken soon to the wonted depth of sadness, with the throbs of my heart falling like the avenger's step, I went minutely through my death-inspection. I felt all round the dusty wainscot, opened the wardrobes and cupboards, raised the lids of the deep-bayed window-seats, peered shuddering down the dark closet, where I believed the assassin had lurked, started and stared at myself in the mirror, to see how lone and wan I looked, and then approached the bed, to finish my search in the usual place, by lying and sobbing where my father died. I had glanced beneath it and round the pillars, and clutched the curtain as if to squeeze out the truth, and was just about to throw myself on the coverlet and indulge the fit so bitterly held at bay, when something on the hangings above the head-board stopped me suddenly. There I saw a narrow line of deep and glowing red. It grew so vivid on the faded damask, and in the white glare of the level sun, that I thought it was on fire. Hastily setting a chair by the pillar, for I would not tread on that bed, I leaped up, and closely examined the crimson vein.

Without thinking, I knew what it was—the heart-blood of my father. There were three distinct and several marks, traced by the reeking dagger. The first on the left, which had caught my glance, was the broadest and clearest to read. Two lines, meeting at a right angle, rudely formed a Roman L. Rudely I say, for the poniard had been too rich in red ink, which had clotted where the two strokes met. The second letter was a Roman D, formed also by two bold strokes, the upright very distinct, the curve less easily traced at the top, but the lower part deep and clear. The third letter was not so plain. It looked like C at first, but upon further examination I felt convinced that it was meant for an O, left incomplete through the want of more writing fluid; or was it then that my mother had seized the dark author by the hair, as he stooped to incline his pen that the last drop might trickle down?

Deciphering thus with fingers and eyes, I traced these letters of blood, one by one, over and over again, till they danced in my gaze like the northern lights. I stood upon tiptoe and kissed them; I cared not what I was doing: it was my own father's blood, and I thought of the heart it came from, not of the hand which shed it. When I turned away, the surprise, for which till then I had found no time, broke full upon me. How could these letters, in spite of all my vigilance, so long have remained unseen? Why did the murderer peril his life yet more by staying to write the record, and seal perhaps the conviction of his deed? And what did these characters mean? Of these three questions, the first was readily solved. The other two remained to me as new shadows of wonder. Several causes had conspired to defer so long this discovery. In the first place, the damask had been of rich lilac, shot with a pile of carmine, which, in the waving play of light, glossed at once and obscured the crimson stain, until the fading hues of art left in strong contrast nature's abiding paint. Secondly, my rapid

growth and the clearness of my eyes that day lessened the distance and favoured perception. Again-and this was perhaps the paramount cause-the winter sun, with rays unabsorbed by the snow, threw his sheer dint upon that very spot, keen, level, and uncoloured-a thing which could happen on few days in the year, and for few minutes each day, and which never had happened during my previous search. Perhaps there was also some chemical action of the rays of light which evoked as well as showed the colour; but of this I do not know enough to speak. Suffice it that the letters were there, at first a great shock and terror, but soon a strong encouragement to me.

My course was at once to perpetuate the marks and speculate upon them at leisure, for I knew not how fleeting they might be. I hurried downstairs, and speaking to no one procured some clear tissue paper. Applying this to the damask, and holding a card behind, I carefully traced with a pencil so much of the letters as could be perceived through the medium, and completed the sketch by copying most carefully the rest; It was, however, beyond my power to keep my hand from trembling. A shade flitted over my drawing-oh, how my heart leaped!

When I had finished the pencil-sketch, and before it was inked over (for I could not bring myself to paint it red), I knelt where my father died and thanked God for this guidance to me. By the time I had dried my eyes the sun was passed and the lines of blood were gone, even though I knew where to seek them, having left a pin in the damask. By measuring I found that the letters were just three feet and a quarter above the spot where my father's head had been. The largest of them, the L, was three inches long and an eighth of an inch in width; the others were nearly as long, but nothing like so wide.

Trembling now, for the rush of passion which stills the body was past, and stepping silently on the long silent floor, I went to the deep dark-mullioned window and tried to look forth. After all my lone tumult, perhaps I wanted to see the world. But my jaded eyes and brain showed only the same three letters burning on the snow and sky. Evening, a winter evening, was fluttering down. The sun was spent and stopped by a grey mist, and the landscape full of dreariness and cold. For miles, the earth lay white and wan, with nothing to part life from death. No step was on the snow, no wind among the trees; fences, shrubs, and hillocks were as wrinkles in a winding-sheet, and every stark branch had like me its own cold load to carry.

But on the left, just in sight from the gable-window, was a spot, black as midnight, in the billowy snow. It was the spring which had stored for me the footprints. Perhaps I was superstitious then; the omen was accepted. Suddenly a last gleam from the dauntless sun came through the ancient glass, and flung a crimson spot upon my breast. It was the red heart, centre of our shield, won with *Coeur de Lion*.

Oh scutcheons, blazonments, and other gewgaws, by which men think to ennoble daylight murders, how long shall fools account it honour to be tattooed with you? Mercy, fellow-feeling, truth, humility, virtues that never flap their wings, but shrink lest they should know they stoop, what have these won? Gaze sinister, and their crest a pillory.

With that red pride upon my breast, and that black heart within, and my young form stately with revenge, I was a true descendant of Crusaders.

CHAPTER VI

To no one, not even to Thomas Kenwood (in whom I confided most), did I impart the discovery just described. Again and again I went to examine those letters, jealous at once of my secret, and fearful lest they should vanish. But though they remained perhaps unaltered, they never appeared so vivid as on that day.

With keener interest I began once more to track, from page to page, from volume to volume, the chronicled steps of limping but sure-footed justice.

Not long after this I was provided with a companion. "Clara," said my guardian one day at breakfast, "you live too much alone. Have you any friends in the neighbourhood?"

"None in the world, except my mother."

"Well, I must try to survive the exclusion. I have done my best. But your mother has succeeded in finding a colleague. There's a cousin of yours coming here very soon."

"Mother dear," I cried in some surprise, "you never told me that you had any nieces."

"Neither have I, my darling," she replied, "nor any nephews either; but your uncle has; and I hope you will like your visitor."

"Now remember, Clara," resumed my guardian, "it is no wish of mine that you should do so. To me it is a matter of perfect indifference; but your mother and myself agreed that a little society would do you good."

"When is she to come?" I asked, in high displeasure that no one had consulted me.

"He is likely to be here to-morrow."

"Oh," I exclaimed, "the plot is to humanize me through a young gentleman, is it? And how long is he to stay in my house?"

"In your house! I suppose that will depend upon your mother's wishes."

"More likely upon yours," I cried; "but it matters little to me."

He said nothing, but looked displeased; my mother doing the same, I was silent, and the subject dropped. But of course I saw that he wished me to like his new importation, while he dissembled the wish from knowledge of my character.

Two years after my father's birth, his father had married again. Of the second wedlock the only offspring was my guardian, Edgar Vaughan. He was a posthumous son, and his mother in turn contracted a second marriage. Her new husband was one Stephen Daldy, a merchant of some wealth. By him she left one son, named Lawrence, and several daughters. This Lawrence Daldy, my guardian's half-brother, proved a spendthrift, and, while scattering the old merchant's treasure married a fashionable adventuress. As might be expected, no retrenchment ensued, and he died in poverty, leaving an only child.

This boy, Clement Daldy, was of my own age, or thereabout, and, in pursuance of my guardian's plan, was to live henceforth with us.

He arrived under the wing of his mother, and his character consisted in the absence of any. If he had any quality at all by which one could know him from a doll, it was perhaps vanity; and if his vanity was singular enough to have any foundation, it could be only in his good looks. He was, I believe, as pretty a youth as ever talked without mind, or smiled without meaning. Need it be said that I despised him at once unfathomably?

His mother was of a very different order. Long-enduring, astute, and plausible, with truth no more than the pith of a straw, she added thereto an imperious spirit, embodied just now in an odious meekness. Whatever she said or did, in her large contempt of the world, her lady-abbess walk, and the chastened droop of her brilliant eyes, she conveyed through it all the impression of her humble superiority. Though profoundly convinced that all is vanity, she was reluctant to force this conviction on minds of a narrower scope, and dissembled with conscious grace her knowledge of human nature.

To a blunt, outspoken child, what could be more disgusting? But when upon this was assumed an air of deep pity for my ignorance, and interest in my littleness, it became no longer bearable.

This Christian Jezebel nearly succeeded in estranging my mother from me. The latter felt all that kindness towards her which people of true religion, when over-charitable, conceive towards all who hoist and salute the holy flag. Our sweet pirate knew well how to make the most of this.

For myself, though I felt that a hypocrite is below the level of hate, I could not keep my composure when with affectionate blandness our visitor dared to "discharge her sacred duty of impressing on me the guilt of harbouring thoughts of revenge." Of course, she did not attempt it in the presence of my mother; but my guardian was there, and doubtless knew her intention.

It was on a Sunday after the service, and she had stayed for the sacrament.

"My sweet child," she began, "you will excuse what I am about to say, as I only speak for your good, and from a humble sense that it is the path of duty. It has pleased God, in His infinite wisdom, to afflict your dear mother with a melancholy so sensitive, that she cannot bear any allusion to your deeply-lamented father. You have therefore no female guidance upon a subject which justly occupies so much of your thoughts. Your uncle Edgar, in his true affection for you, has thought it right that you should associate more with persons calculated to develop your mind."

Now I hate that word "develop;" and I felt my passion rising, but let her go on: -

"Under these circumstances, it grieves me deeply, my poor dear child, to find you still display a perversity, and a wilful neglect of the blessed means of grace, which must (humanly speaking) draw down a judgment upon you. Now, open your heart to me, the whole of your little unregenerate heart, you mysterious but (I firmly believe) not ill-disposed lambkin. Tell me all your thoughts, your broodings, your dreams-in fact, your entire experiences. Uncle Edgar will leave the room, if you wish it."

"Certainly not," I said.

"Quite right, my dear; have no secrets from one who has been your second father. Now tell me all your little troubles. Make me your mother-confessor. I take the deepest interest in you. True, I am only a weak and sinful woman, but my chastisements have worked together for my edification, and God has been graciously pleased to grant me peace of mind."

"You don't look as if you had much," I cried.

Her large eyes flashed a quick start from their depths, like the stir of a newly-fathomed sea. My guardian's face gleamed with a smile of sly amusement. Recovering at once her calm objective superiority, she proceeded:

"I have been troubled and chastened severely, but now I perceive that it was all for the best. But perhaps it is not very graceful to remind me of that. Yet, since all my trials have worked together for my good, on that account I am, under Providence, better qualified to advise you, in your dark and perilous state. I have seen much of what thoughtless people call 'life.' But in helping you, I wish to proceed on higher principles than those of the world. You possess, beyond question, a strong and resolute will, but in your present benighted course it can lead only to misery. Now, what is the principal aim of your life, my love?"

"The death of my father's murderer."

"Exactly so. My unhappy child, I knew it too well. Though a dark sin is your leading star, I feel too painfully my own shortcomings, and old unregenerate tendencies, to refuse you my carnal sympathy. You know my feelings, Edgar."

"Indeed, Eleanor," replied my guardian, with an impenetrable smile, "how should I? You have always been such a model of every virtue."

She gave him a glance, and again addressed me. "Now suppose, Clara Vaughan, that, after years of brooding and lonely anguish, you obtain your revenge at last, who will be any the better for it?"

"My father and I."

"Your father indeed! How you wrong his sweet and most forgiving nature!"

This was the first thing she had said that touched me; and that because I had often thought of it before. But I would not let her see it.

"Though his nature were an angel's," I cried, "as I believe it was, never could he forgive that being who tore him from me and my mother. I know that he watches me now, and must be cold and a wanderer, until I have done my duty to him and myself."

"You awful child. Why, you'll frighten us all. But you make it the more my duty. Come with me now, and let me inculcate the doctrines of a higher and holier style."

"Thank you, Mrs. Daldy, I want no teaching, except my mother's."

"You are too wilful and headstrong for her. Come to me, my poor stray lamb."

"I would sooner go to a butcher, Mrs. Daldy."

"Is it possible? Are you so lost to all sense of right?"

"Yes, if you are right," I replied; and left the room.

Thenceforth she pursued tactics of another kind. She tried me with flattery and fictitious confidence, likely from a woman of her maturity to win a young girl, by inflating self-esteem: she even feigned a warm interest in my search, and wished to partake in my readings and secret musings. Indeed, I could seldom escape her. I am ready to own that, by her suggestions and quick apprehension, she gained some ascendancy over me, but not a tenth part of what she thought she had won; and I still continued to long for her departure. Of this, however, no symptom appeared: she made herself quite at home, and did her best to become indispensable to my mother.

Clement Daldy had full opportunity to commend himself to my favour. We were constantly thrown together, in the presence of his mother, and the absence of mine. For a long time, I was too young, and too much engrossed by the object for which I lived, to have any inkling of their scheme; but suddenly a suspicion broke upon me. My guardian and his sister-in-law had formed, as I thought, a deliberate plot for marrying me, when old enough, to that tailor's block. The one had been so long accustomed to the lordship of the property, to some county influence, and great command of money, that it was not likely he would forego the whole without a struggle. But he knew quite well that the moment I should be of age I would dispense with his wardship, and even with his residence there, and devote all I had to the pursuit of my "monomania." All his endeavours to make me his thrall had failed, partly from my suspicions, partly from a repugnance which could not be conquered. Of course, I intended to give him an ample return for his stewardship, which had been wise and unwearying. But this was not what he wanted. The motives of his accomplice require no explanation. If once this neat little scheme should succeed, I must remain in their hands, Clement being nobody, until they should happen to quarrel for me.

To show what Clement Daldy was, a brief anecdote is enough. When we were about sixteen years old, we sat in the park one morning, at the corner of the lake; Clement's little curled spaniel, which he loved as much as he could love anything, was gambolling round us. As the boy lounged along, half asleep, on the rustic chair, with his silky face shaded by a broad hat, and his bright curls glistening like daffodils playing, I thought what a pretty peep-show he made, and wondered whether he could anyhow be the owner of a soul.

"Oh, Clara," he lisped, as he chanced to look up—"Couthin Clara, I wish you wouldn't look at me tho."

"And did it look fierce at its dolly?" I said; for I was always good-natured to him. "Dolly knows I wouldn't hurt it, for it's house full of sugar-plums."

"Then do let me go to thleep; you are such a howwid girl."

So I hushed him off with a cradle song. But before the long lashes sunk flat on his cheeks, like the ermine tips on my muff, and while his red lips yet trembled like cherries in the wind, my attention was suddenly drawn to the lake. There was a splashing, and barking, and hissing, and napping of snow-white wings—poor Juan engaged in unequal combat with two fierce swans who had a nest on the island. The poor little dog, though he fought most gallantly, was soon driven into deep water, and

the swans kept knocking him under with rapid and powerful strokes. Seeing him almost drowned, I called Clement to save him at once.

"I can't," said the brave youth; "you go if you like. They'll kill me, and I can't bear it; and the water ith tho cold."

In a moment I pushed off the boat which was near, jumped into it, and, seizing an oar, contrived to beat back the swans, and lifted the poor little dog on board, gasping, half-drowned, and woefully beaten. Meanwhile my lord elect had leaped on the seat for safety, and was wringing his white little hands, and dancing and crying, "Oh, Clara'll be thrownd, and they'll say it was me. Oh, what thall I do! what thall I do!"

Even when I brought him his little pet safe, he would not touch him, because he was wet; so I laid him full on his lap.

CHAPTER VII

The spring of the year 1849 was remarkable, throughout the western counties, for long drought. I know not how it may be in the east of England, but I have observed that in the west long droughts occur only in the spring and early summer. In the autumn we have sometimes as much as six weeks without rain, and in the summer a month at most, but all the real droughts (so far as my experience goes) commence in February or March; these are, however, so rare, and April has won such poetic fame for showers, and July for heat and dryness, that what I state is at variance with the popular impression.

Be that as it may, about Valentine's-day, 1849, and after a length of very changeable weather, the wind fixed its home in the east, and the sky for a week was grey and monotonous. Brilliant weather ensued; white frost at night, and strong sun by day. The frost became less biting as the year went on, and the sun more powerful; there were two or three overcast days, and people hoped for rain. But no rain fell, except one poor drizzle, more like dew than rain.

With habits now so ingrained as to become true pleasures, I marked the effects of the drought on all the scene around me. The meadows took the colour of Russian leather, the cornlands that of a knife-board. The young leaves of the wood hung pinched and crisp, unable to shake off their tunics, and more like catkins than leaves. The pools went low and dark and thick with a coppery scum (in autumn it would have been green), and little bubbles came up and popped where the earth cracked round the sides. The tap-rooted plants looked comely and brave in the morning, after their drink of dew, but flagged and flopped in the afternoon, as a clubbed cabbage does. As for those which had only the surface to suck, they dried by the acre, and powdered away like the base of a bonfire.

The ground was hard as horn, and fissured in stars, and angles, and jagged gaping cracks, like a dissecting map or a badly-plastered wall. It amused me sometimes to see a beetle suddenly cut off from his home by that which to him was an earthquake. How he would run to and fro, look doubtfully into the dark abyss, then, rising to the occasion, bridge his road with a straw. The snails shrunk close in their shells, and resigned themselves to a spongy distance of slime. The birds might be seen in the morning, hopping over the hollows of the shrunk ponds, prying for worms, which had shut themselves up like caddises deep in the thirsty ground. Our lake, which was very deep at the lower end, became a refuge for all the widgeons and coots and moorhens of the neighbourhood, and the quick-diving grebe, and even the summer snipe, with his wild and lonely "cheep." The brink of the water was feathered, and dabbled with countless impressions of feet of all sorts-dibbers, and waders, and wagtails, and weasels, and otters, and foxes, and the bores of a thousand bills, and muscles laid high and dry.

For my own pet robins I used to fill pans with water along the edge of the grass, for I knew their dislike of the mineral spring (which never went dry), and to these they would fly down and drink, and perk up their impudent heads, and sluice their poor little dusty wings; and then, as they could not sing now, they would give me a chirp of gratitude.

When the drought had lasted about three months, the east wind, which till then had been cold and creeping, became suddenly parching hot. Arid and heavy, and choking, it panted along the glades, like a dog on a dusty road. It came down the water-meadows, where the crowsfoot grew, and wild celery, and it licked up the dregs of the stream, and powdered the flood-gates, all skeletons now, with grey dust. It came through the copse, and the young leaves shrunk before it, like a child from the hiss of a snake. The blast pushed the doors of our house, and its dry wrinkled hand was laid on the walls and the staircase and woodwork; a hot grime tracked its steps, and a taint fell on all that was fresh. As it folded its baleful wings, and lay down like a desert dragon, vegetation, so long a time sick, gave way at last to despair, and flagged off flabbed and dead. The clammy grey dust, like hot sand thrown from ramparts, ate to the core of everything, choking the shrivelled pores and stifling

the languid breath. Old gaffers were talking of murrain in cattle, and famine and plague among men, and farmers were too badly off to grumble.

But the change even now was at hand. The sky which had long presented a hard and cloudless blue, but trailing a light haze round its rim in the morning, was bedimmed more every day with a white scudding vapour across it. The sun grew larger and paler, and leaned more on the heavens, which soon became ribbed with white skeleton-clouds; and these in their turn grew softer and deeper, then furry and ravelled and wisped. One night the hot east wind dropped, and, next morning (though the vane had not changed), the clouds drove heavily from the south-west. But these signs of rain grew for several days before a single drop fell; as is always the case after discontinuance, it was hard to begin again. Indeed, the sky was amassed with black clouds, and the dust went swirling like a mat beaten over the trees, and the air became cold, and the wind moaned three days and three nights, and yet no rain fell. As old Whitehead, the man at the lodge, well observed, it had "forgotten the way to rain." Then it suddenly cleared one morning (the 28th of May), and the west was streaked with red clouds, that came up to crow at the sun, and the wind for the time was lulled, and the hills looked close to my hand. So I went to my father's grave without the little green watering-pot or a trowel to fill the chinks, for I knew it would rain that very day.

In the eastern shrubbery there was a pond, which my father had taken much trouble to make and adorn; it was not fed by the mineral spring, for that was thought likely to injure the fish, but by a larger and purer stream, called the "Witches' brook," which, however, was now quite dry. This pond had been planted around and through with silver-weed, thrumwort and sun-clew, water-lilies, arrow-head, and the rare double frog-bit, and other aquatic plants, some of them brought from a long distance. At one end there was a grotto, cased with fantastic porous stone, and inside it a small fountain played. But now the fountain was silent, and the pond shrunk almost to its centre. The silver eels which once had abounded here, finding their element likely to fail, made a migration, one dewy night, overland to the lake below. The fish, in vain envy of that great enterprise, huddled together in the small wet space which remained, with their back-fins here and there above water. When any one came near, they dashed away, as I have seen grey mullet do in the shallow sea-side pools. Several times I had water poured in for their benefit, but it was gone again directly. The mud round the edge of the remnant puddle was baked and cracked, and foul with an oozy green sludge, the relic of water-weeds.

This little lake, once so clear and pretty, and full of bright dimples and crystal shadows, now looked so forlorn and wasted and old, like a bright eye worn dim with years, and the trees stood round it so faded and wan, the poplar unkempt of its silver and green, the willow without wherewithal to weep, and the sprays of the birch laid dead at its feet; altogether it looked so empty and sad and piteous, that I had been deeply grieved for the sake of him who had loved it.

So, when the sky clouded up again, in the afternoon of that day, I hastened thither to mark the first effects of the rain.

As I reached the white shell-walk, which loosely girt the pond, the lead-coloured sky took a greyer and woollier cast, and overhead became blurred and pulpy; while round the horizon it lifted in frayed festoons. As I took my seat in the grotto, the big drops began to patter among the dry leaves, and the globules rolled in the dust, like parched peas. A long hissing sound ensued, and a cloud of powder went up, and the trees moved their boughs with a heavy dull sway. Then broke from the laurels the song of the long-silent thrush, and reptiles, and insects, and all that could move, darted forth to rejoice in the freshness. The earth sent forth that smell of sweet newness, the breath of young nature awaking, which reminds us of milk, and of clover, of balm, and the smile of a child.

But, most of all, it was in and around the pool that the signs of new life were stirring. As the circles began to jostle, and the bubbles sailed closer together, the water, the slime, and the banks, danced, flickered, and darkened, with a whirl of living creatures. The surface was brushed, as green corn is flawed by the wind, with the quivering dip of swallows' wings; and the ripples that raced to the land splashed over the feet of the wagtails.

Here, as I marked all narrowly, and seemed to rejoice in their gladness, a sudden new wonder befell me. I was watching a monster frog emerge from his penthouse of ooze, and lift with some pride his brown spots and his bright golden throat from the matted green cake of dry weed, when a quick gleam shot through the fibres. With a listless curiosity, wondering whether the frog, like his cousin the toad, were a jeweller, I advanced to the brim of the pool. The poor frog looked timidly at me with his large starting eyes; then, shouldering off the green coil, made one rapid spring, and was safe in the water. But his movement had further disclosed some glittering object below. Determined to know what it was, despite the rain, I placed some large pebbles for steps, ran lightly, and lifted the weed. Before me lay, as bright as if polished that day, with the jewelled hilt towards me, a long narrow dagger. With a haste too rapid for thought to keep up, I snatched it, and rushed to the grotto.

There, in the drought of my long revenge, with eyes on fire, and teeth set hard and dry, and every root of my heart cleaving and crying to heaven for blood, I pored on that weapon, whose last sheath had been-how well I knew what. I did not lift it towards God, nor fall on my knees and make a theatrical vow; for that there was no necessity. But for the moment my life and my soul seemed to pass along that cold blade, just as my father's had done. A treacherous, blue, three-cornered blade, with a point as keen as a viper's fang, sublustrous like ice in the moonlight, sleuth as hate, and tenacious as death. To my curdled and fury-struck vision it seemed to writhe in the gleam of the storm which played along it like a corpse-candle. I fancied how it had quivered and rung to find itself deep in that heart.

My passions at length overpowered me, and I lay, how long I know not, utterly insensible. When I came to myself again, the storm had passed over, the calm pool covered my stepping stones, the shrubs and trees wept joy in the moonlight, the nightingales sang in the elms, healing and beauty were in the air, peace and content walked abroad on the earth. The May moon slept on the water before me, and streamed through the grotto arch; but there it fell cold and ghost-like upon the tool of murder. Over this I hastily flung my scarf; coward, perhaps I was, for I could not handle it then, but fled to the house and dreamed in my lonely bed.

When I examined the dagger next day, I found it to be of foreign fabric. "Ferrati, Bologna," the name and abode of the maker, as I supposed, was damascened on the hilt. A cross, like that on the footprint, but smaller, and made of gold, was inlaid on the blade, just above the handle. The hilt itself was wreathed with a snake of green enamel, having garnet eyes. From the fine temper of the metal, or some annealing process, it showed not a stain of rust, and the blood which remained after writing the letters before described had probably been washed off by the water. I laid it most carefully by, along with my other relics, in a box which I always kept locked.

So God, as I thought, by His sun, and His seasons, and weather, and the mind He had so prepared, was holding the clue for me, and shaking it clear from time to time, along my dark and many-winding path.

CHAPTER VIII

Soon after this, a ridiculous thing occurred, the consequences of which were grave enough. The summer and autumn after that weary drought were rather wet and stormy. One night towards the end of October, it blew a heavy gale after torrents of rain. Going to the churchyard next day, I found, as I had expected, that the flowers so carefully kept through the summer were shattered and strewn by the tempest; and so I returned to the garden for others to plant in their stead. My cousin Clement (as he was told to call himself) came sauntering towards me among the beds. His usual look of shallow brightness and empty self-esteem had failed him for the moment, and he looked like a fan-tailed pigeon who has tumbled down the horse-rack. He followed me to and fro, with a sort of stuttering walk, as I chose the plants I liked best; but I took little notice of him, for such had been my course since I first discovered their scheme.

At last, as I stooped to dig up a white verbena, he came behind me, and began his errand with more than his usual lisp. This I shall not copy, as it is not worth the trouble.

"Oh, Clara," he said, "I want to tell you something, if you'll only be good-natured!"

"Don't you see I am busy now?" I replied, without turning to look. "Won't it do when you have taken your curl-papers off?"

"Now, Clara, you know that I never use curl-papers. My hair doesn't want it. You know it's much prettier than your long waving black stuff, and it curls of its own accord, if mamma only brushes it. But I want to tell you something particular."

"Well, then, be quick, for I am going away." And with that I stood up and confronted him. He was scarcely so tall as myself, and his light showy dress and pink rose of a face, which seemed made to be worn in the hair, were thrown into brighter relief by my sombre apparel and earnest twilight look. Some lurking sense of this contrast seemed to add to his hesitation. At last he began again:

"You know, Cousin Clara, you must not be angry with me, because it isn't my fault."

"What is not your fault?"

"Why, that I should fall-what do they call it? – fall in love, I suppose."

"You fall in love, you dissolute doll! How dare you fall in love, sir, without my leave?"

"Well, I was afraid to ask you, Clara. I couldn't tell what you would say."

"Oh, that must depend, of course, on who Mrs. Doll is to be! If it's a good little thing with blue satin arms, and a sash and a slip, and pretty blue eyes that go with a string, perhaps I'll forgive you, poor child, and set you up with a house, and a tea-set, and a mother-of-pearl perambulator."

"Now, don't talk nonsense," he answered. "Before long I shall be a man, and then you'll be afraid of me, and put up your hands, and shriek, and want me to kiss you."

I had indulged him too much, and his tongue was taking liberties. I soon stopped him.

"How dare you bark at me, you wretched little white-woolled nursery dog?"

I left him, and went with my basket of flowers along the path to the churchyard. For a while he stood there frightened, till his mother looked forth from the drawing-room window. Between the two fears he chose the less, and followed me to my father's grave. I stood there and angrily waved him back, but he still persisted, though trembling.

"Cousin Clara," he said-and his lisp was quite gone, and he tried to be in a passion-"Cousin Clara, you shall hear what I have got to say. You have lived with me now a long time, and I'm sure we have agreed very well, and I-I-no, I don't see why we should not be married."

"Don't you indeed, sir?"

"Perhaps," he continued, "you are afraid that I don't care about you. Really now, I often think that you would be very good-looking, if you would only laugh now and then, and leave off those nasty black gowns; and then if you would only leave off being so grand, and mysterious, and stately,

and getting up so early, I would let you do as you liked, and you might paint me and have a lock of my hair."

"Clement Daldy," I asked, "do you see that lake?"

"Yes," he replied, turning pale, and inclined to fly.

"There's water enough there now. If you ever dare again to say one word like this to me, or even to show by your looks that you think it, I'll take you and drown you there, as sure as my father lies here."

He slunk away quickly without a word, and could eat no lunch that day. In the afternoon, as I sat in my favourite bow-window seat, Mrs. Daldy glided in. She had put on with care her clinging smile, as she would an Indian shawl. I thought how much better her face would have looked with its natural, bold, haughty gaze.

"My dear Clara," began this pious tidewaiter, "what have you done to vex so your poor cousin Clement?"

"Only this, Mrs. Daldy: he was foolish or mad, and I gave him advice in a truly Christian spirit, entirely for his own good."

"I hope, my dear, that some day it may be his duty as well as his privilege to advise you. But, of course, you need not take his advice. My Clara loves her own way as much as any girl I ever knew; and with poor Clement she will be safe to have it."

"No doubt of that," I replied.

"And then, my pet, you will be in a far better position than you could attain as an unmarried girl to pursue the great aim of your life; so far, I mean, as is not inconsistent with the spirit of Christian forgiveness. Your guardian has thought of that, in effecting this arrangement; and I trust that I was not wrong in allowing so fair a prospect, under Providence, of your ultimate peace of mind to influence me considerably when he sought my consent."

"I am sure I am much obliged to you."

"I cannot conceal from you, so clear-sighted as you are-and if I could, I object to concealment of any kind, on principle-that there are also certain worldly advantages, which are not without weight, however the heart be weaned by trials and chastened from transient things. And your guardian has this arrangement so very much at heart. My own dear child, I have felt for you so long that I love you as a daughter. How thankful I ought to be to the Giver of all good things to have you really my own dear child."

"Be thankful, madam, when you have got it. This is a good thing which under Providence you must learn to do without."

It was coarse of me to hint at my riches. But what could I do with her?

"Why, Clara," she asked, in great amazement, "you cannot be so foolish and wilful as to throw away this chance of revenge? If only for your dear mother's sake, as well as your father's, it is the path of duty. Let me tell you, both she and yourself are very much more in your guardian's power than you have any idea. And what would be your poor father's wish, who has left you so entirely to his brother's care and discretion? Will you put off for ever the discovery of his murderer?"

"My father," I said, proudly, "would scorn me for doing a thing below him and myself. The last of the Vaughans to be plotted away to a grocer's doll!"

It had been a trial of temper; and contempt was too much for hypocrisy. Through the rouge of the world, and the pearl-powder of religion, nature flushed forth on her cheek; for she really loved her son. She knew where to wound me the deepest.

"Is it no condescension in us that my beautiful boy should stoop to the maniac-child of a man who was stabbed-stabbed in his midnight bed-to atone, no doubt, for some low act of his own?"

I sprang up, and rang the bell. Thomas Kenwood, who made a point of attending me, came at once. I said to him, calmly and slowly:

"Allow this person one hour to pack her things. Get a fly from the Walnut Tree Inn, and see her beyond the Lodge."

If I had told him to drag her away by the hair, I believe that man would have done it. She shrunk away from me; for the moment her spirit was quelled, and she trembled into a chair.

"I assure you, Clara, I did not mean what I said. You provoked me so."

"Not one word more. Leave the room and the house."

"Miss Vaughan, I will not leave this house until your guardian returns."

"Thomas," I said, without looking towards her, "if Mrs. Daldy is not gone in an hour, you quit my service."

How Thomas Kenwood managed it, I never asked. He was a resolute man, and all the servants obeyed him. She turned round once, as she crossed the threshold, and gave me a look which I shall never forget. Was such the look that had glared on my father before the blow? She lifted the white arm of which she was proud, and threw back her head, like the Fecial hurling his dart.

"Clara Vaughan, you shall bitterly grieve for this. It shall throw you and your mother at the feet of your father's murderer, and you shall crave meat worse than your enemy's blood."

Until she had quitted the house, I could not sit down; but went to my father's bedroom, where I often took refuge when strongly excited and unable to fly to his grave. The thoughts and the memories hovering and sighing around that fatal chamber were enough to calm and allay the sensations of trivial wrong.

But now this was not the case. The outrage offered had been, not to me, but to him who seemed present there. The suggestion, too, of an injury done by my father, though scorned at first, was working and ruffling within me, as children put bearded corn-ears in another's sleeve, which by-and-by work their own way to the breast. Till now, I had always believed that some worldly advantage or gain had impelled my foe to the deed which left me an orphan. But that woman's dark words had started a new train of reasoning, whose very first motion was doubt of the man I worshipped. Among all I had ever met, there existed but one opinion as to what he had been—a true gentleman, who had injured not one of God's creatures, whose life had been guided mainly by the wishes and welfare of others. Moreover, I had my own clear recollections—his voice, his eyes, and his smile, his manner and whole expression; these, it is true, were but outward things, yet a child's intuition is strong and hard to refute.

Again, during my remembrance, he had never been absent from us, except for a day or two, now and then, among his county neighbours; and any ill will which he might have incurred from them must, from his position, have become notorious.

And yet, in the teeth of this reasoning, and in spite of my own warm feeling, that horrible suspicion clave to my heart and chilled it like the black spot of mildew. And what if the charge were true? In that case, how was I better than he who had always been to my mind a fiend in special commission? His was vengeance, and mine revenge; he had suffered perhaps a wanton wrong, as deep to his honour as mine to my love.

While I was brooding thus miserably, my eyes fell upon the bed. There were the red streaks, grained and fibred like the cross-cut of a fern-stalk; framed and looking down on me, the sampler of my life. Drawing near, I trembled with an unknown awe, to find myself in that lonely presence, not indeed thinking, but inkling such things of my father, my own darling father, whose blood was looking at me. In a storm of self-loathing and sorrow, I knelt there and sobbed my atonement; but never thenceforth could I wholly bar out the idea. Foul ideas when once admitted will ever return on their track, as the cholera walks in the trail of its former pall.

But instead of abating my dogged pursuit, I now had a new incentive—to dispel the aspersions cast on my father's shadow.

CHAPTER IX

At this particular time of my life, many things began to puzzle me, but nothing was a greater puzzle than the character of my guardian. Morose or moody he was not, though a stranger might have thought him so; nor could I end with the conviction that his heart was cold. It rather seemed to me as if he felt that it ought to be so, and tried his best to settle down as the inmate of an icehouse. But any casual flush of love, any glow of native warmth from the hearts around him, and taken by surprise he wavered for one traitor moment, and in his eyes gleamed some remembrance, like firelight upon frozen windows. But let any one attempt to approach him then with softness, to stir kind interest and feeling into benevolent expression, and Mr. Vaughan would promptly shut himself in again, with a bar of irony, or a bolt of sarcasm. Only to my mother was his behaviour different; towards her his manner was so gentle, and his tone so kind, that but for my conviction that remorse lay under it, I must have come to like him. True, they did not often meet, for dear mother confined herself (in spite of Mrs. Daldy) more and more closely to her own part of the house, and rarely had the spirits now to share in the meals of the family. Therefore, I began at once to take her place, and would not listen to Mrs. Daldy's kind offer to relieve me. This had led quite recently to a little outbreak. One day I had been rather late for dinner, and, entering the room with a proud apology, found to my amazement Mrs. Daldy at the head of the table. For me a seat was placed, as for a good little girl, by the side of Master Clement. At first I had not the presence of mind to speak, but stood by my rival's chair, waiting for her to rise. She affected not to understand me, and began, with her hand on the ladle, and looking me full in the face: "I fear, darling Clara, the soup is cold; but your uncle can give you a very nice slice of salmon. Have you offered thanks for these mercies?"

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