Stifled Laughter

A Melodrama

Hay, William Gosse (1875-1945)

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A Melodrama

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John MacQueen

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“Ch’io ho veduto tutto'l verno prima
Il prun mostrarsi rigido e feroce,
Poscia portar la rosa in su la cima;
E legno vidi già dritto e veloce
Correr lo mar per tutto suo cammino,
Perire al fine all'entrar della foce."
Non creda monna Berta e ser Martino,
Per vedere un furare, altro offere,
Vederli dentro al consiglio divino;
Chè quel può surger e quel può cadere.”

DANTE, Paradiso, canto xiii., line 133.

“For I have seen all winter-long the thorne
First show itself intractible and fierce,
And after bear the rose upon its top;
And I have seen a ship direct a swift
Run o'er the sea throughout its course entire,
To perish at the harbour's mouth at last.
Let not Dame Bertha nor Ser Martin think,
Seeing one steal, another offering make,
To see them in the arbitrament divine;
For one may rise, and fall the other may.”

LONGFELLOW’S TRANSLATION.

TO MY MOTHER,
TO A LINDEN MEMORY,
AND TO A ROSE I REMEMBER
IN A FAR AUSTRALIAN GARDEN,
This book is inscribed.
Prologue: ‘The Ship—Evening’
Scene I.—‘Raised from the dead.’

“E che lo novo peregrin d'amore
Punge, se ode squilla di lontano
Che paia 'l giorno pianger che si more.”


SOFTLY—distinctly—wistfully—far out over the sleepy grey expanse, steals the jangle of a ship's bell.

Louder and yet louder it peals, sweeping away and away over the waste in mellowy waves of sound, as though bent on rousing the echoes of some far, pale distance;—till with a plaintive jerk it sinks. . . . and dies into silence. . . . trailing behind it, as it goes, a lingering, wistful wail, which, in the heart of one who stays his grim thoughts to listen, wimples with an echo of parting, like an anguished word.

The day is done. The fierce old passion-haunted warrior has almost run his course; and lies there, faint and dreamy and still, drifting imperceptibly towards night. The strained hush of the death room lingers, mournful, over the deep; upon whose quiet bosom, and upon the heavy canvas of the solitary ship, the paling death-flush of the passing day glows faint and pink as a rain-beaten rose. So sensitively still is the hour, that such humdrum and unobtrusive ship-voices, as the splash of out-tipped galley-refuse, the rattling creak of a block, the reckless scraping of a fiddle deep-buried in the fock'sl, and even the half-raised human voice, thrust themselves with many times their ordinary volume and distinctness upon the unwilling ear; while the sudden harsh ‘clank’ of some iron implement, dropped wantonly upon the vessel's deck, yells out across the water like a desecration—a laugh in the presence of death.

. . . . She lay clear-outlined as a fly upon a window pane—her masts and shrouds picked out upon the evening sky in bold and inky lines; her newly blackened hull and whitened ports casting their great dull shadows into the deep; her canvas dangling upon the yards in a loose, fantastic, lazy fashion;—the one relieving object in a monotonous seascape of flat and lifeless water.

Though the shadows had begun to deepen about the cuddy entrance under the poop, and gloom was thickening in the door-ways of the different deck-houses; still —objects, both moving and stationary, stood out upon the open decks in a gleam that was clearer than noonday.
Upon the poop was a scattering of figures, inhaling with a languid pleasure the cool evening air, after hours of heat lounged heavily away in shelter of awning or cabin. Noticeable among these was a great, red-bearded man, leaning over the bulwarks near the wheel, and throwing about him a pair of small and exceedingly fierce eyes, whose rather harassed energy was for the while amply occupied between the cat-like watching of three fishing lines attached to the bulwarks near-by, and the glaring—with extreme ferocity—at each and every passenger, who chanced, in the course of promenade, to come within murmuring distance of their owner.

Not far distant from this exclusively inclined gentleman, paced a small, yet portly, ship's-officer; carrying in a precarious position beneath his plump arm, a telescope of a ludicrously bent and battered appearance, and wearing upon his sleepy visage, a chronic, sphinx-like smile. This person—whether from a petty maliciousness of disposition, or a large-hearted interest in the concerns of others, it was impossible, by reason of his utter lack of facial expression, to decide—seldom, if ever, allowed himself to pass through the fisherman's vicinity, without halting to enquire, in a murmur of incredible laziness, though of sympathetic secrecy and modulation, after that gentleman's 'luck'—a class of tactics which was responsible for a series of ingeniously voluminous glances from the last named.

Side by side, in animated conversation upon the opposite side of the poop, strolled a thin grizzled person in military undress, and a cadaverous and consumptive-looking individual in the uniform of a ship's-officer, whom the other addressed as 'Captain.' It was noticeable, in connection with this latter person, that he appeared to have contracted a habit, or eccentricity, of ever and anon—and especially in the heat of argument—plunging his hand into his breast pocket, and sometimes half, but usually wholly, fetching from that receptacle a pocket-book and pencil. It is also worthy of mention, in regard to this peculiar habit, that the mere appearance of the book seemed enough to convince the soldier of the integrity of his companion's argument, whatever the subject under discussion at the time. And no matter to what heights of volubility or argumentation the military gentleman might have arrived at the moment of its appearance, it no sooner caught his eye, than his eloquence seemed to forsake him, his words to freeze upon his lips, and he would fall to nodding with a violence, as absolutely and as suddenly convinced, as would be the action with which he would, simultaneously, motion the magic book back to its receptacle.

On the railings at the break of the poop, two young subalterns, and yet
another ship's-officer, were lounging and gossiping, with their eyes turned forward; while up and down past this latter group, paced a stiff, red-coated sentry—monotonously regular as a pendulum.

Snugly ensconced in a nest of rugs and draperies beside the mizzen mast were two ladies. One, a sharp-featured, excessively-bony woman, lay, with a languishing air, propped up among countless pillows in a lounge chair. The other, round-faced and motherly, smiled round upon everything and everybody from a campstool.

Before the two ladies there skipped, and gambolled, and crowed, and fell, and hurt herself, alternately, a chubby child of three years or thereabouts.

“Oh, I quite concede you their bravery,” the invalid was murmuring in injured, but languid, tones—resuming a monologue that had been droning on like the buzz of a weary fly for some twenty minutes already—“Extremely brave they necessarily must be; as brave as lions indeed; always excepting, of course, that offensive fat officer; for, say what you will, Catherine, dear, I cannot and will not reconcile the quite alarming redness of his complexion with that exclusive water-drinking at meals. It's a sure sign of the worst—I'm as certain as I could be of that. . . . And then, too, who could dream of trusting, altogether, to that skeleton of a captain, with his deadly ‘charts,’ and his threadbare compliments? He is what in my dear old London we should have called a—er—er—don't pretend you don't know what I mean!—the kind of creature that puts coal on the fire with a tongs——”

“What was I going to say?” resumed the lady—after a moment's pause for breath—in a voice that seemed, momentarily, on the verge of breaking into a storm of tears. “Oh yes—yes! the convicts!—as if I could ever for the fraction of a second banish them from my mind! And to think that anyone could be ridiculous enough to talk of ‘bravery’ in such a connection! Oh! my dearest Kate,” punctuated the invalid, leaning out of her cushions with rising tones. “You, who've seen so many horrible things in India—what could you expect of thirty lions against a hundred and twenty human tigers!—it's unanswerable!”

Upon this, the motherly lady rose from her stool, with a despatch that seemed designed as much to hide the smile upon her face, as for the more evident reason of gently up-raising and smoothing her companion's pillows.

“Oh, my dear,” she remonstrated soothingly, “you are morbid. You exaggerate their chances. There's always the barrier, you know—how could they possibly break through the barrier?”

“Oh! the barrier!” protested the invalid, sinking back among her pillows in weak and martyred resignation. “That universal ship's cry! That one
hope and stay of the ship! Let me but doubt a little; let me but gently complain; let anyone of you find himself driven into a corner by my feeble protestations; and it's 'the barrier' that greets me, it's 'the barrier' that's thrust in my face; knowing, as you all unfairly do, that with my head an hourly agony, such a mastery of detail is quite beyond me.”

“But! my dear,” expostulated the motherly person impulsively. “It's all so plain, so satisfying, so soothing! The Captain's explanation so completely wipes out all one's little fears—and you know——”

“Ah no—no!” broke in the other with a weary gesture, and a tone that might have done signal duty as a death-bed adjuration. “How well—how lamentably well I know what you would say! He drew it for you on a map—a chart! They tell me—these young men—that he has drawn a chart to shave himself by, so as to avoid the islands and things; they're atrociously vulgar, but I'm quite of their mind. . . . and if I cannot win you over to my side, dearest Kate, I can at least be a generous enemy; and leave you, in silence, to your simple, almost child-like faith in these men. . . . though I daresay,” droned on the speaker, with a morbidly-prophetic dropping of tone, “there may come a time when even the memory of my weak and petulant warnings will hold its own regret for you all. . . . And—and”—with an anticipatory shudder—“I do hope it won't be in the uncomfortable manner the papers do it—from one's ears, you know—that's all.”

At this dismaying suggestion—calculated, as it was, to inspire broodings of a distressing and disturbing nature—the other lady sprang again from her stool, the picture of sympathetic consternation.

“Bless me—this is too dreadful—too ridiculous!” cried she, glancing around her in half-humorous concern. “Oh—Captain!” she quickened appealingly in the direction of the lean and cadaverous officer who was passing before them, at the moment, in animated conversation with his military friend; “do come and help us—help quiet our fears. Here's Mrs M'Bride working herself and me quite sick and morbid about those poor creatures on the lower deck—please come.”

“Gracious heavens, my dear Kate!” whispered the lady mentioned, tragically. “He'll want me to count—to add up his figures! He will put me back a month with his charts and things!” Whereupon she subsided so deeply into her pillows as to leave but the merest suggestion of beak-like nose and attenuated features visible beyond them.

The two men dragged in their walk up the deck, and turned slowly off towards the group beneath the mizzen mast.

“Madame,” said the lean captain, in clear and painfully precise tones, advancing deferentially to the feet of the invalid, “pray command me in the
very smallest matter that promises in any way to allay your pain. The cool
of the evening has, I trust, detracted somewhat from the evil effects of such
a day as you have experienced below?"

“Yes, yes, Captain, indeed!” came a low, sweet murmur from the
pillows. “I am almost well.”

“Oh, Captain Evershed,” broke in the motherly lady impulsively, from
her camp stool, “do explain to her all about the barrier. She has made
herself so dreadfully nervous brooding over the prisoners, that she's
beginning to imagine all sorts of terrible things, and helping me to see
them into the bargain. The explanation you gave me was so entirely
satisfactory. It made one feel so safe—and——” And the good woman
shivered slightly, with a fierce little glance towards the laughing child at
her feet.

“My dear lady,” said the Captain, bowing stiffly towards the speaker—a
cadaverous smile of satisfaction beaming fitfully from among the bones—
“you do my poor powers of explanation far greater honour than I should
care to claim for them; yet”—gingerly drawing the pocket-book from its
wonted receptacle—“we can do but what we can; and it may be that with
the help of a pencil-line or so. . . . a judicious lettering. . . . in short, a
simple diagram, we may do something—er—something towards laying
the fears of our much-tried invalid at rest—er—if not completely, at
least——”

“Do it with this, sir,” broke in the grizzled soldier beside him, with an
unromantic adhesion to practical detail, for which he was notorious—at the
same moment producing and proffering for the Captain's edification a
piece of deck-chalk. “Figure it out with this, sir, on the floor,” he went on,
indicating, with a cheerful disregard for nautical susceptibilities, the deck
at his feet; and adding, in a thoughtful aside, that fitted ludicrously ill with
a certain dry alertness visible about his eyes,—“pity to make a mess of the
book.”

The Captain replaced his pocket-book with a regretful deliberation.

“The floor,” he said, with sarcastic emphasis, kneeling with some
cautions, and with a covert yet all-seeing watchfulness that gave evidence of
a haunting fear of ridicule, upon the deck in front of the invalid, “the floor
is not altogether in my line; nevertheless——” And here, losing with the
acquisition of the chalk all sight and sense of his surroundings, he fell to
measuring this way and that over the deck in his vicinity, with an absorbed
and silent demeanour.

“Oh—and there will be no figures, Captain!” pleaded the invalid
presently, leaning forward out of her cushions with a delicate air of frailty.
“Please don't— they invariably set my head going.”
“I, too, am with Mrs M’Bride in this matter,” put in the soldier in his grim, expressionless way. “It is our habit to look at a ‘nought,’ for instance, in the light of a personal insult.”

The two ladies seemed a little doubtful as to the strict good faith of this concurrence: the invalid, at length, putting herself upon the safe side, with a suspicious but uncompromising sniff; while over the rotund and cheerful face of her companion there passed a smile, so forced and wearily-conventional, as to place her without a doubt in the character of the soldier's wife.

“Not so much as a figure, ma'am,” returned the Captain at length, abstractedly, without lifting his absorbed gaze from his work. “Be in no apprehension as to a single figure; merely a line here and a line there, of which the child yonder could grasp the purport... . . . There!” he cried, sitting suddenly back upon his heels, and gazing down upon his handiwork with an absent satisfaction; “there, ma'am.”

His audience peeped over at the diagram with some show of interest. It was obviously intended to present a view of the deck, and was drawn something after the following fashion:

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A o 0 B o C
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The two ladies having given vent to the several flattering little exclamations of surprise, apparently necessary to all such circumstances; and the child having been admonished, and safely imprisoned in the arms of the motherly person, for evincing a strong desire to play hop-scotch in the sacred precincts of the diagram, the Captain, with a very nice manipulation of the stick of chalk, proceeded to point out and explain.

“You will observe, ma'am, that the diagram is divided into three parts, A, B, and C. The part A signifies the poop where we now sit; S being the poop railing; B, the deck below us, or main deck, where the convicts are barricaded; and C, that raised fore-part of the ship called the ‘fock'sl.’ The three circles indicate, roughly, the respective positions of our three masts; while the dotted lines signify the convict barriers, as you observe—an after barrier, a port-side barrier, and a forward barrier—each of which is more than six feet high, and studded with spikes of iron.”

“At S,” continued the Captain, turning and pointing forward, melodramatically, with his chalk stick, in the direction of the poop railing, “there is always one sentry—as you see—overlooking the convict enclosure. At D, the after, and at E, the forward gateways, are two more warriors; while one other, as you can barely see from here, keeps watch
and ward upon the fock'sl. The prisoners, of whom but twenty are allowed to take the air at a time, have but one mode of egress upon deck; and that is by M, the main-hatch, where, when the convicts are below, another sentry stands. Lastly, should anyone wish to proceed from the galley R to the poop, or vice versa, while the convicts are taking the air, his only way would be along the open space or passage-way T G. Now, my dear Madame,” concluded the Captain, triumphantly, “acknowledge to me that you could not be safer—even at your own dressmaker's in London.”

“Oh, it all sounds delightful,” admitted the lady, sorrowfully. “But, as Dr. M'Bride is always saying, ‘anybody can write a letter, but the reading of it is another matter.’ There seem so many eventualities connected with your scheme. Suppose now—I only say suppose—one of your soldiers were to fall asleep, or——”

The soldier whisked round fiercely upon the speaker, while every drop of blood fled his countenance, leaving it white and ghastly.

“My God—Madame!” he jerked out;—and then pulled himself short with a quick contemptuous laugh, as he felt his wife's touch upon his arm. For she had risen quickly from her stool to his side at the querulous words of the invalid, as if she had realised, on the moment, what their effect would be.

“He's so ridiculously sensitive about his silly soldiers,” she explained, with a little nervous laugh. “And—and after all, so much depends upon them, you see——” and, hesitating a little, she turned upon her husband a face full of sympathy, yet frowning and fraught with urgent meaning.

It was some moments before he would respond to her overtures; and when at last he did so, it was with so ill a grace, that perhaps it was fortunate that pillows intervened to arrest the gaze of the invalid.

“I ask pardon for my roughness, ma'am,” he said, gruffly—his white heat fading slowly to a dry contempt. “I'm foolishly sensitive,” he added, with a dry laugh, “on religious matters—and on blasphemy even when spoken in ignorance.”

The invalid lady grunted sulkily from the uttermost depths of her pillows in ungracious answer.

“Well,” she broke in, a while later, in tones of deep foreboding, “I'm sure I do hope you are all in the right. You, Captain, at least, should be an authority on your own ship; yet—what were we given ears for if not to trust to them? When one has as good as heard——! But what is the use of my wearying you with my morbid experiences! Some idle night-voice, you would say. . . . some ugly creation of my sick fancy!” And having by these words restirred the flagging interest and curiosity of her hearers to the required pitch, the speaker allowed her voice to drop away miserably, full
of infinite suggestions of unhallowed knowledge.

“Heard, ma'am!” exclaimed the Captain, glancing up, with a look of half-irritated interest, from his kneeling posture at the invalid's feet. “That is a strange word among so small a company as ours.”

“There is evidence of a painful lack of social experience in your words, Captain,” put in the soldier, gruffly—for he was still smoking from the effects of his blaze. “The infinite possibilities of a lady's hearing powers have plainly been but insufficiently borne in upon you. I recollect, at this very moment, certain old garrison ‘teas,’—eh, Kate? Why, my dear Captain, you would only need to have experienced what it is possible for a woman to ‘hear’ about her absent friends, to be quite convinced of her auricular superiority over us mere lookers on!”

The Captain, brushing the chalk from his hands with a quiet deliberation, rose thoughtfully to his feet.

“Far from doubting Mrs. M'Bride's hearing powers,” he said, gravely, “I should be glad if she would let us further into this matter—if she would explain herself a shade more fully——”

“Oh,” thrust in the invalid with a feeble irritation, “there's nothing to explain. When one hears a thing, one hears it, and there it is. When one is rudely awakened from feverish slumber, at dead of night, by a hoarse and dreadful whispering, so deep, so fierce, and of such murderous import, as to leave one weak and fainting in one's bed—Oh!” interjected the lady, with a shiver, and a sudden lowering of her voice to the most morbidly suggestive of demi-tones, “it would have made a stone palpitate!”

The two men looked thoughtful at this realistic statement of facts; while the motherly lady drew her camp-stool a little closer to the speaker, with a softly ejaculatory “dear! dear!” and a faintly apprehensive back-glance at her husband, as though secretly fearful of some further indiscretion from him.

“And had these whisperings no familiarity for you— no recollections?” inquired the Captain, sympathetically.

“Oh, I make no accusations,” said the invalid, waving her hands with a grandly forgiving air. “I accuse no one; I will not be a party to getting anyone into trouble—wrongfully, perhaps, with my nerves all pins and needles. . . . But I have my notions—I will say that—I have my notions.”

The Captain's thin features began to put forth signs of a growing irritation.

“I understand you to lay stress on a certain deep hoarseness—gruffness—noticeable in your midnight voices,” he said. “Does the voice of Gadban, my steward, bear any discernible relationship to your notions?”

“Indeed, Captain,” the lady made whispered answer, leaning forward
with a surprised and eager confidence, “since you've guessed it so cleverly, that was my notion.”

“Why, bless me!” chimed in the soldier, with a chuckle of whimsical incredulity. “Not that servile scamp who offers you potatoes as if he had obtained them for you at some stupendous risk, and were still suffering from a disagreeable cold caught in the enterprise? You're not going to make a midnight hero out of him?”

The Captain made no answer, but turning, strode over to the nearest skylight, which, with lids prised open to their widest capacities, seemed to yearn dreamily at the passing breaths of evening. “Gadban!” he hailed, peering down over the edge into the gloom below. “Gadban!”

Just at this moment, from somewhere forward on the fore’sl—while the group about the mizzen-mast, together with the lounging subalterns at the poop-rail, were still listening indolently for some answer to the Captain’s call—there floated aft the scraping wail of a fiddle; to which was presently added a rousing accompaniment of voice on voice, joining in one upon another as though taking fresh courage at every individual intrepidity, till a rough-jingling chorus swung growling out on the air.

The melody—if so queer a discord might be so termed—was distinguishable rather for a rude and reckless abandon than for any pretension to consistency of tone; and instinctively (if not repellently) struck the listener as deriving its origin from an atmosphere rather of tavern-fumes and wine, than of roaring wind-swept decks and screeching windlass. Up—up into the quiet hush of mast and shroud and paling heaven curled this dark, strange ditty, with only, it seemed, the lame lilt of the doggerel withholding the singers from some outrageous extravagance, and just the faint cry of the fiddle reassuring the listeners against a hoarse-voiced menace, while sometimes (so suggestive was its swing), behind the rollicking shout of the break, and the long-drawn yowl of the finish, it was open to the imaginative mind to catch a stray ‘clink’ or two as of broken glasses, the popping of corks, or even the cries of carousers bellowing for ‘more.’

“Ho—‘tis the yell o’ the evening bell
(Clink o’ chains—clank o’ chains).
Drown ye the yell o’ the evening bell,
Drink and drown——!

“Paid is his wage, and paid his hire,
(Clink o’ chains—clank o’ chains).
Drink to the gray face rotting in the mire,
“Again that horrible ‘shouting,’ ” cried the invalid, clasping her ears with a pettish gesture. “I declare—they might be openly insulting us!”

The soldier, too, was peering away forward, with a half-amused, half-speculative grin upon his face.

“It beats me where they get that thing,” he muttered; “it's no sailor's pipe.”

His wife turned quickly and looked at him. “Oh, don't you know?” she cried with a smile; “but you must get Captain Evershed to tell you. It's quite an interesting experience. The steward, it seems, was himself transported in Governor Graham's day—a dreadful time, I believe—and teaches the sailors the queerest things—old prison songs and such.”

“Ah! so that's the secret, is it?” said the soldier.

Meanwhile the Captain was still peeping into the skylight, waiting for his answer.

“Gadban—Gadban,” he called again, with an irritable heightening of tone that—now that the fock'sl pipe had ceased—rang out in hollow sharpness over the quiet poop, “on deck here, please.” And then, striding back towards the group, he cried, as he came, in what—as far as tone went—might have been the echo of his last impatient call: “I'm going to have this out, ma'am, out by the roots.”

A little frightened at being taken so seriously, the invalid lady fixed her eyes upon the companion, a few yards aft of her chair, with a gaze of some anxiety. And presently there sidled thence, what at first sight would have struck you as a small, squat, feeble person, boasting a pale, snub face, like that of a sickly prize-fighter—if such an anomaly were possible—and having an appearance of such unctuous meekness, as would, pardonably, have been designated ‘pitiful’ by a beholder possessing a comfortable confidence in his own immediate judgment.

Indeed, it was a face to strike very favourably upon an observer unbiased by such petty incongruities of appearance, as a perpetual shadow of teeth—shall we say—behind the shallowest smile; retiring manners behind a broad flat face; and eyes—great over-whited eyes, for ever shyly lidded, yet for ever throwing out slow glances of a groping suggestion—as of one walking perpetually in marshy places. He seemed—as the motherly lady herself rather happily, if ancienly, phrased it—“so afraid of hurting people's feelings.”

Yes—and there was pity in the faces of the women as the man sidled haltingly forward; for an ugly hunch that disfigured his back came the more sharply into evidence as he neared the group. Yet such things, it is
said, have their purpose; and it may well be that this particular deformity more than served its turn, in attracting the too sympathetic eye of the observer from the evident strength of the overgrown body, and of the short, bandy legs beneath it.

“Ha, Gadban!” snapped the Captain, sharply—‘brutally,’ the motherly lady called it, under her breath—as the timid new-comer squirmed to the words, with a sudden spasmodic widening of smirk. “Remain just where you are, sir, and give us some explanation of all this rubbish—this small-hours gossip with morbidly inclined friends within hearing of the ladies' cabin—this rubbish about the prisoners. Come!”

Ah, he was a most respectable person was the steward. The invalid lady herself was quite certain of that—now that she had had a good look at him—from the hasty respect with which his great, innocent eyes dropped before a direct gaze. His care with regard to etiquette in this respect was so persistent, as to amply make amends for any little deficiencies of tone or presence which might be evident in his general deportment.

“Rubbish, sir?” he inquired in a dull daze of tone and gesture, that would have been almost pathetic, had it not been for an unfortunate element of incongruity in the ear-grating depth and huskiness of the voice; which, coupled with a haunting suggestion of a slightly over-done emphasis in the manner, was more or less calculated to set a sensitive tooth upon its edge. “Rubbish sir... and in the hearing of her lady-ship!” Whereat he smiled, a sour, three-cornered smile, and shook his head at his twisted, soul-wrung napkin, with a reproachful touch—as of injured fellow-feeling.

“It was last night—at eleven—I think I must have heard it,” put in the invalid with a modest blush, which, however, the pillows effectively concealed.

“At eleven o'clock, sir,” echoed the Captain, with rising irritation. “Throw back your retentive memory to that hour, sir, and give us a sample of these words of wisdom: come!”

At this admission from the lady, a grin of humorous reminiscence spread slowly over the face of the steward, and for a moment he appeared to find some difficulty in containing himself. But, no doubt, observing in one of the many watchful glances he thought well to repeatedly throw about him, that his Captain was in no mood to derive any lasting pleasure from the sight of merriment in others, he drew the back of an apologetic hand across his lips, and essayed an explanation.

“That there cabin-boy, sir,” he began in a deep and husky quaver, which he apparently considered a happy and fitting companion to the suppressed humour of his rather artificially disposed features; but which, it must be admitted, made a blend something covertly-cruel; “he's scarey as a woman
towards dark... We was finishing up the knives and forks, and I was just a' chaffing of 'im—never thinking to be overheard be a soul. ‘Joe lad,’ I says, giving him the pinch, as you might say, ‘if them there horrors in the pen yonder was to cut loose, you and me'd best not be found a' cleaning of the knives. It u'd be fair tempting o' providence, Joe,’ I says, ‘with you so like a young gentleman when ye're face begins to whiten, and ye ain't a' cursin’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’ cleaning of the knives. It u'd be fair tempting o' providence, Joe,’ I says, ‘with you so like a young gentleman when ye're face begins to whiten, and ye ain't a' cursin’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’—like he was a' then, sir. ‘Well,’ says 'e, wild-like, ‘you've no call to fear, Dan Gadban; nobody'd never make any mistake’——”

But the Captain suddenly stemmed the torrent with uplifted hand. “And did this delightful badinage continue to any length?” he inquired mildly.

“Well, sir,” sniggered the steward, throwing around a sly-lidded glance, and broadening to the conscious smirk with which his class of humorist invariably hails the coming ‘mot,’ “‘tain't for me to let on low agin' a messmate—‘tain't for me to go reporting things that's neither here nor there. . . . But when that there cabin-boy Joe, takes to cursing like an old man—as 'e does, night-times regular—it gives me the quakes, let alone 'er ladyship here!”

Whether it was from a certain unfortunate sense of the ludicrous, underlying the suggested picture of ‘her ladyship,’ afflicted, in common with the steward, with something akin to the ‘quakes,’ or merely from a jocund rush of relief at this comparatively harmless explanation of the small-hours mystery;—certainly there was evidence of infectious merriment upon more than one face among the listeners. Only the pronounced features of the invalid herself remained obdurate; and these with a pursed-up, pillow-throned disdain that boded ill for that sapient and far-seeing estimation of respectability, which a less oppressive view of the steward had, a moment or so previously, led the good lady to inwardly opine concerning him.

“Do you identify anything among this, ma'am?” inquired the Captain,
with a cadaverous beam. “Such a voice as this, with which providence—to
counteract, one supposes, as the wings of the flying-fish yonder, an
excessive mildness of disposition—has embellished the other attractions of
my steward, would, I admit, when set upon a midnight background, be apt
to start one listening—or even ‘quaking.’ ”

“Candidly, Captain,” snapped out an acid voice from the cushions, “I
cannot imagine this person in the rôle of the owner of that ghastly voice. . . .
Even were I to allow the possibility of his possessing a tone so cruel, I
fear that my conscience would not permit me to credit him with its
cunning—its intelligence.”

And here it is worth recording, that, as the sickly steward hung
apologetically there, on the outskirts of the group;—his large hand fiddling
restlessly at the, already, much befiddled buttons that adorned his jacket;
his mouth still feebly awry under the inevitable grin—there crept a
momentary gleam beneath his lids that fitted but ill with the lady's latest
estimation of him, and iller yet with the guise in which he posed.

“If—if that there Joe——” he ventured to hazard, presently, in the pause
which followed the invalid's remark. “If Joe——”

“Joe—Joe! It's always Joe!” burst in the soldier, who had been glowing
and sputtering at high-pressure for some time back. “It is always Joe!”

“Yes—yes,” echoed the Captain, with an irritation of tone and eye, none
the less rightly severe, that it owed its origin, more to the soldier's
interference, than to any tendency to self-obliteration that might have been
noticeable in the general policy of the steward. “Be not over-anxious for
Joe, Mr. Gadban; we'll find time to attend to him I have no doubt.
Meanwhile, as regards your own peace of mind, let me remind you that
bullyragging of the ship's boys, was not a part of our contract. This is not
the first time, Mr. Gadban, that I have felt the necessity of prodding your
memory on this point——though indeed,” he continued, slowly moving
towards the steward with a gradual calming of manner; and only ceasing to
meditatively toss a piece of deck-chalk in his palm, when reaching his side,
he glanced him quietly in the eye,—“Something whispers to me that it is
the last. . . . I'll have no bullying.”

Perhaps, here, for the first time, the onlookers began to comprehend the
secret, by which this smug-mannered skeleton of a man—who, to be
candid, would have better graced the counter and side-bottles of some
country pharmacy, than the boisterous and uneven quarter-deck of a ship—
kept order among a blustering mob of seamen. Yet, on the other hand,
there was something irresistibly ludicrous, in the association of so
masculine a charge as ‘bullying,’ with an individuality so feeble as that of
this small, sickly-smirking nonentity, barely ‘existing’ there in his creased,
ill-hanging blue jacket and shrunken ducks——shrunken so pitifully, it seemed, behind the knees, whence something had apparently been borrowed to feed a tendency to ‘give’ in front:——though, certainly, a close and cold-minded observer would hardly have done wrong in instinctively bracing himself at the sight; for, should not a ‘give’ in a sturdy leg stir thoughts of a ‘spring’?

However that might be, the weakly and piteous characteristics of the hunchback steward were so far emphasized under this so evidently exaggerated rebuke, that our motherly friend——though not given as a general rule to imitation——was constrained to echo the pettish giggle of her invalid neighbour; while the taller of the two pinch-waisted, long-blue-skirted, peg-topped subalterns—both of whom happened, as they lounged towards the group, to catch this last remark of the Captain's——was overheard to intimate, behind a much bejewelled hand, to his companion, that this particular charity might well have begun a little nearer home.

"That will do then, steward," dwindled off the Captain, falling once again to his easy chalk-tossing. "Do your best to recollect that etiquette prescribes a certain modulation of tone towards midnight. Let us have no further complaint from either quarter. . . . Well—well, man?" he quickened impatiently, as the steward—with the agency of a deferential forward-jerk, and a half-raising of his darkly timid eyes—evinced an unmistakable desire for speech. "What is it you would say?"

"All this talk's clean druve it out o' my head," said the man, with a half-injured deference. "I was to pass the word that Mr. Bolt, the sergeant-major, had found a young woman as he thought might suit the lady. . . . She's been under guard in the cuddy this 'alf-hour back," he added, with a gleam of something like malice in his shaded look.

The Captain glanced up with a grin of surprise and interest. "Good!" he cried, turning briskly upon our friend of motherly propensities. "Good! Something in the way of a nurse turned up after all, ma'am—you recollect my much-criticised words of the other evening: —‘There's never a bin of refuse so corrupt that it won't provide a fairly decent picking to the conscientious searcher!’ Now I call you to witness at my triumph. Fetch the young woman up, Gadban."

"By the way, Gadban," he added—a trifle thoughtless, perhaps, in his enthusiasm—as the steward went shuffling away astern upon his errand, "nothing fierce—nothing untamed, eh?"

The invalid leaned out from her cushions at the words, and looked up wildly at the speaker; while the motherly lady gave the child at her knee a little hitch, as if to reassure it against some impending danger.

As for the steward—he paused at the companion-head; turning that pale
jowl of his across his shoulder with a soft and quiet laugh.

“Alf dead, sir!” he cried, laconically.

“Surely a most inapt figure of speech, sir,” remonstrated the Captain, sharply—rather, it seemed, with the intention of reassuring the ladies, than with that of reproof. “Or is it,” he added, with the trace of a smile among the bones, “that you permit your too generous feelings to run riot with your imagination? . . . At any rate, you may fetch the lady yourself. She would scarcely do herself justice triced up between two soldiers.”

During the latter part of this conversation the invalid lady had reared herself, slowly, to a stiffly attentive up-rightness in her chair; and now, clinging desperately to the chair-arms, she watched the shuffling exit of the steward, with a demeanour of gaping amazement.

“I think—I think, Captain—” she broke out in a flutter, finding her tongue at last, “I think I must have misunderstood you. . . . This woman—what—is she?”

“Merely a female unfortunate, dear lady,” replied the Captain, with a quick reassumption of his former artificialities of manner—and there was all the fastidious rectitude of the country chemist in the exaggerated smoothness of his words, and of the slow-tossing chalk in his palm. “They've been poking about among the refuse again, ma'am—and that time in our friend's interest—and we are rather in hopes of finding a lingering gleam or two in a somewhat lack-lustre gem they profess to have discovered.”

“But do I understand,” continued the lady wildly—a hectic blood-spot springing into the grey of either cheek—“that you propose having this—this abandoned female on deck here; and without a guard? That you, in fact, calmly lay us open to any insult—any degradation—any contam——?”

“Oh! my dear Madame,” protested the Captain reproachfully, “I pray you place more faith in my discretion. Did my steward's words, then, so utterly escape you——?”

“But a felon!” cried the lady, in a gradually ascending scale, “a criminal!—probably a murderess; they are all tarred with the same brush, all subject to the same dreadful tendencies. A wild desperate woman—an offscouring of the London——!”

But here it was that the lady so suddenly ceased; subsiding into the extremest corner of her chair with a little shuddering gasp. For only a few yards from her stood the steward; and, beside him, a poor, pale shrinking thing, a’shuddering too—and at her every word.

Oh ridiculously soiled, and pale, and wild, and draggled was this little felon! so irresistibly so, indeed, as to tickle to no small degree the risible
faculties of the steward; and to render the presence of a somewhat ostentatiously apologetic hand, near—if not quite covering—the obviously twitching lips, at the least, a conventional necessity.

Her gown—an ill-fitting gray petticoat and shift—hung open carelessly at the neck. An irregular time-tangled heap of red-hued hair fell in unkempt masses about her breast and shoulders; and created, with a strand here and there, a pitiful curtain to the grey, hunger-pinched features, smouldering with a weak passion, as if at some recent insult, within. There hung a fascination, as of a faded, yet untamed, beauty, about the little, piteous visage—just as it were the gleam on the dying ash; for something, besides the mere want and weariness of prison life, had killed the youth in her looks; while her little figure, though youthful, had a faintly fading air, like those prematurely ripened flowers we buy in the London streets.

Though the hopeless abandon of her pose and attire seemed to indicate a standpoint somewhere close to that low watermark of human sinkage—the loss of self-respect; yet that the acid of the invalid's invective should have had power to sting, was evidence that a goodly portion of pride—that most faithful of habits—still clung, unwearied, to the sad little bosom. At sight of the sick lady's shuddering withdrawal into the deepest refuge of her chair, the hand of the shrinking woman sought the bosom of her gown, as if to stay its quivering rise and fall; while knotted masses of hair fell about her lowered face so thickly, as almost to hide it from the curious gaze of the group.

“Look up, lass,” cried the soldier in his rough way. “Look up. It's the face we want to see—though the hair is bonny enough, in all conscience!”

The woman raised her head at this, and shook the hair from her eyes and face, with a toss of her head that flashed as near to the hearts of her watchers as if it had been a sigh—so pathetically hung was it with tarnished coquetry, and weary grace and air—so close akin to that fragment of torn lace, we all have passed upon the footpath, with its dumb and faded whisperings: the while her gaze sought the soldier's face a trifle wonderingly, as though the note of rough compassion in his tone had half-surprised her.

The invalid, now that she had had time to take in the queer grey object, and observe how little it was to be feared, was dropping a reactionary tear or two, over such an expression as breaks out, involuntarily, upon the faces of the many of her exalted condition, when, through the inadvertence either of their coachman, or their curiosity, they find themselves in the region of dirt and poverty. Across the homely features of her motherly friend played a swift alternation of light and dark shadows, as gentle compassion for the ‘draggled sister’ in her misery, and maternal antagonism towards the
‘waif,’ in her projected capacity of monitor to the child, strove in fairly even mastery,—while at his wife's back stood the grizzled soldier, with a grim glint either of compassion, or mere amusement, in his eyes. For the Captain—he stood a little aft of the group; meditatively feeling his long thin chin, and gazing under his lids at the woman's face. But for his costume, he might have been an Arab slave-dealer, meditating a purchase.

“Do you happen to know, Gadban,” he asked presently, in his suavest manner—still regarding the woman through half-closed lids, “do you happen to know, why the sergeant chose this particular woman?”

“I was in alongside o' him, sir,” the steward made haste to answer, with a soft glance at his questioner. “She was the only woman fit to keep company with the child.”

“And what,” asked the Captain again, shifting his gaze quickly to the face of the steward, “and what, in your opinion, constitutes this particular fitness—Mr Gadban?”

The man laughed a stifled laugh, and, raising his timid eyes, threw out a flash-like feeler round the group.

“She's the only one,” he said, at last, “as can keep her thoughts from her face.” And he cast round a smirk at the wretched figure beside him.

Round swung the woman with an angry flash, and her clenched fist whipping up, passionately; then as suddenly caught herself up with a sigh and a sob, her spare arm dropping back lifeless, and her pained eyes twisting, mournfully, sideways, at her silent judges. A worn and hopeless shadow deepened in her face as she passed thus, slowly and silently supplicating, from one grave visage to another; and presently, dropping her head again to the old wretched droop, she clenched her hands together, with a cruel force, behind her back, as if to punish the offending member for so thoughtlessly detracting from her few faint chances of favour. But, far from prejudicing the minds of the group against her, that half-raised hand had wrought wonders in her favour.

“Captain,” said the soldier suddenly, with a kind of snarl, “I think we might dispense with this gentleman's opinions. They are as much in the way, in this case, as the guard would have been!”

The Captain looked displeased.

“Ye—es?” he questioned, stroking his chin a little doubtfully, “and yet there are cases when a little bluntness may be forgiven—nay—is eminently desirable, my dear Major. The man's a reliable judge, for all his crude way of putting things.”

“As judge of a horse, or a cow, or a dish of potatoes, or even a glass of wine, I should consider him admirable,” said the soldier warmly. “But as judge of anything that can reason give me someone with a wit a little less
pungent; and a discernment of feminine character a shade less—less ‘horsey.’"

While the soldier was yet speaking, the steward had edged forward a step or two, his timid lids rising and falling a trifle darkly towards the speaker, and his napkin flip-flapping across his knee, with a sulky and aggrieved impatience, that only a wholesome appreciating of the ship's discipline could have held from breaking into words.

“'Tain't like you, sir,” he broke in at last, with a haste his words subsequently explained, and a depth and underlying insolence of tone that could be accounted for only on the hypothesis of an unhallowed knowledge and assurance as to the trend of his Captain's sympathies; “'taint your kind, to go stirring up trouble 'twixt master and man by words as ain't true. If any's seen me snickin' at the wine, I give 'em fair leave to say so—if any's seen anything that ain't plain and above-decks, let's have it. There's little enough missed over me, saving it be now and agin' such leavings as you gentleman u'd laugh, and make game over—Aye!” and suddenly he paused, lowering half timidly about him, with a repulsive and defiant sweat breaking out upon his yellow skin.

“That will do, now, Gadban,” said the captain, smiling grimly, and throwing out his arm with a motion of dismissal. “You mistake the gentleman. He, I am sure, meant no such insinuation.”

“Yet, ‘leavings,’ ” murmured the irrepressible soldier, drily, “is an open term.”

With a dark look, the steward shuffled off towards the companion. And the woman, after a moment's shifting hesitation, took the order to include herself, and followed weakly after him with dragging steps and bowed, dejected carriage.

And presently, it seemed, there sat a something in the piteous procession—either in the sickly show of venom of the shuffling leader, or the dogged; and dragged haste of his more sickly follower; or, it may be, a grotesque and lugubrious blending of the pair— that had its vein of humour for the Captain; for of a sudden he bowed down over his hand with a wicked snigger, having embodied within it a mirthful and half-ashamed stuttering, beginning with 'consider the lilies,' and ending with 'go!' While, on the other hand, the soldier—either from an inherent antagonism, or merely the inevitable diversity of the human temperament— though blessed with an equal, if not greater, sense of the ludicrous, could, strangely enough, discover nothing but food for irritation in the picture, and pealed forth, presently, in vehement protest:—

“Not you—not you, my lady! Where's the hurry?”

The woman dragged a little at the cry, and half turned backward, as
though doubtful in her wretchedness whether to take the words to herself; and then, dismissing it, perhaps, as beyond the pale of human reasoning, that anyone should trouble to infuse a cheerfulness into his tone for her sake, she turned on, moodily, after her shuffling guide.

In the mouth of the companion, he turned upon her with a covert snarl; his white face gleaming up, full of weak and sickly venom, out of the dark of the stairway.

“Not you, my lady,” he whispered, in sneering echo. “They haven't done with you yet—nor have I! Well—well for you, my plume and feathers, ye thought better o' yer blow. You'd have felt the deck, ye would—Captain and brigadiers, or no Captain and brigadiers! Don't ye hear them calling on ye? They haven't tired o' ye yet. They must have their game, the gentlefolk; though they tire soon! Up, and make believe to be an archangel in distress. It'll maybe amuse them for the while; time hangs that heavy. . . . But see—next time it won't be kissing and soft words upon the stairway!”

While he yet spoke, a pale, pinched gleam of hope had begun to brighten in the woman's features. But, ere she answered the repeated calls from the deck, she leant far down into the companion, and took a long, fearless look into his face.

“How you talk!” she sneered, bursting into a low-tone laugh of hysterical contempt. “You make me home-sick—I was born to that tune!” And, thrusting down her arm to its utmost reach, she snapped her fingers, slowly, in the gleaming eyes.

Then laughing still—her lips parted, her eyes half-joyful in their desperate hope—she drew herself out upon the deck, and started eagerly forward towards the now silent group.

But only a little way did she carry her joy. Quite suddenly, in the midst of, perhaps, her fourth or fifth step from the companion, her glad spirits seemed to forsake her, and she dragged a little; presently stopping outright, a few yards from her benefactors, with her spare figure shrinking into itself, and turning a little sidelong of them, as though it would fain have escaped observation; and her eyes fixed glassily upon a new addition to the circle, in the shape and substance of the fierce-eyed fisherman—distinguished formerly for his exclusive habits, but now, it seemed, made suddenly sociable with success.

The new-comer hung, with straddled, stiffly pompous mien, by the arm of the invalid's chair; dangling at the end of a line the while, for the edification of the group, a depressed and somewhat consumptive-looking fish, whose meek and unoffending aspect seemed hardly to warrant the expression of extreme ferocity with which its captor regarded it.

“E—h!” he was whispering, with a long-drawn, brogueish awe—
regarding the fish, the while, with a kind of fierce solicitude. “E—h, but she was a gran' puller!”

“It seems thin, poor thing,” the invalid chose to comment inadvisedly.

The Scotchman lifted his heavy-browed eyes with reluctance from his prize, and fixed them for a moment's meditation upon the speaker.

“Missus,” he rejoined, presently, in dry and meaning tones, “there'll be many a thowless body a might stronger than ut seems.”

The general expression of the group seemed to say very plainly—if not apprehensively—that the introduction of an innovation of a novel, if not startling, character, was an immediate necessity, if the tension occasioned by the new-comer's remarks were not to be oppressively prolonged. And this, as it came about, was amply provided for, in the fisherman's sudden discovery of the presence of the convict-woman. Realising the necessity—after so extremely neat a rejoinder—of despatching a waggish glance around the company, if only to discover on whom he might rely for sympathy, in the event of any further encounter arising from it, his gaze in this manner fell upon the shrinking, tattered figure behind the Captain.

“In Heaven's name! Wha' do ye he re, woman?” he shouted suddenly, in horrified surprise.

There was a general turn in the poor woman's direction at the gentleman's cry. She was standing a little apart from the group, with her fingers nervously twisting and twining in her lap. As they turned upon her she lifted her head, and confronted them bravely, but there was despair in her eyes.

“Ah, yes, Doctor,” cried the motherly person, eagerly, “you've arrived in good time. This woman has been suggested for poor Jennie's place. What do you advise?”

“Heaven presairve ye!” blurted out the Doctor, thunderstruck. “D'yer ken this woman——?”

“Ah! no, Doctor!” burst in the woman, fluttering forward suddenly, with a little shriek of supplication; “you wouldn't have the heart—you wouldn't have the heart to spoil a poor wretch's one faint chance. . . . No, no!” she quavered, turning in frantic appeal from the Doctor's hardening face to where the women sat. “Your gentle hearts will listen to me, then. You are women—you will understand. . . . Ah, if ye could but take my place, for one short hour, down there among that scum—if for just one of those maddening nights, there was nothing in your gentle eyes and ears, but just that crowd of soulless women, mumbling and moaning with such talk and action as ye wouldn't find in hell itself—if in those few blessed hours, when sleep took pity on ye, it was only to toss and shiver in the horror of the same cruel dream, where, cling and clutch and cry as ye would, there
was always a slip—slip—slip, closer—closer to the brink of the same, dark slough; if you could fancy in your gentle hearts only the merest shadow of what I've seen—Ah! ye wouldn't wonder at what I tried to do.”

“Aye!” shouted the Doctor, unable to contain himself further, “an' what ye would ha' completed, ye limmer, if it hadn'a been of' auld M'Bride!”

But the woman's wretched appeal had, evidently, roused both the sympathies and curiosities of the group, and the motherly lady had the visible acquiescence of the majority of her companions, when she put her gentle question:

“What has the poor thing done, Doctor?”

“Dinna be blinded be ye're sympathies, ma'am,” growled the person addressed, with some asperity; “puir woman indeed! she's the maist desperate female o' them a'. Because, forsooth, she doesna' tak' to her fellows, she must gang starve hersel' to a blessed skeleton. Aye, an' would ha' gieven us the go-by wi' a bent nail, but that she w'ur ower weak to mak' the best use o'ut. When ye've convicts aboard, ye'll do weel to resairve ye'r sympathy till ye gain ye're ain fireside and dish o'tea. Eit's a gran' preventative to indegestion.”

Suicide! What a sharp, cold sound it has! What a lonely shudder lies in the word! How closely, and how irrevocably it is associated in our minds with murder! A woman who is so little in love with existence as to wish to terminate it, is not the most desirable person with whom to entrust the innocent mind of a child. Small wonder, indeed, that even those faces which had openly shown their sympathy, grew suddenly fixed and cold at the Doctor's words.

There was nothing hurried or forced in that quiet motherly movement, by which the soldier's round-faced wife transported the child from the deck to her lap; neither seemed there anything outwardly disturbing in the quiet, downward glance of the soldier, with its adjunct of grimly-regretful head-shakings. Yet they fetched a wince, and a mute, beseeching movement, from the convict.

With an odd twist to his mouth, the soldier leant over his wife; and catching up a wisp of the child's fine hair, let it run caressingly through his battered fingers.

“Too little capital, wife,” he said, “to go speculating at our time of life.”

Yet softly spoken as were the words, they reached the woman's ears.

“No—no, master!” she cried, with a frantic gesture, “ye couldn't do it—you couldn't send me down again, after such a glimpse as this. . . . What harm can I do—I so thin and weak and small—I'm only fit to dandle a child. . . . See!” she panted, hurriedly rolling up her sleeve, and disclosing a spare, white arm, “see how thin and weak it is—just so much skin and
bone—I couldn't harm a fly. . . . Ye don't think—ye can't think——” (she paused with a sudden wondering hesitation, as if thunderstruck at some slowly emerging probability); “you can't think I'd harm the child. My God!” she burst out passionately, covering her face with her hands, and shaking her wild head slowly from side to side; “you happy folk show no mercy, when you get a sinning woman down!”

In a while, again—struck, perhaps, by the silence which followed her impassioned outburst—she slowly unclasped her face; and crossing her hands upon her breast, with a little piteous shiver, glanced vaguely round upon her silent audience: (most of whom now stared out over the sea, with a strained assumption of disinterestedness).

It was then that the Captain, who, for some time past, had been spying out intently towards the horizon, shut up his glass with a neat click, that rang like a period; and turned towards her.

“You are making a mistake, my good woman,” he said, in the soft measured patter of one who imagines he is having the last word. “It is not a bodily harm, that the lady fears for her child——”

“You!” broke in the desperate little felon, turning on him so fiercely as to occasion an involuntary stepback on his part, “do you think I'm a blind fool—do you think I can't see what you all mean?. . . . Look!” she said, flinging herself to her knees in front of the soldier's wife, and pushing the beautiful hair from her face, and cheeks, and forehead, “look! tell me—is my face a brutal one? Is it coarse—is it murderous? Does it look as if it would harm the child by word, or deed?” And as she spoke, she forced into her face a wan little smile, that brought a queer, wild beauty with it, and filled it with a strange attraction.

And then, while somewhat thus she knelt, holding back the gold of her hair in a sweet, ragged bunch, and smiling wild things at the mother—who, in spite of a continual series of praiseworthy efforts, only hardened out the tell-tale feelings from the one side of her plump, kind face, to find them trickling in at the other—there rang out a child's laugh, sharp and shrill and glad; which had its shivering, thrilling echo for every heart in the group—so ill did it fit with the pity and pain of the moment.

Again and again the child laughed and pointed—was there ever such an 'object' as the lady presented! Surely she had assumed this irresistible pose for its own exclusive benefit! Surely she was possessed of a ‘funny-bone’ of a most desirable kind! Surely there never could have formerly existed—even in the more doubtful of fairy fancies—such an amazingly amusing personage as this dilapidated lady in the shabby grey gown!

“See!” cried the woman, seizing her opportunity with a dreadful eagerness, and working her way back upon her knees, a few yards aft of
the child and its mother, "see! the child shall judge me, the child shall
decide. . . . Children are never deceived; they know whom they can trust. If
she repels me, I will go back— I will go back!"

So she sat herself down on the deck, in the midst of them all—a little
battered, grey thing—laughing wildly to attract the child. And no one had
the heart to gainsay her.

"Come then, my pretty," she cooed, enticingly—leaning forward the
while, and beckoning at the laughing child, with a wild smile in her eyes,
that she essayed in vain, by various tricks and graces, to hide and soften:—
"Come then, and we will play, you and I, here upon the warm deck; such a
game, such romps and laughter! Come then, dearie, for I've a tale to tell—
goblins— fairies—asking, praying to be told! Ah—and see," she
quickened, dropping her tone to a whisper, and crouching suddenly away
from her wondering judge, with a great assumption of secrecy, "I've
something to whisper —quick—I've a secret to tell! Oh! how you'll laugh
when ye hear it—such a mad, merry secret, such a laughable tale is mine!"

So she ran on in her rags and her quavers, and with the mad moan always
under it all, like the toll of the grave 'neath a May-day revel. And,
instinctively, the child seemed aware of the moan, for, though rippling with
constant merriment, its hand clung the tighter to its mother's breast.

"Ah! so lonely here, so lonely," she whispered, dropping presently to a
feigned plaint, though there was a deal of real wretchedness in her tone, for
a whisper was afloat, already, that she had sealed her own doom. "All
alone—poor crazy me. . . . I that was sane—once," she added, with a little
alluring laugh like a sob; and then laughed again—this time a peal.

"See now!" she cried once more, pushing herself desperately to her
knees. "See now!" and arranging her hair in a heavy brown frame round
her chin and cheeks, she peeped out at the child with alluring smiles and
enticing grimaces.

(And at this the child seemed forgetful even of the moan in its joy,
though still it did not release its hold of the parental bosom.)

Ah! many, and strange, and secret were the arts and trickeries of child-
eticement which originated in that little grey mass of passionate
womanhood, and broke on the astonished gaze of man that quiet evening.
How the child shrilled in little shouts and screams, and hid its golden head
in its mother's lap for sheer and unutterable joy! How the two woman-
watchers glowed and trembled—it may be, they hardly cared, or bothered,
to analyse why! How the two raw subalterns craned their stiff-stocked
necks, and hoped and despaired alternately!

But there came a time at last, when, with a semi-inaudible appeal—full
of a dumb and dreadful earnestness, made more dreadful still by an
uncertain laugh from the child—the weary grey bundle of a being sank into a sitting position on the deck, and only supporting herself by one weak and quivering arm, sank her brown head upon her breast, and was done. Great masses of hair fell over and veiled her face as her head drooped lower and lower upon her breast; and even had she troubled to raise her heavy eyes, she could not have seen in what manner her audience were regarding her. Yet, through the dim, numbing misery of the moment, a gleam of wonder must surely have crept into her brain, at the utter silence which had followed that last, faint word.

All in a moment it came, edging its way through the dead, dazed murk of her meaningless, careless wanderings, first feebly, then surely, then with a sharp pain at her heart, as she realized that it was something more than a painful thought—that, in fact, it was a touch from outside, a nudge on her arm as if to attract her attention.

Well! they might nudge and push themselves weary for all the response they would gain! Did they think she would meekly walk it? Did they see in her anything of the lamb that toddles, bleating, to its doom? Did they fondly expect the cork to push in as neat, and clean, and easy, as it had popped out? Oh! she was weak; but her nails had grown in the prison! She might manage to make it a carrying matter.

Someone spoke close to her ear. It was a high-pitched, impatient voice, possessing a quaint, foreign accent of its own, and evidencing, in the somewhat laboured suggestion it contained, a decided conservatism of spirit—a decided indication of a preference for the usages of time immemorial, in contradistinction to the hundred and one, more novel and less monotonous, that might otherwise have been chosen as better befitting the moment.

“Shall us be lions?” it suggested.

And then, in a flash, she had thrown the hair from her eyes, and, with her grey arms clinging feebly-passionate about the wide-eyed child, was kissing its wondering face again and yet again, as only rescued souls, who have shivered in the grey-cold gloom that lies the other side of hope, know how to kiss.

It was the Doctor who found his voice first of the spell-bound group, and he spoke in a wry-faced hesitating way, as though ashamed of his words and the show of sympathy they necessitated.

“Ye might gie the lass a trial, ma'am,” he said. “She's ower weak to do much harm.”

The felon ceased to caress the child at the first sound of the words, and bent forward eagerly as if to listen; and when the jerky sentence had faded upon her ear, she fell suddenly back again to her old position of the
quivering arm, her head drooping a little, and her grey eyes opening and
closing over a shadowy smile. And presently, those watching her the more
closely, noticed a movement on her lips, and thought they could even
detect a murmur, as of some oft-repeated word or name; though, on the
contrary, there were others of the group who insisted that it was merely a
pathetically monotonous repetition of the Doctor's words: “Ye might gie
the lass a trial—ye might gie the lass a trial.”

A brief while later still, still faintly murmuring and smiling, she seemed
to find the weight upon that thin supporting arm a greater burden than
either she or it could bear, for suddenly she removed it, and fell heavily
upon the deck, and moved no more.

A little previous to this, the small stout ship's officer— before indicated
as being to a certain degree remarkable for an enigmatic and perpetual
smile, together with, and softened by, a vast, expressionless expanse of
countenance —had moved up to the outskirts of the group, and gradually,
by a series of drowsy forward-jerks of a lazily curious nature, made
himself familiar with the turn of events. Though to every appearance
languidly indifferent to all the inner and softer workings of the little
tragedy, he happened—whether by chance or design—to be lounging but a
few feet from the woman when she fell, and it was he that first waddled to
her side on that occurrence, bending over her subsequently, with his fat
hands resting upon his fat knees, and his face puckered up into the
inevitable gleam of merriment.

Almost immediately he was joined by the Doctor and the Captain—the
former kneeling down quickly beside the prostrate woman; the latter
halting, and peeping gingerly over at her face, as a dog might sniff at a
doubtful bone.

“Call a hand aft, Mr. Larkin,” he said, abruptly, drawing himself up with
a kind of fastidious wince. “Have the woman put, for the present, in charge
of the sergeant's wife.”

The stout officer turned his head in a leisurely manner, and fixed his
small eyes, in inscrutable meditation, upon the Captain's chin.

“I was going below myself, sir,” he made laboured answer, blurring his
words with an incredible slovenliness. “I'll take it down myself—that is,”
added he, with a grunting laugh, “if you've done with it amongst you!”

There was that in the man's words—or, as was remarked by someone
afterwards, “in his distressing habit of misplacing them”—that served to
rouse, in each member of the group, a righteousl y indignant consciousness
of his neighbour's shortcomings. But then—as was another, and a fairly
comfortable suggestion of the moment—“who ever took Fat Larkin
seriously?”
So, lifting the limp grey bundle in his arms, this enigmatical personage wended his way slowly across the deck, and into the companion: evidencing, it must be admitted, a much greater solicitude for his burden's comfort, than his mode of offering his services might have led one to expect. While trudging heavily down the companion steps, he seemed struck with a sudden interest in the little pinched face that lay nodding against his shoulder, and gazed down at it for quite a while, with a grim half-wonder in his smile.

“You poor little sinner,” he said, suddenly, and bent his head and kissed it.

It was probably much to his surprise, however little to his visible discomfiture, that the woman opened her eyes and frowned darkly at him.

“Stow that!” he said, lazily, as if she had spoken to him. “Stow that, and don't fret. It's only a sailor's kiss—it's only Fat Larkin. Nobody minds him.”

And the woman seemed to take his advice, for presently she closed her eyes over a smile. But the fat officer continued to look deep into her face for long after she had closed her eyes.
Scene II.—‘The two voices.’

(Three weeks later.)

“There is a little desultory murmuring, and a deal of thoughtful sea-gazing, among the cabin passengers upon the poop. The two ladies drone softly, with long interspersions of silence, of the long summer twilights of England, and of seats in honeysuckle porches. The men lie stretched, and thoughtful. The stifled passions of another day of calm float upward among the evening vapours.

The convict-pen is full of lounging, grey-clad shadows, and these are thinking and dreaming also; but in groups, with folded arms, lowered brows, and now and then a guttural, dog-like growl.

Among these latter, but crouching in an empty corner, moodily withdrawn from his fellows, there may be made out a wizen, little, mouse-haired felon, with thin, prematurely-lined features. He seems perpetually fearful of something, this little man; for, ever and again, his slow eyes, fraught with a brooding sorrow, fling round across his shoulder at his companions with a great, wild start, as of one afflicted with some haunting fear or fancy, which, in spite of repeated verifications to the contrary, he cannot stifle. Nor, on a second glance, do these strangely-expressed fears of the man appear entirely devoid of foundation; for, irritating as his peculiar tactics may be to those nearer to him, they seem scarcely to merit such ugly murmurs of contemptuous merriment as frequently emanate from this or that lounging group that happens to catch them; nor yet that uglier growl of menace, flung out at intervals by his nearest neighbour—a great, dark-visaged giant, sulking with lowering brows and chin deep-sunk in chest against the port pen-wall.

The sentries, too, have fallen a prey to the drowsy influence of the hour. He, tramping aloft by the poop-railing, drags his half-closed eyes from the horizon-line with increasing reluctance, as, every while, the bulwarks block his way, and make it necessary for him to halt and face about; he, standing at the after-gateway of the pen, is smiling away over the waters to starboard with the twilight in his eyes; while, so comfortably lulled by this treacherous dusk-hush is he upon the fock’sl, that, not content with

—DANTE, Pur., can. v.
permitting the continual obstruction of his vision by the gossiping, smoking clusters of hands and soldiers that surround him—it being a post-prandial hour with these latter—he must have his mumbled word, or laugh, or even nudge, in proper season.

Nor does this phase of dreamy pre-occupation pass utterly unmarked.

In the shadow under the poop—though not so far under but that the movements of the sentry above were half visible through the spare railings—a pair of eyes had been restlessly sweeping the decks for an hour gone. Never still, never satisfied, from sentry to sentry, from point to point, they had seemed to rove, taking in every fresh movement, every fresh sign of languor, every deepening deck-shadow to be seen from that position.

And as slowly the dusk-lights took on a greyer tinge, the shadows a duskier spread, the sentry—sole occupant of that portion of the deck between the pen and the poop—a dreamier smile of abstraction, so this gleaming pair assumed a swifter, wilder, more restless dance, now glittering, now glowing, now straining, till, with a sudden, sly swoop, they crept out from the poop, with the bent, grey body to which they belonged, and hugging the gloom of the larboard bulwarks, sped forward swiftly and silently (yet with a faint ‘rustling’ sound as of a woman's gown) into the mouth of the passage-way running between the bulwarks and the pen.

There in the passage-mouth it halted—this little grey thing with the desperate eyes—and raising itself cautiously from the stooping posture in which it had slunk so secretly from the shadows, peered away aft at the motionless figures, scattered in various states of recumbency, upon the poop. Then, apparently satisfied with the picture of dreamy and undisturbed languor which that place presented, it turned away forward again, and sped swiftly along the dark passage towards the bow.

When arrived about midway between the fore and aft entrances—in a great, inky shadow cast by the shrouds of the main-mast—it halted once again, and leaning upon its elbow against the wall of the pen, bent its head as if to listen.

Softly, from somewhere within the pen, and high up against the wall (as it might be the voice of a tallish man), there smote upon the silence of the place a grumbling, jeering sound. “Hey! so they cease with the dark,” it growled, like a continued taunting of some silent victim; “so they cease with the dark—these prayers and supplications; they shut up to the dark like cursed flowers—do these pious mumblings!—flowers for the poop to pick! And when the kind-hearted ladies can no longer see to pick—to pity the poor, saintly sniveller down there among the animals. . . . why, we put up the cursed window-shutters ‘case the goods spoil!”
With a sudden, soft cry the figure threw itself to its knees in the shroud-shadows by the wall, and glued its trembling lips to one of the many fissures in the uneven palisading.

“Benjamin—Benjamin—Ben!” it cried, in an eager whisper.

“What's that?” breathed the former voice, hoarsely. And upon this there fell a listening silence.

“It's me—it's Nell.”

And the woman—for her voice alone betrayed her—laughed a little wild laugh to herself.

“What!” came hoarsely through the palisades, “you here again? Why, it was only yesterday—have a care, you reckless fool! You'll get yourself nabbed—you'll——”

“Hush!” burst in the woman, with a trace of spleen in her tone. “What's come to ye! Is this easy, lazy, jolly life sapping your nerves that you must bite your lip over every doubtful card? You didn't use to win that way. Why, boy, did ye suppose you'd received me so kindly last night, that I must come creeping along for another snub to-night? I've—I've brought news with me, Ben—news! Aye, a tale that'll set ye laughing, if it doesn't fetch the tears to your poor, old eyes!”

“Chut!” snarled the voice with sneering emphasis. “Have ye won over the skipper—have ye squared the guard—have ye set a light to the ship? Or”—with a snapping laugh—“or is it that the young officers, perhaps, are showing themselves kind and friendly?”

A gleam, like a wan light of pleasure, shot into the woman's pinched face at the words.

“Why, Ben,” she murmured, sadly, “so the wind still blows in the old place! I forgot you couldn't see me. ‘Dangerous woman’ hardly fits me now. . . . Dear, dear, was I really ‘dangerous’? Or is it just some thin, faded joke that won't go—won't let me forget? . . . Anyhow, I'm only a joke now, Ben. I make them grin—that's all.”

“Chut!” came the voice again.

Almost at the same instant, the woman fluttered nervously against the wall.

“Hark!” she whispered, breathlessly. “I thought I heard—hush! up there upon the poop. I can't see. . . . Look, Ben—are they moving; do they seem to watch? I thought——”

From the other side of the wall there came a clumsy, grating sound, as of a great body turning sharply aft; then a grunt of relief, followed by the same slow grate across the boards.

“S—s—t! how you start a man!” growled the voice, with something like a quiver. “It's a toss of the dice—it's a chance hand you're playing. . . .
You could play a chance hand once without whining!

“Aye—and still,” said the woman, smothering her fears in a flash of anger. “Aye, and still. Listen ye—I've come to tell you of it.”

“Chut! fool,” repeated the growl. “Better get back into safety—better for both.”

The woman laughed almost gleefully.

“Wait!” she whispered. “We'll uncover the fool, if you'll listen.” Then, settling herself still closer to the wall, she pressed her face to the crack in the palisading, and poured through a torrent of words in a low, half-fearful quaver.

“It was last night. I was waiting in the cuddy for fruit for the child. The steward had leaned over and tried to kiss me; but I struck at him, and he went off grumbling, and vowing fool's threats, away forward after the stuff. The gentlemen were sitting over their wine at the table. I was standing in the shadow of the cutlassrack at the stern end of the cuddy; it was dark there, and they didn't notice me. The Captain sat at the head of the table, shaking his head and nervously fingerling his wine-glasses. The others were all leaning over the table towards him, and laughing.

“It was long before I could catch the drift of their talk, though I listened and watched, quiet as a cat, in the dark of the arms. They seemed to be chaffing him, and more than once I caught the words, ‘convict’ and ‘Port Joseph.’ Then one of them shouted out something in a jeering voice, and I saw it all.

“It seems the Captain sets up for being a saint. He reads prayers to the ladies every morning at the breakfast table. But a tale had got round, that four convicts had escaped, when he last left Port Joseph on his homeward voyage, by hiding in the hold of his ship. It was this they were chaffing him about so loudly. One would lean over to ask him, 'tween the laughs, if the telescope hurt his blind eye when he searched the hold before sailing. Another shouted out to know whether it wasn't he that invented the maxim, 'a good bargain makes good ballast.' They all swore that, with a warm heart like his, he could never resist a pathetic inquiry after the ‘old country’ from a home-sick prisoner, who kept jingling the takings of a successful farm in his breeches pockets.

“I pricked up my ears at this. Every face I watched —every word I strained after. I followed them right through their maudlin, half-drunken chaff, till they drifted on to talk of the Settlement; and from that— oh! listen, lad—from that, to attempts to escape made by the convicts. . . . I was craning forward at this, with a hand on the sword rack, mad to catch every word, and nearly finished it all, Ben, for something turned in my hand with a ‘click,’ and I thought I was done. But somehow a laugh burst and
covered it, and somehow they didn't hear, and I drew in a'sweat with fear, and breathed again.

“But oh!—it was sickening work, listening to their ugly tales: crazy attempts to get free by land and sea, revolts, murders, quick deaths in the rush, slow deaths in the sun and the sand—all so sure of success, all ending in nothing, but, maybe, a doubtful bone or two found shining in the desert, or the cat, or the gallows... Every fresh tale they told was a fresh load on my heart, and the chances of freeing ye, Ben, and all the mad dreams I had dreamed about it, grew dimmer and dimmer as they talked.

“Someone said something at last. Oh, Ben, 'twas a dreadful thing he said, and it buzzed in my ears, and tingled, and rang, as that other thing buzzed and tingled, Ben, when they forced us out of the dock, and wouldn't let me speak... 'A hopeless place for a lifer,' he said; 'one in a thousand tries wouldn't prove successful.' And everyone nodded and seemed to agree. And I shuddered, lad, when I thought of ye, slaving away—slaving away.”

“And is this what ye've come to tell?” broke the voice, in a fast-rising growl of despair. “Is this what ye've come to whisper? You might have better kept away. It's a pity to clear a fool of his crazy hopes. But maybe I'm wronging your kind little heart—maybe you've fetched a knife along with you, to hand in along with your news.”

“Hush, lad!” soothed the woman, in a trembling voice. “Have a little patience. I haven't told ye all, or anything of what I came to tell... Why, the fool had but fetched out his cruel words, when our Captain—who hadn't got over his chaffing, and up to this had been moping and fiddling at his glasses in sulky fashion—looks up with a snap, and says in a calm, nasty voice (though 'twas sweet as a hymn to me): ‘You surprise me, gentlemen. Now it has always been a matter of wonder to me that so few have escaped.’

“The others turned upon him, grinning and whispering, as though they expected more fun from his words. With a sneer, a young officer, silly with wine, sung out to be told where he founded his wonder; and I saw the cool Captain fix him with a stare. Still nodding at him, he murmured of a ‘hackneyed delusion called experience,’ and how it came to us all ‘in good time’; and that, for himself, he had been blowing this way and that about Menalia for some years past, and the southern, eastern, and northern coast-lines lay spread out before him, as he sat there among them, clear and clean as a chart-line. And again he repeated, it was a matter of great wonder to him that practically none had escaped.”

“Maps—he went on to say in the silence that followed, for he had shut their mouths with his snubs and his calm—maps were by no means scarce in Port Joseph; in fact, their minutely measured out and closely explored
coast-line was a boast and a proverb among the Settlement pedants. Any convict with ordinary intelligence—and the majority possessed something more than that—could get a look at one under this or that pretext. What was to prevent him copying the coast-line northwards to Cape Stalk, and that of the archipelago of islands lying to the north of it? What was to prevent him stealing a boat, as so many of the fools had done before; filling it with provisions, grain, arms, fishing-tackle, and a comrade or so; slipping off some drowsy morning—he acknowledged the guard to be too strict at night; clinging to the coast-line, with an eye unskinned for weather and the northern coral-reefs; refitting and refilling at every large bay—there were plenty of them right up the coast, all safe as a house, all full of fish, each with streams of clear fresh water; and so cutting away up northwards, with twice or thrice the chances of any of the ‘cockle-shell’ navigators and explorers who had so successfully preceded him, for, if he hadn't their powers of navigation, he would have what they hadn't, and what were six times more precious and practical than anything they had—he would have a chart. . . . As to the natives and their empty menaces, a gun-shot was enough to send them scuttling; while, on reaching Cape Stalk, he had only to slap his compass down, keep the boat's head in a line with the needle, and the gods themselves couldn't prevent his hitting Papeana, and successfully posing before that settlement of loose-moralled beach-combers, as a shipwrecked sailor.

“Here the voice of the Captain ceased, and peering out, I saw him throw himself back in his chair with a grinning question in his face. There was silence for a while or two. Then the red-faced Doctor shouted out to know how he accounted for the fact that so many of those that had sailed off in this fashion had ultimately preferred the cat and the slip-knot to continuing their voyage; while another, sheltering himself under the Doctor, reminded the Captain, sarcastically, that there were a few wretched individuals still existing in this wicked universe who were so deficient in mother's-knee education, that the navigation of even a small open boat was a difficulty to them. But the Captain smiled on in his pious calm, challenging this one and that with confident eyes, and annoying the two that had spoken still more with the taunt that before he dealt with their questions, he would just mention in passing that there was one real difficulty connected with his scheme, and that they all seemed to have let pass them without a thought.

“Then grinning condescendingly over at the Doctor, he badgered him a while on the ignorance shown in his question; then explained to the table that quite the greater number of those convicts who had returned crestfallen, and yielded up themselves and their boats to the mercies of the Governor, were of a similar kidney with those poor crazy loons who
vanished from the Settlement some years since, leaving the message behind them that they were going to walk to China. They were the refuse of the Irish Rebellion—an ignorant, vagabond lot, who somehow got it fixed in their minds that they had only to sail or walk a few miles northward from the Settlement, and there they’d find old China awaiting them with open arms. So off they had gone with, at most, a week’s provender thrown into the bottom of the boat—generally to their death, one way or the other.

“He said he would ask them to laugh with him over the simplicity of the second question. He reminded them that two and two make four; and that—as there had been prisoners who had managed to sail their boats fifty miles northward of Port Joseph, and had lived to tell the tale; so there might reasonably be supposed to exist others possessed of the same reckless hardihood.

“Then, suddenly lowering his voice so that I had to strain out beyond the arms to catch it, he acknowledged that there was just one stumbling-block—the difficulty of obtaining a boat. He said he had forgot, when he began his argument, that, since the late attempts to escape, the rules as regards the boats had been greatly strengthened—not so much, he had been told, because so many lives had been lost, as because they would persist in losing the far more valuable boats along with them. So that the stealing of a boat nowadays must be a task requiring patience and skill.

“‘No, gentlemen!’ I heard him say (and I hear him now, Ben; and I think I shall always hear him; for the words, since the moment they reached me, have clung ringing and singing here in my head, as if they held special meaning for me and you). ‘My only wonder is that some clear-headed “lifer” hasn’t arisen, who has wormed his way by assimilated piety into that little fishing-settlement they’ve lately organised away down the harbour; got up a good knowledge of coastal navigation with a boat ready to hand; and been off before now. See here a moment, gentlemen—I’m going to have you all on my side ere we rise.’ Those were the very words, Ben! Then out he drew a pocket-book from his coat, and tearing a leaf from it, began to draw and write something upon the table before him. I knew it was a chart, Ben—almost as soon as himself; and something caught in my throat, so that I began to gasp at my breath. And, sure enough, he must presently explain it to them, showing what bays might be used for watering, and what shoals should be shunned.

“Just then, from close behind me, a cry sounded faintly from the cabin of the child; and I suddenly remembered the fruit and the steward. He will often stay gossiping away forward on such errands as I must give him. That’s his way of showing his indifference to such orders as come through
me. That's his only chance of a spite; for I give him no other chance. Yet—although I knew if he found me still loitering and listening there, he would have the chance he was looking for—I couldn't leave the game with the luck running fair into my lap. I couldn't have done that if I'd heard the child's mother come crying for me. For the thought was turning me sick and dizzy and wild that maybe the Captain would leave the paper behind him, or crush it and drop it close by. So I risked it all on the cast, and clung there to the arms, half-dead in my fear and excitement.

“They seemed hours hob-nobbing there. I thought they would never go. The wine travelled round and round, and they sipped and sipped, and murmured and drowsed—until I had dreams of snatching it fair from their half-drunken hands. And then, with a jump that clean drove the breath from my body, the Captain rose and murmured a grace to himself. I could see the chart lying by his plate. ‘Would he take it?’ I wondered and trembled. It was maddening not to be able to move? But slowly he turned, and left the cabin by the cuddy-entrance, the others trooping after in a straggling crowd—the last stooping to the chart as he passed, and taking a long drunken look.

“I hardly waited to see him fair round the door-post before I dashed sobbing to the table. In a flash I was poring over the little white slip, drinking in line and name. I had a scared notion that even then I might lose it. And then, as I stood there scanning it and sobbing, someone clasped at my arm, and I gave a cry, and near dropped in my terror—though something helped me to clasp it in my fist, and hide it behind me as I turned. . . . It was only the steward after all, Ben, the pale, cowardly scoundrel. A thing ye'd fear in the dark, like a rat. He'd not seen the paper, bless you! but accused me of stealing the silver and drinking the wine. I laughed in his face; for the gentlemen had emptied the bottles themselves, and there wasn't a spoon that was worth the stealing. And the chart, Ben—the chart's in my bosom, here, beside ye!”

The woman ceased, all breathless, and leaned with a sudden faintness against the wall—her bosom heaving and falling with painful fervour. The hoarse breath of the invisible listener came blowing through the crack in thick and frenzied gasps.

“Quick!” he whispered. “Give it me, girl! Pass it through the crack, while there's time—while there's time!”

“No!” breathed the woman, starting away and panting out the word with a dead look in her eyes. And then again, with a sudden softening and appeal: “No—leave it with me, Ben; trust in me. I'll find a way——”

But then the breath rose, quickening, in the crack, to a kind of stifled roar.
“Give it to me—damn you!” wheezed the frenzied voice, again. “What's the use of it to you with your paltry year or two—what's the use of it to you with your looks and your freedom? Give it here, you heartless devil—or when I get out—I'll——”

The voice, as it fell away gasping on the words, seemed nearer to hysterical tears than murder. The woman was very silent there by the barricade.

“Oh—Ben,” she murmured, presently, in a strange, hard voice, “what's come to ye since ye've been aboard here? Your voice is not the old voice—your face is not the old face. Have ye nothing but rough words and scowls for me? How dim the light has grown. Is it Ben Blake I'm whispering to? Is it? Ben Blake had ever a laugh on his lips for me; ever a laugh in his eyes. The light is dim—the crack is very small, Ben, but this man's face seems rough and hard. It makes me half afraid.... There was once a man who would have killed a man for doing that.”

Though there was sadness in the voice of the woman, it contained, besides, an evident strain of that confidently admonitory tone peculiar to mothers and animal tamers, who, from long experience in the arts and caprices of the lower mind, are able to gauge, with a certain measure of accuracy, the depth of this fit of sulks, or that sudden blazing snarl of anger. Her concluding words were fraught with a gentle regret, and she lingered reproachfully upon them, as if to bring the man's baseness thoroughly home to him, and insure the deeper repentance.

But no whispered prayers for forgiveness, no frenzied oaths of self-condemnation—not so much as a single repentant ejaculation—enlivened the dead, wooden face of the barricade. Instead, there followed on the woman's words a breathless silence—a silence full of ominous suggestion, and half-broken at intervals by a hardly-perceptible tapping upon the palisades: the involuntary action of a slow mind debating within itself.

It was the woman who broke the silence at last. She was kneeling with her eye still glued to the crack in the boarding.

“What are you thinking about, Ben?” she asked, with a strange breathlessness. A startled movement greeted her question from the other side of the wall, followed quick by the sound of a half-stifled oath.

“Thinking, Nell?” growled the voice—yet nearer now to a whine than a growl—“thinking? What should a wretched devil of a lifer do with thoughts or hopes? Ye're hard on poor old Ben. Do ye expect a man to herd with swine and yet keep his company manners? Do you expect a man to come the sweet with ye after keeping such company as helps me stifle away the hours below; or standing time by time up here in the sun, to be sneered at by the poop-folks, or avoided and sniffed at by such puling...
night-birds as the ‘weasel face,’ yonder——?”

“What?” she broke in, springing to her feet in a rage. “And ye let him do it? and you stand and grin? Bah! were I in there among ye, would I bow meekly under his sneers and refinements?—would I gape like so many louting plough-lads at his sham fastidiousness and religious airs?—would I content myself with the mere jeering at him from a corner like any cowardly schoolboy?”

“What would ye do?” asks the voice, with something of a whine, something of a sneer. “Would ye have us go in a body, and sneer and gibe as you do nightly? Chut! he laughs at you when your back's turned; he grins in his sleeve while ye're there. The man's only tarrying for the clear, sure chance to blow on you, Nell. And then, where'll be all the fine schemes, all the fine charts? Where'll old Ben be then? Slaving, it's like, in that blinding scorch, without hope, without change, for life... . . . Come, girl,” he added, with a sinister fall in his voice, that was meant to be wheedling, “just one peep now—in case——”

But the woman shrank back from the voice, with pain in her eyes, and a little, soft laugh in her throat.

“You've wasted no time, Ben,” she cried, with a tremble in her words. “You've wasted no time in your new school, Ben. Yet I liked ye better as you were. Don't become too knowing, Ben; there's danger in too much knowledge, they say. It so often means over-acting and over-doing. And then they see through ye, Ben, like a bit of glass. And then they badger ye, Ben, the live-long day, as they badger the ‘weasel-face’ yonder. . . . Where is he?” she hissed through the crack, with a reckless, venomous note in her voice. “Where is he? Can ye see? I'm going to comfort him. Where does he lean?”

“You're cursed hard on a man——” the voice began.

“Don't whine, Ben,” she burst in again, “however effectual they tell you it is. There's a separate name for whining dogs; don't make me say it... . . . Tell me, where does he weep? where does he sigh to-night, that I may comfort him?”

“In the forward corner, curse you!” growled the voice, throwing to the winds its whining subterfuge. “You're short to-night. If he wasn't such a venomous skunk I could almost pity him... . . . You fool!” he called after her, hurriedly, as she moved off slowly from the crack. “I tell you you'll goad him too far some night; I tell you he'll round on you yet, whether it suits his plans or no!”

The woman had turned from the crack, as if about to make her way forward; but at the sound of these few added words of warning, she paused a while, glancing back a shade wistfully in the direction of the voice.
“Oh,” she muttered, with a bitter laugh, “we must be careful of our language, with the chart against our bosom!”

Then, swinging away again, with all the venom and cruelty of the preceding moments gleaming up anew, and with an added recklessness, into her pinched and pallid features, she began to creep forward, along the inside of the passage, towards the bow.

The gray evening light was dimming over the sea; and the gloom of night had already fallen in the more over-built places of the ship. As she neared the forward end of the passage, the woman might have been seen to stoop here and there in the shadow of the wall, and to apply her eye to odd cracks in its surface, as if searching for somebody or something in the dim light of the pen, within. There was a touch of evil in the nervous, cat-like stealth of her creeping and peeping movements; her manner did not resemble that of one who sought a friend.

It was some five seconds later that she came upon a crack—six yards or so from the bow end of the passage—from which she only withdrew her eyes for one quick right and left glance, returning them immediately to the wall, with an eagerness, as foreign and seemingly unnatural to the diminutive womanliness of her appearance, as was the cruel laugh which accompanied it. It half seemed that all her wild tenderness vanished with that one peep—that all the woman had fled, unmasking some little, cruel animal, that, like the lizard in the flower-plot, her womanhood had smothered.

At the sound of her laugh—whisper as it was—a weary breath like a moan issued from within, followed by a broken word or two as of appeal, and these, so slow and weak of utterance as to suggest a proved foreknowledge of their own futility.

“Not to-night—not to-night,” they seemed to say. “Have a little pity, lass! I'm ill, if you only knew it—ill and weary... Ah, you laugh—you don't believe me! See, see how my hand quivers. Can you see it, lass? Look in my face—is it real, or only sham—what's written there?”

“Ah!” broke in the woman, with a cruel laugh. “Weak and ill, are ye—weak and ill! So the weather's still changeable, is it? A week or so back it was the pious and calm. Then down comes the rain and the sorrow and the longings for home. Now it's weak and ill and weary... Oh! you're only a second-rate sham at the best. You've left nothing for the rest of the voyage, unless it be one thing—and I wouldn't meddle with that. It'll find you soon enough without the need of sham!”

“Would to God it might,” came the voice, fervently.

“Aye!” cried the woman, with rising venom. “It'll be short and sharp, I don't doubt. It doesn't wait for the seeking of such as you in Port Joseph.
Ropes knot themselves there, they say, and trees are always handy... Yes! you will need to look well to yourself out yonder, friend. You'll maybe miss your gloomy London alleys, and the sport and the shelter they gave in the night. You'll find it more difficult, perhaps, to come on a man with his back turned in yonder scattered place—more difficult to down him with perfect safety to yourself in the old, neat, silent style——”

“Lies—lies—lies!” broke in the voice, with a weak passion. “I tell you again, lass, you've been hoaxed—worked on—lied to! You're killing me, lass—you're killing me amongst you! You'll be mad with yourself for the life you've led me—when it's over, and you see what a devil you've been—Hush!” he snapped in, with a startled quaver. “What's that, lass? It's footsteps! They'll have heard voices! Quick! hide yourself—sink down close in to the wall! There's someone coming! 'Fore God it's no lie! Listen!”

The woman burst out with a sneering, incredulous laugh; then sank like a stone in the dark of the barricade. Along from the after entrance of the passage there echoed the sly 'pit-pat' of slippered footsteps.

Louder—louder they sounded out of the dusk behind her, while she shuddered and shook to their oncoming voice—ever sinking, ever crouching a little lower; and at last even hiding like a frightened child beneath her trembling hands, as though by this she thought to escape the eye, or ward off the expected blow. Nearer—yet nearer they drew; slipping and slithering over the planks with a strange, sliding, stealthy movement. To the woman's ears they had a halting sound as of the steps of a person who searches, and she forthwith cowered so low into the wall that her red fringe brushed the deck.

Ah! they were close behind her now—now they were almost passing! Was it fancy that they seemed to hesitate?—was it fancy they faltered and dragged a little? . . . On a sudden she clasped a hand to her lips as though to stifle a scream, for they had ceased altogether in the gloom close beside her.

So, cowering and shuddering, she awaited the end.

But the end was slow in coming. Moment after moment dragged its maddening track through the silence, till it seemed as though the very sands of time had conspired with the watcher, and were dropping in singles instead of the proverbial batches, till she was ready to scream with a high-pitched nervous terror at the first touch or the first word... Yet no one touched her, nor spoke to her, nor laughed gently in the shadow at her agony.

. . . . And presently it fell about that, while still straining thus—while still her thoughts, like fish in a troubled pool, fluttered frantically this way and
that after some poor pallid straw of hope—she became sensible of two hardly-perceptible, yet almost comforting sounds: a gentle irregular chipping as of metal upon metal, and the calm regular snort of a person, seemingly undisturbed and breathing through his nostrils, the two combined being apparent indications of a pre-occupied mind. Very cautiously she shifted her position a little, and, winking and blinking, like some frightened animal, cast up a timid glance across her shoulder. . . . But the barest peep was enough to send her ducking back to her old position, with a shudder and a frightened breath.

Half-turned seawards stood the squat figure of the steward, chipping for a light, and steadying his flint upon the bulwarks, the better to accomplish his desire. From his moist lips there protruded a short, black pipe, filled to overflowing with tobacco; and to apply a spark to this seemed his one worldly care for the moment.

‘Chip—chip—chip,’ sang the steel in the silence, spitting out an angry fountain of sparks, but never a glow. . . . So that presently, with a soft spoken oath, he shifted a step or so nearer to the woman, as a man might take a new stand for luck, and tried anew.

‘Chip—chip—chip,’ sang the steel in the silence—but what a queer silence! What a strange quiet, for example, prevailed within the pen—not a shuffling step, not a murmur! To a listener, at such a moment, it might have occurred as a fantastic possibility, how that even a ‘chipping’ flint might mark a destiny.

“Steward,” rang out a thin voice suddenly, from somewhere near the forward end of the passage—a voice so strangely alike to that which had, but a moment before, warned the woman of approaching footsteps, that she shot up her head at the sound with a face gone wild with wonder.

“Steward, they wait ye on the fock’sl!”

Almost at the same moment the steward succeeded in striking a spark into his fuse, which caught and glowed out brightly in the dusk.

“What's the hurry, shipmate?” he bawled out, blowing upon it with a vicious fury. “I'm spry enough, ain't I?” and at that, applying the glow to his pipe, he enveloped himself for a space—with not a few involuntary intimations of satisfaction—in a series of feathery clouds.

. . . . A moment or so later, still intent upon his fuse and bowl, he sheared off with extreme deliberation from the bulwark, dragged at a snail's pace past the breathless woman, quickened suddenly, turned the corner complacently, and was gone.

The woman did not immediately rise on his disappearance; nor even after his slipshod footsteps had long ceased to echo in the mouth of the passage. On the contrary, for quite a while, she lay a lifeless bundle in the shadow,
and only roused herself from her uncomfortable recumbency at last, in a half-hearted, almost reluctant fashion, thrusting the loose hair wilderedly from her forehead, and staring drowsily about her with the dazed and wondering airs of an awakened child. But this indifferent, half-awakened state was not to be hers for long. Upon a sudden a flash of pale recollection thrust every trace of languor from her face; and, as if suddenly realising her danger, she pushed herself quickly and breathlessly to her knees. Simultaneously a sound so curious broke upon her ears that she was fain to pause and listen.

An unaccountable trembling took her as she hung there straining her ears; it was as if the ugly note of the sound held some drear significance for her. Now it would whisper almost inaudibly—full of a sullen secrecy—like the rustling of some forest night-breath; now it would rise, gathering in volume, to the mumbling, moaning cry of some deep-stifled, cellar-prisoned gust. And always it seemed to rise but a few inches from her—to gather round and envelop her—to stifle her with its perpetual buzz and hum.

Struggling to her feet she peered about her, with a crazy, stifled irritation—up at the dim-hanging canvas, out across the shadowy sea, up and down the passageway, and away into the forward gloom. But every view held a calm, as of a mocking, painted stillness.

Then suddenly a faint clue reached her in the shape of a sound—a trivial, dot-like sound (like a giggle, low and inexpressibly cruel) flung softly out, close by, within the pen.

Like a flash she came facing round to it; her mind quickly cleared of a host of mad conjectures, her wonderment replaced with dread. . . . For a many-voiced, whispering murmur, fraught with an ugly levity, was filtering through the wall.

With the grim lesson of her late adventure entirely blotted out by this vague, new fear and the curiosity it aroused, she flung herself down once again by the wall, and applied her eye to the crack in the palisading. And it was a strange scene which there dimly presented itself to her view; and one, moreover, that was never to forsake her as long as memory held.

The outlines of the great, bare enclosure were all soft and hazy with the falling dusk, and surrounded the fantastic half-reality of the figures with a harmonious suggestion of limitless shadow. It was a dusky study rather than a picture—a dim impression in gray; from which, at most, a bare limb or two, a section of palisading, and here and there a grinning, furtive face stood out in detail. A few feet from the inner side of that part of the wall where the woman watched, stood a thin-framed, under-sized convict, quite alone, with his wizen, deep-furrowed face showing pale and anxious in the
half light. His lips trembled a little, and appeared to be uncomfortably dry, for he moistened them repeatedly. His pose—stiff, yet weakly-swaying—suggested the helpless balance of a drunkard. Yet, though his body might be failing him, there glowed a set defiance in his sorrow-sunken eyes that seemed to cry out mutually of a spirit still unquelled.

Further aft—spread out in an irregular half-circle right across the pen—a restless cluster of shadows was edging in stealthily—hesitatingly—in little, irresolute, muttering batches, towards this lonely figure in the corner... . . . And about it all was just the grayness of the dark, and a little sound above a whisper.

“What is it?” cried the woman, in fear and trembling. “What has happened?—what are they going to do?”

The lonely figure flashed round at the voice, and ran wavering up to the barricade. This unexpected sympathy had quite unmanned him, and tears were welling from his eyes.

“I can't tell—I can't think.” he whispered, wildly. “But you can help me, lass—you can save me... . . . Quick!” he cried out piteously, with a terrified half-look over his shoulder. “Ah, for God's sake, quick! Say something—speak to them—tell them I spoke to save you—not to give you away! 'Twas the giant said it! ‘He gave her away,’ he said. They think I split on you, lass—they think I gave you away... . . . Quick—quick—or I must shout—I must call out! Speak to them—tell them—stop them—they'll— they'll——”

“Ah!” screamed the woman, hammering and thumping with her fists upon the wooden wall. “Stop—stop—stop! He saved me—he saved me!”

But her shrill despairing cries—and that shriller, more despairing one that rose wail-like and short-lived from within the pen—swirled away in the din of a sudden, snarling rush, which, echoing and reverberating from the region of the pen, fore and aft, into the dreamy dusk-hush, broke rudely into many a soft-eyed home-dream, many a low-voiced longing; was the untimely end of many a fragrant 'clay' dropped helplessly from as many gaping lips; hushed, with the ruthless levelling of the vulgar, the flowery, well-bred yearnings of a languid poop-lady, and the rough, oath-garnished boastings of some sailor-orator, into a similar imbecile stutter; set men groping wildly for anything that would help to deal a blow; and then—died out, as suddenly as it had arisen, into a grim and guilty silence.

As for the woman, she had not ceased to hammer and add her wailing to the clamour, till the utter futility of her efforts seeming to penetrate even the depths of such an unreasoning frenzy as was hers, she turned away aghast and helpless, ringing her hands and peering this way and that, as if
with some vague and unfinished notion of seeking help. Then, as the officers began to yell fiercely from the poop, and the sound of many feet pattering and stumbling down from the fock'sl beat upon her ears, she seemed suddenly to recollect the dangers that beset her own position, and with scared looks and double-bent body, started running aft along the passage.

Darting at last, with a faint scream, out of the after entrance, as a crowd of panting and dishevelled soldiers surged madly round into the other, she sank half-fainting upon a pile of ropes in the shadow of the bulwarks, and lay wondering vaguely at the increasing tumult around her. Half-consciously, as in a fancy clouded with sleep, she saw the dim width of deck between the pen and the poop surge suddenly, like a filling sluice, with passing and repassing figures. Soldiers dashing, unarmed and helpless, beneath the poop; soldiers flinging out past their fellows, equipped and eager; soldiers forming up in front of the barricade gate; soldiers everywhere. Officers hurrying and exhorting, nervous and distracted, save one: a grizzled gentleman, standing half-way down the poop-ladder, and quietly restoring order with quick and worried gestures. Sailors making back for the passage entrance and half-gleefully feeling at their cutlass edges as they run. A lank, pale ship's boy that comes running and hiding in the shadow, followed by a little, fat ship's officer, boxing his ears with the comfortable verbal comment that there was a time for everything, but that he had chosen the wrong one for seeking lost articles. And so on, on, in a mistily moving din, till there fell over all a curious lull and stillness, as of each man in his place and waiting.

Suddenly into this quiet, then, there stabbed a sharp order. Bayonets flashed ‘clip—clipping’ into their sockets. Yet another command. And the pen-door flew inwards with a rousing crash before a hedge of gleaming eyes and bayonets.

. . . . Again ensued a period of silent waiting.

Then, softly, there came floating down to the half-fainting woman, from somewhere deep in the pen, the sound of a petulant moan like the plaint of a child. Pushing herself with an effort into a sitting posture, she peered over in the direction of the sound with an expression of wondering fear. And then, all in a moment, she was tottering to her feet and breathing out, “Ben— Ben,” in gentle yearning accents, with her thin hands outstretched towards the gateway, where stood a shadowy giant, holding tenderly-propped within his arms a softly-moaning heap.

But suddenly she grew silent there in the shadow.

“Ah! you've hurt him, Ben,” she whispered, and drew a little backward with a frightened breath.
Slowly, with an exaggerated assumption of gentleness, the giant bent his
great body and laid his burden upon the deck in the midst of the levelled
bayonets. Then, rising almost with reluctance, he walked quietly back into
the pen, and the gates crashed to behind him and his guard of soldiers.
Outside, again, the officers and soldiers melted slowly into broken order,
and gathered round the huddled, grey heap by the gateway with universal
exclamations of wonder and relief.

“So, gentlemen,” said the grizzled officer, grimly, as he descended the
poo–stairway and made slowly towards the group, “that extra hour in the
cool was near being an hour too much for some of us. How one learns
aboard a prison-ship, to be sure. Lock up will be at the usual hour in future,
gentlemen. But, Gad!” he whipped out, under his breath, at sight of the
giant's legacy; and then, in a softer tone, “Poor little toad.”

“Who is he?” he spoke again, presently, lifting a worried face round the
group, “does anyone know?”

Nobody knew.

“Get the book, sergeant,” he ordered. “In my cabin—my wife will give it
you.”

(And, 'at the words, there was a quick movement on the outskirts of the
group, and someone moved away under the poop.)

It must have been just at this moment, that, as the woman hung, still and
white as marble, in the shadow at the other side of the deck—her eyes still
fixed in a strained, uneasy fascination upon the crowd round the barricade
gateway—she became sensible of a gentle prodding in the region of her
arm, which fetched her flashing round with the old fears dancing anew.

A pale-faced, shrinking woman stood at her elbow with a cup of water in
her hand.

“Take it to the poor, bruised wretch,” she pleaded, with a mixture of pity
and horror in her face; “take it to him, girl—I—I cannot.”

The other's head cleared on the instant. Snatching the glass with a little
hard laugh that added a look of wonder to the already surcharged face of
her petitioner, she hastened across the deck towards the crowd. Reached
there, she thrust her way through the curious soldiers into the small cleared
space in the centre, where a scattering of ship's and military officers hung
silently regarding the operations of the bluff Scotch doctor, who, kneeling
at their feet, seemed busily occupied with an indistinct something on the
deck before him.

At first she hung back a little at the sight or its suggestions. But
becoming conscious, perhaps, that not a few eyes were watching her
movements curiously, she presently advanced with an effort to the busy
surgeon's side.
“They sent me with water, sir,” she said, in a dry voice, bending down towards him and proffering a trembling glass.

But so preoccupied was the gentleman in his operations, that she had to make her offer a second and a third time before she could obtain an answer.

“Ou aye,” said the busy man at last, abstractedly, and in the tone of one making a concession; “ye may sprinkle 'us head and welcome.”

Without a word she sank to her knees beside him— though the closer view of a rocking head and gentle, pain-drawn features which the movement entailed, drove a sudden shudder through her that was responsible for a serious diminution in the tale of her precious water. Bending low over the prostrate felon, she began to sprinkle his forehead feverishly; subsequently softening to a quieter movement, and ending by becoming almost tender in her womanly pity and solicitude. She seemed, moreover, to tend him with an increasing absorption as she grew more familiar with the suggestive novelty of her surroundings; at times touching his forehead with a covert hand, at times stooping to scrutinise his features with a queer and questioning look; and falling at last to a gentle murmuring of her lips, whence issued a crooning sound such as mothers use. The softening influence of what seemed a maternal instinct all but transfigured her as she knelt in the dusk of the gate; melting out that faint hardness or coarseness of outline which had hitherto been the most noticeable characteristic of her features, and generally so completely rejuvenating her, that it were questionable whether her fearful petitioner of the moment previous would have recognised the hardened flouter of her pity in this gentle, feminine thing.

“Such a devil—such a devil!” she would sometimes murmur, brokenly; and then, as if sharply recollecting her position in the midst of her enemies, would cast up a lightning glance at the preoccupied doctor, who —from a general aspect of hopeful expectancy—appeared to be engaged in a prolonged and, as yet, unsatisfied search after broken bones.

It was a little later that a gray-whiskered soldier pushed his way into the crowd, with a large note-book and a lighted lantern in his hand. Receiving the book, and bidding him raise the lantern, the grizzled officer opened the leaves to a slow, deliberate measure, as though searching for some particular page.

“This should be it,” he said at last, drawing nearer to the light. “Yes!”

Then, clearing his throat, he spelt out the following in a halting treble: “Number 1025—James Dust—seven years' penal servitude—Incendiary—Rick-burning.”

A murmur, half of amusement, more of pity, ran through the crowd at
this announcement.

“Getting his modicum of excitement out of his little flare-up, to be sure,”
commented the fat ship's officer with his inevitable leaning to the
humorous side.

. . . . And no one seemed to notice how wild-eyed and stiff hung the
woman over her empty water-cup, till, dropping it with a crash, she fainted
dead away.
Act I: ‘The Ship—Morning.’

(A month elapses between the Prologue and Act I.)
Scene I.—‘Masks.’

“Io pur sorrisi, come l'uom ch'ammicca.”

—DANTE, *Pur.*, can. xxi.

. . . . Drowsily to and fro, like a dozing gull, she swings in the swell.

Awnings, spread here and there in stingy patches, give to the more honoured portions of the deck some small protection from the blaze. But even these are useless as against that dazzling glance of sun on sea, which, striking upward from the leaden surface, penetrates, ere long, to the wariest dozer in his coolest, shadiest lair.

Dull and sodden burns this morning glow—melting the tar in her seams, denuding the decks of life, evolving out of the harmless ship-brasses, and as harmless weapons of the yawning poop-sentry, little glaring gehennas, not glanced at with impunity; flaming like an evil boding in the contents of the crazy red buckets that line the poop, and peeling equally suggestively at the legend ‘Briadene’ that lines their sides; and even succeeding at last (from a well-considered ambush in the compass-box) in screwing up the already generously wrinkled countenance of the man-at-the-wheel to such a degree, that the fat officer of the watch—who has been rudely awakened from a comfortable doze in the shadow of the mizzen-mast by the resounding flap of an idly hanging sail—indignantly accuses him of sleeping at his post.

Few sounds break the heavy, waiting silence of the almost deserted decks.

Now a sail flaps to against the mast with a helpless ‘wallop’; now the gentle heaving of the ocean drags a groan or two of remonstrance from the drowsy vessel; while, ever and again, at uneven intervals, a prolonged and murmurous grunt floats out across the decks from the vicinity of a much-inflated hammock triced up in the shade of the overhanging deck of the poop.

There are moments, too, when a low, muffled, many-throated laugh or shout echoes up on deck by way of the main-hatch from somewhere in the depths of the vessel, and mingles with the cheerful clatter of plates and jangle of cooking utensils, issuing from the galley just forward of the fore-mast, in a grimly foreign manner. And it is at such moments that the nodding poop-sentry may be seen to grip his carbine with a firmer grasp, and shake himself till his accoutrements rattle again, as though a necessity
for combating the fatal epidemic of drowsiness, into whose toils the ship and her company seem to have fallen, were suddenly thrust upon him.

. . . . The almost motionless vessel; the officer dragging his lazy heels up the poop, or gazing with drooping lids into the compass-glass at the stupid, sun-puffed visage reflected there; the perspiring, clothes-cursed sentry alternately dozing and pulling himself together; the wrinkled steersman leaning heavily over the wheel, and wondering, apparently, in the shock, sun-muddled head of him, how hard the deck would prove if this, his sole support, were to suddenly give way; the fock'sl-head littered with the recumbent forms of sailors curled up in the sun like so many basking dogs; the main-deck crossed and recrossed with long sleepy shadows, and drowsier for the drone of a solitary fly or so, and the peace-giving echo of the long-drawn grunts before mentioned—all seem to have conspired together to make, with the shimming, gray-blue dome of heaven, and the vast, still spread of the waters, one somnolent, inanimate whole.

Even the little white galley forward, with its open sunlit doorways—in the shadowy background of which, as you peep through from starboard to port, the fire glints and glows—ere long lowers its clatter to a gentle, simmering murmur, comfortable and contenting as the purr of a cat. It would seem as if even this—the ship's dame-gossip and tale-tattle—finds it no longer possible to resist the general depression; in further support of which opinion the bustling, self-important clouds which had, ere this, enveloped the time-blackened pipe upon the roof, give place to a dreamy, glimmering column, suggestive of sleepy and profound meditation.

Hardly had peace thus strangely and suddenly fallen upon the little white-washed house, when a figure advanced into the starboard entrance from the interior shadow.

Small and wrinkled-faced he seemed, with eyes large from either sickness or sorrow, and form clad in gray convict-slops some sizes too large for him—the slops, in turn, covered by a large white cooking-apron. Seating himself a trifle wearily upon a stool in the doorway, and gripping a bucket between his knees, he set about peeling some potatoes with slow, abstracted, thought-clogged movements.

Even when his form was in shadow, and his stubby, gray-tinged head had bent itself so low upon his work as to render his features well-nigh indiscernible, there was something indescribably pathetic in the lonely insignificance of the posture he had assumed, and in the weary, mechanical manner of his culinary effort. But how was this aspect of lonely misery intensified, when, ceasing in a thoughtful moment his work, he propped up his chin upon his hand and looked out across the sleepy ocean with a wistful peep of sorrow in his thin, gentle, weather-beaten face, which
seemed, from a momentary flash of brightness that fled across it—masking it in a less cloudy guise for a breath, to leave it again, full of a numbed and dreary longing—to have in one moment caught and lost again some flitting gleam of hope in that realm of dreams and fancies beyond the far horizon!

“I must be dreaming mad, I think,” he muttered, rousing himself to his work with a little shake; and then, as if struck by some further thought, subsiding again into his former dreamy posture. “That wild thing would have killed me, had she dared. . . . and yet . . . . her little face is not all bad—not all bad. . . . Ah!” he quickened with a deep, fierce intensity, yet with the dreams thickening in his eyes, “they used me ill—that yellow crowd. Night after night, sick and dizzy, my head whirling, my eyes dim with the old thoughts; night after night she must come, with her scratching and her whispering, and her gray face perking eerie and dim through the wooden slit—night after night . . . and yet,” he added, with a sudden, simple calm, “it's not all bad, that little face.”

“Frightened eyes!” he dreamed on, with a strange deep glow in his own, “frightened eyes that grow tender. . . . Did I dream ye? Aye! I think it was a dream. . . . I'm pretty sure it was a dream.” Then slowly running his gaze along the horizon, he drifted deeper and deeper into some remoter train of thought, which seemed, from the frequent alternations of light and shadow that flitted uncertainly across his withered features, to consist of half-pleasant, half-sorrowful materials, and these—taking into consideration the dismal and unchanging raptness of his gaze—of a reminiscient rather than a hopeful kind.

Thus, minute after minute found the man still lost in dreams. Indeed, so deeply and unconsciously absorbed did he become, that he ceased at last to stir or sigh to the few petty worries that seemed especially to concern him; heeding neither the drowsy flies, that, gathering slow courage from his stillness, bobbed, droning and buzzing, in warily narrowing circles, an inch or so from his head; nor the hissing splashes of overwrought cookery that echoed continually from the stove behind him; nor yet the slow-creeping sun that ever glowed stealthily, silently, up his form, as if, like some enchanting monster of dim, childish days, it sought to surround him with its golden web while yet he dreamed. . . . No movement made he, unless it were a gentle tremble of the lips, an involuntary murmur—the habit of a lonely man.

* * * * *

Away astern, under the poop, a door opened suddenly with a grinding creak, and a woman in a coarse grey gown stepped hurriedly out, banging
the door to behind her.

She thus accomplished her entry upon the quiet decks, only a yard or so distant from that gentle spot of shade where swung the grunting hammock, and, by the clatter of the closing door, roused a corresponding commotion in that airy peace, which, taking as its initiatory form a prodigious heave, ended, with no little measure of completeness, in the sudden upshooting from its upper end of an unsettled human head.

“Heaven help ye, woman!” cried this apparition, in a breathless torrent of invective, as the timid disturber of its peace sped hurriedly out along the blinding deck. “Hae maircy on the doors—they be but tinder like ourselves, the blessed morn... . . Hi!” he quickened, starting half upright in his hammock with a cry of surprised recognition, “so it's you, ye mad limmer! Come ye here, come ye here immediate! Yon's no demeanour for the Sabbath quarter-deck!”

The woman turned with an impatient twitch of her shoulders—the more emphatic, perhaps, that there was a suspicion of mirth in the gentleman's reproof—and came slowly and sulkily back towards the hammock. She seemed, on closer scrutiny, to be a small, neat, insignificant person, boasting as her most distinctive feature a loose-bound mass of brownish hair, and wearing a quaint, sly look in her pretty wild eyes. There was little about her to rouse, much less to attract, the smallest measure of curiosity.

“Closer, huzzie, closer!” spluttered the gentleman, as she paused a few yards forward of the hammock, and stood peeping up at him with a mingling of coquetry and appeal. Then, suddenly reaching out a huge red hand, he caught her neatly by the chin and drew her thus beside him.

“And where might ye be bound sae fast, mistress?” he inquired in low, growling tones, scrutinising her face closely with his little fierce eyes.

“To the galley, Doctor,” said the woman, timidly, and with a little nervous laugh: looking anywhere but in her questioner's face the while. “For soup for Miss Katey,” she added, hastily, holding up the small jug she carried, as if dreading the insinuation of some other motive.

“Fa' soop fa' Miss Ketty,” echoed the gentleman, slowly, with a whimsical attempt at imitation. And then, as if pleased with the lilt of the words, he repeated them again, the while shifting his little eyes backwards and forwards from the deck to her face, with a great show of shrewd penetration. “Fa' soop fa' Miss Ketty... . . Dear, dear, how the child sops up the liquid, to be sure!”

“Lass,” he said again, presently, releasing her chin and giving her a chuck beneath it—and there lay a certain awkwardness in the action and a certain deadness in the speech that savoured strongly of premeditation—“lass, ye're anither woman since that bit physic; ye're face'll no' be sae'
wish-washy... an'—an' tell me, now—"

“Oh, sir! I'm quite well again,” broke in the woman, sidling off impatiently, “indeed I am!”

“That's bonny!” cried the Doctor, with a rather overdone show of enthusiasm, “that's bonny, now! An' see ye here, lass,” he continued, beckoning her back to him confidingly, and leaning out towards her, to a precarious distance from his hammock, in the process, “there'll be queer tales for the hearin' 'tween here an' the galley— there'll be something for a body to pick up, maybe, 'tween here and yon wee white housie!”

With this dark and enigmatical suggestion the gentleman paused, and for a space the hammock shook and quivered beneath him as though momentarily inflicted with some deadly internal disorder.

“I repeat,” he resumed, jerkily, when these questionable symptoms had partially subsided, “ye'll likely ha'e a better chance than maist o' finding oot who o' them's awa' to 'us death, and who's fattening like a Christmas goose, amang they seick bodies we've loosed aboot the decks. Ye'll maybe hear tell o' some ither misguided gowk besides ye'sel', gangin' moaning and mooning aboot, hiding his seicknesses and bottling up his sorrows, for fear we should be helpin' him to prolong a useless existence—ye'll maybe hear tell o' such, I say.”

Again the speaker hesitated, watching the woman attentively as though in expectation of some word or sign from her. But she remained quite silent, a few yards from him, her eyes bent upon the deck, and the jug swinging impatiently in her hand.

“Ef,” continued the Doctor, presently, leaning recklessly out of his hammock with the air of a gambler about to hazard his all, “ef by chance ye should hear tell o', or cast eyes on, s'uch a pairson, ye'll be doing baith him and ye'sel' a service by passin' on the word to auld M'Bride. Eh, lass?”

The woman was still standing in the same place, and her eyes were still bent demurely upon the deck. And although it was a visible and apparently felicitous circumstance to the still quaking Doctor that even the minute particle of colour usual to the ‘wench’ was wanting, and that her small passionate bosom had quite suddenly taken to itself a periodic and convulsive heave, yet he failed to note one other rather portentous change in her demeanour—the flash of desperate cunning which had found a sudden abiding-place beneath the drooping eyelids.

“There's 'Dismal Jim,’” she said at last, in a low voice.

The Doctor fell back into his hammock at the words with a little gasp; remaining lost, yet visibly quivering in the depths for a considerable period. And when eventually he appeared into view again, there hung about him—that is to say, about his hair and beard, and general
expression—the constrained air usually associated with persons rescued from suffocation at the last conceivable moment.

“And what's the matter wi' 'Dismal Jim'?” cried he, boisterously.

“Oh, sir!” said the woman, with a genuine concern in her voice and great wild eyes, “he's so thin and ill, and strange and miserable. He mutters to himself all day at his work, and sits dreaming and mumbling in the galley doorway all his spare moments. And then he seldom speaks to anyone; and when he does, it is only to ask some queer, mad question. . . . He asked me yesterday. . . . as he was stirring at the soup”— and here the speaker's eyelids drooped again over the sly and cunning gleam—“if—if I thought a fisherman's life would be a hard one. . . . He said they talked of making him a fisherman out there——”

‘A'weel, mistress,” broke in the Doctor confidingly, “there's a method in 'us madness. Jim's a guid lad—a guid hard-working lad. And it's like he'll hev' 'us cot in the feshin'-settlement, an' 'us place in the boats, and a'. . . . E—eh,” he continued, nodding his head over a long, meditative breath, “there's a muckle heap o' refuse shipped oot yonder; and ef there's anything found among it wi' the glint o' honesty still adherin', eit's a moral cairtainty that ut'll no be left to rot to the level o'us madness. Jim's a guid lad—a guid hard-working lad. And it's like he'll hev' 'us cot in the feshin'-settlement, an' 'us place in the boats, and a'. . . . E—eh,” he continued, nodding his head over a long, meditative breath, “there's a muckle heap o' refuse shipped oot yonder; and ef there's anything found among it wi' the glint o' honesty still adherin', eit's a moral cairtainty that ut'll no be left to rot to the level o' the whole heap.”

“Ye might do wour' ye'sel', lass,” he added, coming suddenly down on the woman with twinkling, triumphant eyes, “ye might do wour' ye'sel' than follow a wee handier i' the foot-marks o' 'Dismal Jim.' ”

At this the woman put one hand upon the bulwarks beside her, and turned away towards the bow with the action of a bashful girl, while the good Doctor lay back in his hammock, and shook and quaked at the sight with a barely suppressed hilarity.

Perhaps it was unfortunate that the jolly-minded gentleman did not catch a glimpse of the reverse side of the picture. The half-turned, shyly-stoop ing back, the slender grey-clad arm grasping the bulwarks on the one side, the dangling loose-hanging jug on the other; the bent, restless head with its passing glimpse of pale and twitching cheek—these were the elements of a graceful tableau that might, without stretch of imagination, have borne the inscription: “The old, old story”; and been relegated to the tender mercies of some summer artist to be immortalised or merely receive a fresh coat of paint, as the case might turn;—these were materials more than sufficient to
set an elderly gentleman of genial temperament chuckling and groping in
the sunshine of a younger age;—these, in brief, were an agreeable break in
the monotony of a tropical morning.

But. . . . of the under side of the stone, the reverse of the coin—the side
elderly gentlemen are apt to overlook in their superior knowledge of
values—the side that bears the date and worth. . . . it was unfortunate in the
Doctor that he omitted to observe that side.

Yet how dark and diseased with pale cynicisms and deductions would
that imagination need to have been, which could have suggested even a
portion of the truth! What manner of mind were his who could have given
it even as a fantastic possibility, that that slim, grey arm reposing so lightly
and gracefully there upon the bulwarks, was quivering and bending
spasmodically under the weight of a half-swooning woman— that that pale
and coquettish glimpse of cheek was part and portion of a face all drawn
and white, and wild with a mingled cunning and dread—that within that
bashfully bent head there drummed, and rang, and tingled a pitiless scheme
of betrayal and wrong!

As the occasion turned, however, no one came forward to disturb the
serenity of the good Doctor's feelings with any such suggestion; so that he
was merely constrained to shout down at the woman in a jolly, choking
voice, as one might say “I wish ye luck,”—to be gone about her ‘soop’;
and to lie thereafter drowsily chuckling at the flies as they hung, buzzing
and flopping, under the flat of the overhanging poop above him, or grimly
nodding his bushy head in time to the dragging and irregular footsteps of
the sentry overhead.

It was while thus seasonably engaged that the jollyminded gentleman
was, on a sudden, considerably startled by the sound of a voice—peculiar
for a drawl of incredible laziness—presumably addressing him from some
immediate though invisible vicinity.

“What have you been saying to the ‘sinner,’ ancient sluggard?” it asked,
with a companionable familiarity. “Eh! what have you been scolding the
‘sinner’ about, sluggard? Answer me! or—or, bus't me if I don't drop
something on you!”

There was enough of serious intention in the words to summon the
Doctor's face to a level with the hammock-brim; and to set it peeping
nervously around it in some little apprehension as to the threatened
onslaught. But, though he craned himself to within several nominal
measures of overturn—and created quite an undesirable warmth in the
process—nothing could he discover worthy of attachment to the voice, till,
attracted thither by the sound of a lazy chuckle, he leaned out from under
the poop as far as personal safety would permit, and threw up a harassed
gaze in the direction of the poop-railing.

“Scolding!” he snapped, addressing, with a relieved irritation, the fat, drowsy face of the officer on watch (who, leaning in a comfortable position over the railings, regarded the speaker with a broad and sleepy grin). “Ah'm not scolding, ye loon—ah'm—ah'm——” And he began an anticipatory chuckle.

“What d'you doing?” inquired the officer, with a praiseworthy effort.

“Ah'm—ah'm——Oh! man, ut's glorious!” cried the Doctor, breaking out into a fit of irresponsible chuckling at the thought.

“I might wound you, were I to offer any further suggestion,” blandly hazarded the other, doubtless by way of a stimulant.

“Man!” gasped the Doctor, in a mirthful screech, “ah'm match-mekkin'!” And he fell back into his hammock in a convulsion of merriment.

“What's that?” murmured the officer presently from above, smiling sympathetically.

The Doctor slowly drew himself up to his former hazardous position, and bent upon his questioner a look of pity.

“Hae ye a mither?” inquired he, faintly.

“N—o,” hesitated the other, as if he were doubtful on the point.

“Or a maiden-aunt?”—with irritation.

“N—o.”

“Hae ye any women-folk?”—fiercely.

“N—o.”

“Do ye happen to possess anything in particular besides an ower-complement o' sloth?” inquired the gentleman, tartly.

The fat officer smiled a wintry smile.

“I'm a lonely, unprotected bird,” he murmured sadly, drawing the back of a fat hand across his eyes in an affecting manner, and gazing at it contemplatively afterwards as if to make sure of the state of his feelings.

“I'm a lonely, unprotected bird,” he repeated, brokenly; “and I'm sure—oh, generous-hearted Northener!—you would not bruise my feelings wantonly.”

“Larkin,” said the Doctor, with a withering look, “eit's a pity ye canna cultivate a serious side—ut's a vera useful thing to hev' aboot ye—besides bein' a source of congratulation te' ye're friends.” And having so delivered himself, the angry gentleman sought consolation—with what seemed a rather unpremeditated abruptness—in the ever-ready depths.

For a while the fat officer—leaning above—seemed content with his lonely reflections, looking about him and whistling softly with the same inward smile. Then suddenly, with a slow twisting motion to his mouth as if he were chewing something he disliked the taste of, he craned down over
the railing, and again addressed him.

“Below there!” he called, in an alluring drawl; “a question with you, noble chieftain!”

“Oh! let a body be, will ye!” groaned a voice from below, in muffled tones of irritation.

“It's about the 'parties,’ laird,” said the officer, smiling sleepily; “who are the parties, laird?”

The somewhat dishevelled form of the Doctor rose majestically from the hammock and confronted its questioner curiously.

“What pairties?” it said, with some asperity.

“My Highland laddie sleeps!” replied the smiling officer. “Did he not hint of merry doings—burials, births, bells, or something such?”

The other paused in his descent, and a light broke slowly across his hairy features. The next moment he had slithered, shouting and chuckling, into the depths.

“Eit's fair divertin',” he would cry between the laughs. “Man alive! eit's fair divertin'.”

“And the parties?” suggested a sleepy murmur from above.

“Aweel, ah couldna' juist tell ye that much,” cried the Doctor, springing up hastily. “Ut's a wee sacred, ye ken. There'll juist be twa puir convict-bodies deein' for love o' one anither, an' afraid to spek' the word. . . . An', lad, auld Sam M'Bride 'll juist be doin' the spekkin!”

The grin died slowly out of the fat features of the officer, and his face took a thoughtful turn.

“Did you ever hear,” he said presently, “of the gentleman who, being hard put to it for a little excitement, loaded his fowling-piece and took to balancing it, barrel-downwards, on the end of his nose?”

“Eh, eit's a world o' pities, Larkin,” returned the Doctor, a little lamely this time, “eit's a world o' pities that ye canna cultivate a serious side.”
Scene II.—‘Faces.’

“... or puoi la quantitate
Comprender dell' amor ch' a te mi scalda,
Quando dismento nostra vanitate,
Trattando l'ombre come cosa salda.”

—DANTE, Pur., can. xxi.

As for the shivering woman by the bulwarks, she had roused herself with a bewildered start, at the Doctor's bidding, as though from a species of lethargy; and moved off weakly over the deck—a vague, sick fear in her flitting eyes—towards the open after-gateway of the pen. There, turning hastily into the bare, sail-shadowed enclosure (deserted now of anything more cruel or harmful than the yellow fury of the morning; and only the glimmering point of a bayonet peeping over the mainhatch to waken a thought of the sinister truth beneath), she wavered forward across it; her eyes casting-back in anxious watch upon the poop, her steps tottering and uncertain; yet never ceasing to reason with herself, with pettish word and gesture, upon some deep-laid, restless trouble that possessed her. “Desperate and dangerous—desperate and dangerous!” she would cry over to herself, again and yet again. “Marked so for life, they say. Aye, they who marked him say it! Therefore, what hope—what hope but this——?”... “Ah,” she would mutter, with a sudden, wild irritation, “he asks me to throw in my soul—a woman's delicate soul —as ye would block a wheel with a stone! I do a good action; the only one I can claim—I win a soft thing to me in pity; it was never done in pity before. Now I must break it—the soft thing I've won. . . . And I fear it—I fear it; for all it is so frail!”

Muttering and mumbling much after this manner, she reached at length the forward end of the enclosure; and, passing through the forward gateway, crept round beside the fore-mast to the port side of the galley. Here, by the open doorway, she stopped uncertainly and seemed to listen.

A quiet whispering as of cookery filtered drowsily through the doorway; and this, with the patch of shade that lay in the hollow of the wall, and the glimmering column of smoke that floated lazily up from the roof, threw a dreamy shadow of comfort over the little white house that had not been vouchsafed to other portions of the ship. With her fears or hesitations reassured, perhaps by this very quietude, the woman presently bowed herself, there in the shade of the wall, and thrust her eager, white face...
round the doorpost.

It was oppressively warm within. Upon a long, low stove, running the whole length of the forward side of the building, something was simmering comfortably. A little, greyish-haired man was the only occupant; and he sat in the opposite doorway—gazing seaward—with his chin resting upon his hand.

For a space the woman probed the shadows of the place with doubting eyes, as though fearful of other company besides that of the man in the doorway, but in a further while, having apparently satisfied herself that she was unobserved, and likely to remain so, she dropped upon the motionless dreamer a gaze of a peculiar raptness, across which, as gust follows gust across a darkening pool, there swept a series of dim, quick-changing expressions, now faintly contemptuous, now darkly critical, now nervously hostile, half-hidden under each of which there seemed to strive a gentle, but persistent, wave of reverence.

So, for quite a lengthy while, she stood observing him there from her vantage-point behind the doorpost, many and varied thoughts infusing a glaring absorption into her look that would surely have startled the dreamer had he found occasion to turn. But at length, seeming to tire a little, she fell to dropping her gaze hither and thither like a restless child, and presently, with a weary stretch of her arms, and a little shuddering sigh—for the place was thick with dreams and drowsiness—stepped softly inside.

Still hesitating near the threshold, she allowed rather than forced her gaze to drop about aimlessly among the scattered and untidy furniture of the cabin. Here it would hover for a moment, with a mingling of pity and impatience, upon a hopeless jumble of cooking utensils; here again upon an overturned sack of potatoes; here upon a half-empty bottle, wallowing helplessly to and fro to the faint motion of the vessel, and drop by drop disgorging its dark, vinegar-like contents as it rolled. Among many such signs of debility, her swift glance wandered, and always, it seemed, with a growing impatience, until a suitable climax in the form of a splashing hiss from the feverish kettle, along with an implied threat from that vessel to continue the same with rapidly narrowing intervals, if something were not speedily forth-coming to allay its pain, sent her quietly creeping among them; collecting pots and pans, re-stowing potatoes, shaking out dusters, re-stacking dishes, wiping side-tables, and generally reforming the galley with her deft woman’s touch.

She went about it in quick silent rushes, watching the dreamer out of the corner of her eye the while, with the nervous, half-gleeful secrecy of an excitable child. Yet there were times when there hung a suspicion about it all, of things thrust here and things dropped there, with something more
than necessary fervour.

In a brief, smooth while, barely sufficient indeed for the proverbial wave of the god-mother's wand, the galley was smiling with conscious neatness, like a child fresh from the basin. The cooking utensils dangled piously, each from its respective nail; the potato-sack leaned like some portly old gentleman—in a posture somewhat suggestive of inebriation—against the wall; the dribbling bottle had ceased to wallow, and the kettle, now loftily oblivious to such passing trivialities as internal pains, was mumbling distressing things to itself about its fellow-vessels in a scandalous but peace-giving undertone—in a flash the galley stood reformed, and the good fairy with a homely soft-spoken ‘there’ (falling weirdly dissonant on the tail of her recent passion), rested breathless, in the midst of her reforms, and smiled about her.

. . . . But now that she rested, that self-effacing absorption in her task, which, arising doubtless out of its congeniality, had seemed for the while to push her sorrows into the background, began to fall from about her, swiftly, yet with reluctance, like a clinging garment, reinstating, as it were, piece by piece, her former pensiveness and dejection. And it was with a weary droop to her shoulders, and the smile quite gone from her lips, that she presently made back to the doorstep, where, shimmering in a sleepy sunbeam, her little soup-jug stood.

Here in the doorway she turned, sharply, as if in obedience to some sudden whim or fancy, and rested her eyes, with something of a gentle expression, upon the still dreaming convict. And then, as she hung thus—rapt and gentle and motionless—there stole suddenly into her look a slow-spreading gleam of pain, which brought her thin hands, clutching, to her face as though the feel of it were agony, and sent her staggering weakly out into the blaze, to sink down, bowed and pale and listless, by the doorstep.

“Oh, Ben, Ben!” she crooned to herself, in a tone betwixt passion and wretchedness. “What wonderful thing is this ye've done for me, that I should give so much—give ye all—in return? Aye, all! for when this is done there can be little left to mourn over. . . . unless it be his heart, for that must break, poor dismal, dreary thing!

“God knows, when I had their lies for a consolation; when he seemed the thing they named him; when I'd see him crouched there in his corner, feigning his pious mask, muttering his prayers, edging apart with a loathing look from poor Ben and the others, to show he was none of them: poor thieves and swindlers! He! a sloucher in dark alleys! a beast of sudden rushes! a deadly doer of silent work! Yes! God could tell how he paid me for bating the timid thing—God knows how he paid me for that. . . . And here there's no consolation; here there's no lie!
“How simple and easy it sounds,” she continued, sadly, “this bettering yourself. How you sit in the dusk, and reason, and harden your heart, and promise yourself you will wake and dream no more. While all the time they are clinging and throbbing about you—the old lies and the old scenes, and presently you forget. . . . Yes, Ben, I might have bettered myself with the help of the child, and never looked softly into your face again. But, ah, it was easier to creep along by the pen and whisper a word or two. It was easy too, for your sake, to creep on a little further, and madden the hunted thing, till he'd shiver and shrink as he heard my scratch on the woodwork, and whisper his timid prayers through the cracks for a little rest in the game—he was weak and ill, he said. . . . No—no!” shuddered the woman, crouching suddenly back against the galley as if in appeal. “I—I broke his spirit for you. I can't break his heart too—I can't—I can't!”

And then as she wavered thus, half-in and half-out of the shadow, something white fell fluttering from her bosom, and lit softly near her feet. Her hand had shot out and grasped it almost before it reached the deck; yet even when the trembling fingers had fast closed around it, she did not immediately restore it to its former hiding-place; but, holding it where she had grasped it, peered hither and thither about the silent decks, with panting bosom and frightened eyes.

Very shortly, however, the motionless and universal quiet seemed to reassure her, for her furtive flutterings calmed a little. And presently, drawing in her hand, she proceeded, with elaborate caution and secrecy, to unfold and flatten upon her lap a tiny scrap of paper.

It was an oblong scrap, very much creased and thumb-marked; and as it became smoother under her careful touch, so there stood out the more clearly—running obliquely across it from corner to corner—a faint, irregular pencil-line; to which, every here and there, a few neatly-written words had been appended, giving it the appearance of a mapped coast-line.

“It came as a sign!” cried the woman, poring over it, rapt and awed.

“Here you sail away, calling here, and here, and here. Here you must hug well inside the reefs. Here you must watch for the gusts; for the bluffs are ‘devilish draughty.’ Here there's no sign of an anchorage till you get within half a mile, besides something else about ‘lee-tides.’ Here fish will rise to red cloth, if you're patient. Here you must hurry, or the blacks will foul the wells. Why, it's as clear as a yacht cruise—a pleasure-trip. . . . And I, dreaming here!” she whispered, starting half-upright in the sudden wave of her fancy,—“I whining here with him marked ‘Dangerous,’ and twenty black scores to his credit! There's only the one thing wanting. . . . And that”—she shivered and glanced over her shoulder towards the galley door, with a sudden compressing of her thin lips—“and that is there. . . .
for the asking!"

Rising hurriedly with the thought still hot within her, she stepped once more into the shadowy quiet of the galley.

Her face took a paler tinge as she crept softly over to the dreamer and placed a hand upon his shoulder; and her thin voice trembled under its gaiety as she cried in a wondering quaver: “What ails ye, Jim?”

As for the man, he neither moved nor spoke at the sound of the words, but dreamed on across the ocean as though he had not heard.


“Hush!” murmured the man at last, without moving, in dreamily anxious tones—as though mistily conscious, from the shadowy land of his fancy, of some disturbing element in the material world beneath him—“hush! Let me be—let me be, a while. . . . Would ye destroy it all in a moment—in a flash? It has taken hours to build . . . hours and hours!”

The woman laughed a soft, nervous laugh at his words, and bent down closer to him in a listening attitude.

“See!” he continued in a bated whisper, catching with a quiet abruptness at the hand that lay on his shoulder, and drawing her down close beside him; looking over the sea the while, with his eyes still full of dreams. “See how the fire-light dances in her poor, mad face; and watch her wandering eyes, how like a dog's they are, as they follow the leaping shadows back and forward over the wall. . . . that was always her way.”

A look of pain swept the woman's face as she listened, and she made as if to draw back from the dreamer; but his hand still held her to him with a tightening grip.

“Won't ye watch with me—how the grey fear grows in her face when the fire-light sinks a little, and the grim, black shadows creep, fluttering and bobbing, nearer—nearer—nearer—to her great oak chair. . . . Aye, and see! With a quick, deft thrust of the poker, a blaze shoots up from the ashes—gleams through the room like a lightning flash—gleams in her poor, silly face, till her pitiful eyes are jewels, and her mouth's a'tremble with smiles—gleams on across the walls, till it's only the far, cold corners that choke with their huddling shadows... . . . Aye, aye,” he added, with a sudden drop in his voice, “the poor, old nights!”

A light had crept into his eyes, and a dreamy enthusiasm into his voice, as his memory-picture blossomed and took shape before him; though, as is the way with such flimsy, fantastic growths, it seemed to ripen only to fade. In a little space he was groping back, blindly, in his former gloom, and the brightening look was a fitful gleam, and the growing voice an almost inaudible murmur, as he continued.
“On the moor-edge in the evening; lying and thinking, half-hid in the summer heather, and breathing the summer smells. . . . What a time to seize a man—as ye might seize a straying calf—and tie his legs with bits of parcel string, and his hands with a filthy neck-cloth!

“Sam Anderson—Sydenham—Howe, and the others; —ne'er-do-weels—poachers—cowardly swine! I sometimes remember ye in my prayers—low-spoken, earnest prayers, they be.

“‘Wisp—wisp—wisp,’ they come hurrying past through the heather. ‘What!’ cries one, pulling short in surprise, 'ain't heard of sour Jim Dust, the school-teacher! Him that lives, lone, away here on the moors with his old, mad mother! Him that bears the Manor a grudge for turning him off the Lowlands! Him that's been heard speaking ill 'gainst Squire by as many of us as needful! Why, there's few as would trouble to whisper: Who'd ha' thought! He's the kind that would pay off a grudge with a trick like that. There's few that cares to give him a good-day. Even parson don't visit with him —being scared of the old witch-mother and the lonely place, they say. Why, he's made to get us out of this! He's been ripening for us to pick this many a day——'

“. . . . And I'm up and on them, mad and shouting: ‘Ripening for you and yours, Sam Anderson! You mean rotting surely.’ . . . And they fling me down on the heather, and truss me up like a calf.

“So it's slinking down over the moor, and round by the ‘Beacon,’ and over the old coach road—with a feebly-struggling, feebly-cursing burden—till, with rushing breath, and scared side-glancing, we pass near the gate in the moonlight. And I must start dragging and beseeching a bit as the glint of the fire catches my eyes, and the sharp ‘jerk—jerk’ of the kitchen clock comes halting away down the path, to die out behind us, lonely and chill. ‘Let me go in—let me go in. She'll be wondering a bit, maybe.’

“They pause, all chokes and whispers, there by the gate. What's to fear in the house, or the man! Such a wee slip of a chap—thin as a weasel; feel his arms! Witch? Devil's tricks? You're moon-struck, John! What's to hurt in the tricks of a ginned stoat! There's five of us, and good for as many devils! Hold him fast and give him a peep at her—likely his last. . . . 'Sides, we shall see what's there—inside!

“I can feel the great brutes sweat and tremble as we move up the path through the moon-shadows. I can feel their breath brush quick past my cheek, as they peer over my shoulder into the ‘home.’

“It's chill enough. A fire glints bright in the grate; flushing out a glow over the hearth, and hiding the walls in a formless jumble of shadow. She sits alone in her chair, 'times leaning over the blaze, 'times crooning softly.
The leaping light caresses her hair and face like a reverent hand—poor
gentle old face, wondering—wondering—like the face of a sickly child.

“I'm praying they miss her words, as they come quavering over to us
through the silence. I'm praying they overlook those round-faced, waxen
things, over which she bends so tenderly. . . . But what are prayers!

“‘Blest,’ says one, with a cluck in his throat, ‘blest if she ain't foolin’
dollies!’

“Well! Is the sight of a child doting over bits of wax such a marvel, that
ye need stare and strain so? Do ye find them so damned uncanny then—her
meaningless, quavering tales? Tales like idle-struck chords, dying out, one
upon another, in silly-sounding jumble! Have ye never watched a lonely
child, how it knots up a piece of cloth and calls it ‘dear,’ or fondles a bit of
stick and calls it ‘sweet,’ that this one should come so odd to ye? Don't say
it's the grey hair and wrinkled face that makes ye grin and nudge each other
behind me?

“. . . . Ah, there they strain in the doorway, staring into my heart, and the
secret it has hid so long and well, with the same gaping greed their like had
shown at any other monstrosity show. And sighting only a skeleton with
their rude and animal gaze, where a mote of reverence might have found
the angel.

“God forgive me—I'm half ashamed as I whisper, ‘Mother, can ye leave
the children a moment?’ . . . Round she turns, with a puzzled smile. ‘Jim!’
says she, all agaze, ‘leave the children!’ And the smile dies out of her face.
‘Ah—ah, no!’ And she stoops and fondles her ‘dears,’ looking back at me
half-afraid.

“Someone sniggers loudly behind me. Someone else says low and
meaningly, ‘Doan't 'e laugh at her!’ And she turns again at the sound, and
fixes us all unseeingly. So there we hang; watching each other like bats
'mongst the shadows; and each man waiting for his neighbour to speak out
and end it. But the clock alone tells its drowsy tale from its dreary corner.

“Fear, and shadow, and silence are no friends to patience. They grow
restless, they have no time to waste, they must be going. No—I might go
no nearer. I must say my say from the door, and say it ‘quick’!

“I see her poor eyes watching us round the chair-back—I make a wild
spring towards her, but they have me fast. ‘Mother—my old mother! I'm
leaving ye for a while! I shall not see ye to-morrow—for days, maybe! Ah!
try and understand—for days; alone for days!’

“Ah, how she struggles to understand, the poor old grey-haired child!
How vacantly come the lines and wrinkles; how bewilderedly she croons
and mumbles! ‘Jim. . . . Jim, they do not love ye, Jim! Don't ye believe
them. . . . I've watched and waited for ye, many an evening; and caught
them darting and shivering and hiding as you came through the door. . . .

Don't—don't let them creep and cling about ye so!

“‘Ah, if they were only shadows, mother.’

“‘Why do ye stare so wild at me, dear? They'll go if ye stir the embers a bit. I've watched them night by night. . . . Give it a stir, Jim, they're more fearful of you than us—they creep about us, when you're gone.’

“‘Come away, mates!’ clips in a hoarse voice; and they begin to drag at me, sore. But my heart is full of a sickening fear; and I struggle a little there in the doorway.

“. . . . Did they have me at last? Did they force me, limb by limb, through the doorway? And did I clutch at the lintels as I passed, and so staying my progress and theirs for a flash, get a glimpse behind me at the old home? It may be so.”

Here the dreamer paused a space, running his eyes along the horizon in dreary endeavour to pick up the thread of his narrative, which, in some unaccountable manner, seemed suddenly to have fallen a'fog in his mind, or suddenly to have left him. “But she was kneeling over the grate,” he continued at last, in a voice just above a whisper, “and stirring the embers a bit . . . . and I could not see her face.”

He shook himself almost fiercely as the last words fell from his lips, and the dreams died quickly out of his face. Lifting his disengaged hand he began to rub his eyes like a person sharp-roused from sleep; and then, clasping the door-post beside him, made as if to lift himself to his feet, when something in the posture or rigidity of his occupied hand seemed suddenly to strike him.

For quite a minute he hung in dazed and helpless suspension over the small, white-knuckled fist he there discovered himself to be clutching. Twice in that time he removed his eyes, rubbed them frantically, and took another look; but no amount of eye-rubbing served to make it any the less solid or any the more explicable. A while later he made the further curious discovery that something in the way of an arm was attached to the fist, and, led on indefinitely by this latter find, deemed it expedient to prolong his investigation round the doorpost and into the shadow-hung galley, where he came suddenly upon an unexpected something that sent him starting back as if he had been struck or stung.

“You!” he cried, throwing the hand from him, roughly. “You! God forbid that I should tell all this to you! God forbid! Oh, God forbid!” Whereat he dropped into his old position with his elbows upon his knees, and began running his fingers slowly back and forward through his stubbly hair in a kind of dismal frenzy.

“And why not me?” questioned the woman's voice in half-pettish, half-
plaintive tones from just within the doorway; and then, as if to counteract a
certain lilt of earnestness evident in the words, there was added, with a
queer abruptness—“you sentimental ship's-cook!”

The man blazed round upon her, slowly.

“Yours must be a low ebb, woman,” he cried, trembling, “to produce a
laugh like that—aye! and a laugh with misery under it; for I'm not so blind!
Have ye no better memories, no better thoughts of your own, that ye hold
mine at so little value? Are yours all so bitter, then? Have ye nothing—if
it's only a dry, dead weed, or an old song—that ye come across now and
again, and drop the cold mask from your face lor?”

“Didn't I say you were sentimental?” came the voice, with a little shrill
laugh.

“Woman—woman!” he cried, whisking round seawards again with an
angry glow in his eyes. “Strange things I have heard of ye—strange things
have I seen ye do. . . . yet you didn't seem one to come tiptoeing in on a
man, with a smirk on your lips, for his secrets!”

“Nor did I,” burst in the other with a jerky indignation. “Best gather your
wits before ye speak. . . . you—you held me!”

“I held ye?” (A moment of silence followed the ejaculation, while the
man stroked his forehead in a kind of mental haze—screwing up his eyes
and muttering, like one grasping mistily at some dim-looming recollection.) “I held ye?” he breathed, again. “Was it you, then? It was a
woman with frightened eyes, I thought—frightened eyes, with a touch of
kindness somewhere. Ah, lass, it wasn't you! . . . It was just what I would
have ye be—it was just what I sometimes fool myself into thinking that
you are.”

“So you do that sometimes—low ebb and all!” sneered the woman, in a
shrill quaver.

Something in the tone of the words seemed to strike strange upon the
man; for he raised his head sharply, with wonder in his looks, and listened
a moment. The next, he was leaning back into the galley with his head
twisted round in the direction of the voice, and the wonder growing and
softening in his wizen face as he looked.

“Why, my little lass,” he said, “you're weeping!”

At this there came the rustle of a quick movement from the shadow
where the woman crouched; and, with her head hanging a little as if to hide
her face, she rose hurriedly, and slunk across the galley in the direction of
the opposite doorway. While at the taking of almost every alternate step,
she would shake her head in sob-dumb vehemence and fling out something
under her twitching breath; which took, now the semblance of a frantic
negative, and now that of a half-scared struggling against some seeming
fate—as one might cry, “I can't— I can't!”

In the luminous frame of the opposite doorway she paused; and then rounded suddenly upon the spellbound convict with eyes full of passion and tears.

“Oh, I can see you!” she cried unsteadily, and with a mighty contempt in her voice, “thinking there to yourself—pruning yourself maybe—that a word of yours has done it. Ha! your words are laughter, fool, not tears!” and, at that, she hid her face in her hands and fell to more passionate weeping.

Perhaps her eyes were blinded a little, perhaps she had no care to look;—but far from evidencing any pretension to pride of rhetoric, the weather-beaten features of the convict seemed to indicate a trend of feeling, verging rather towards self-pity than self-exaggeration of even the most unpretentious kind. As he sat shifting there on his stool in the sunlight—throwing up periodic, but guarded, glances in the woman's direction—his slow-moving eyes contained a soft, shy wistfulness, that was more than half-suggestive of a scolded child. Now—as her sobbing rose the more painful on the ear—he would fetch a slow breath through his teeth like a man in pain, or run his lank fingers in distraction through his hair; now catch involuntarily at the door-post by his side, and half-raise himself from his seat—only to fall back again with a helpless glare in his eyes, and a maddened, mumbled protest. . . . It seemed that her passion hurt him, so that he could neither rest nor be still beneath it.

His weeping companion—rent and unmanned as she was by her sorrows—was still hesitating in seeming irresolution on the doorstep, when he rose with a sudden yet slow desperation from his seat, and made over towards her with eyes very bright and hands clenched up and trembling.

“Don't!” he breathed, pausing with a great, sharp pity in his eyes, a few feet behind her. “Don't; ye'll get no good by it.”

She roused herself at the sound with a little shiver, and drew a step from him. But whether from this or that reason—for who can measure the reasoning of a woman's tears?—her sobs began to subside from that moment; and soon, but for an occasional breath-twitch, or a slow, grief-numbed movement of the hands, grew as silent and as still as her dumb, puzzled comforter behind her.

“Lord! how green you must be!” she broke out, suddenly, with a low-voiced passion that bitterly belied the humility of her carriage. “How green you must be, to gape at a few, cheap tears. . . . Why, it's only children and lawyers, fool, that have time or reason for that! Real grief? Real sorrow at the bottom of such shallow-running gush?” She laughed a soft, bitter laugh. “Have ye never heard the men comfort themselves? Women don't feel a
thing like men! And when they begin to scrape bottom, why, they don't feel at all!” And, still ignoring him with her full-turned back, she dropped her eyes on some object without the door in an unseeing state of bitter reverie.

In a little, the man moved closer to her side with a shy smile in his eyes.

“I'll just be green then, lass,” he said. “And we'll pretend you're feeling it a little.”

But the woman shook her head pettishly, like one who tries to shake back the tears, and made an involuntary movement nearer the doorway.

“So it's not in your heart to forgive me?” he said, with deep feeling threatening somewhere at the bottom of his dragging tones,—“not if I was dreaming—not if I was half asleep—if I hardly knew you were there, lass—if you caught me unawares?”

He turned half-wearily back to his seat, since she hardly moved and did not seem to hear, but rounded back in a moment more, with a new thought burning in his earnest face. “Don't think I don't see how it is,” he cried, giving her arm an odd, staying touch in his earnestness, as though he feared to be left with his word unsaid. “A friend—a mother—a—a husband maybe, you've been trying hard to forget, to lift from your mind, to separate from your life aboard here. Oh! it's easy to see! And I, in my mad, mumbling ways, undo all your weary work... and fetch back all the old, sad thoughts. Oh, it's easy to see!”

“Aye, easy!” she muttered, from a drooping dream in the doorway, “easy as dreams, Jim!”

At this he watched her curiously for a space, seeming to find as deep an enigma in her words as lay in the countless shadowings of the rust-gold hair that drew and held his eyes. But in a further while—summing her up in his breath, with a sighing something like 'weary-wild’—he would have moved once more to his stool in the other doorway, had she not suddenly swung and caught him by the sleeve, with a light in her eyes and a heave to her breast, that stayed him staring.

“Jim,” she cried, breathlessly, eyeing him with a pale, sad smile, “we'll dream ourselves crazy yet, you and I!”

Apparently the little, sad man was as unused to woman's touch as he had a few moments previously proved himself to be to her tears, for a faint glow tinged his quiet face as he felt her hand on his arm. Nevertheless, for all the tell-tale blood, he kept his brightening eyes upon her face.

“Talking of dreams,” he said, “there's one that may madden me before it's done. I see two women come to my galley, lass. And the one—she with the hard face and harder words—she talks a deal in her bitter way and lingers long. But the other—she with quiet face, and quiet helpful ways—she never comes but when I'm asleep in the doorway... Is she never
going to give me a word?”

At this the woman turned swiftly from him, and propping herself against the doorpost, leant thus looking out into the glare. She did not speak at once.

“Yes,” came the wraith of a voice at last, “she was only a dream, that second one, and only a jaded faint thing at that. . . . And oh, Jim! watch your dreams,” she cried, with drooping head and dwindling tones, “for they hurt!”

“My lass!” said the man, in simple pity.

“Right into my heart they go,” moaned she, “and tell me new names to call myself by.”

With a sigh, the man turned away towards the simmering stove. “I might have seen,” he muttered, thrusting his slow fingers through his hair in a quiet frenzy of self-disgust. “I might have known.”

But, taking into consideration the glimmer of a half-formed smile, that on the moment flared up and sank again in the woman's glistening eyes, it is likely that his words signified an even greater want of penetration than he seemed in them to claim.

Soon he was moving half-heartedly among his whispering cookery—shifting here and stirring there. But the woman lingered still in the doorway, with eyes lowered and thoughtful, and lips moving always to a low, involuntary murmur.

“. . . Odd, lonely thing!” she mused. “It’s little you know of us women! Where’s all your smoothness and confidence? It is only the woman should be shy! Why don’t you kiss me and sicken me? It would make it so much the easier! What made you think of ‘lass’? It’s a purer sound! Why, you’re not even what we call—manly—there’s quite a clean look in your eyes!”

And then, again, after a little silence:

“. . . Odd lonely thing! Why treat me as if I was above ye—as if a woman was something above a man?—Oh, yes, yes! Saints and prudes enough till we miss our own footing—‘Stones’ for the ‘erring sister’ till we find it slippery beside her. . . . And then—why then we can open our blind woman’s eyes and see through the skin of a face—then we know how it feels to lie in a sort of pit, and watch the faint circle of light far above us thin itself out to a glimmer; and—and shiver a bit at the thought of how easy we take to the darkness.

‘Easy,’ do I say? If the thing was odd and lonely? If you’d helped the brutes to lead it a hell? If it had been innocent, or ignorant, or—good-hearted enough to respect you? Ah!” she panted, drawing down her head, with a little breathful cry. “God has cursed a poor, cold sinner with a clinging spot of kindness. Make it easier, make it easier!”
The man lifted his head from his cooking, with knitted brows, at the cry; and presently leaving the stove, he came and stood over her—silently questioning.

“Why do you come?” she burst out irritably, flashing half-round at him. “Why do you come?”

He hesitated, still quietly regarding her, before he returned an answer. “Seemed as if you sobbed,” he said at length, and turned back to his work.

And then, as the woman hung watching him—her head turned back and held so, with the nervous arrestment of a listening bird—there dawned a something in her face that brightened and yet deadened it, as day pales night; while a nameless quivering like a dull, sick smile, hung thread-like from her lips.

“Good-bye, Jim,” she whispered, in a broken voice.

The convict was engaged with his cookery. He was standing by the stove with his back towards her, and with his grey head bent to some grim, pot-like vessel, the contents of which emitted a drowsy fume as he thoughtfully stirred them.

“Why, lass—are ye leaving us for the shore, then?” he asked, with a wan assumption of the jocular, and with his eyes and thoughts still to the stirring spoon.

The woman cried out something with a laugh. “Nearer than you think,” she quavered, swinging her shoulders against the doorpost. “Nearer than you dream, Jim, lad. In the future you may sleep it sound in your shady door-way—no eaves-dropping, no clumsy clatter to disturb you. . . . It's like this,” she explained, with strange, wild haste—perhaps the cessation of the stirring sound of spoon on pot, with its ‘listening’ suggestions, disturbed her—“they cry, ‘keep your own end of the ship.’ Some one else must fetch the child's milk, they say.”

There was a clatter as of metal upon metal as the woman ceased to speak. But on glancing up she saw nothing to occasion the sound. The man still stood with his back to her, and calmly and quietly stirred as before.

For a while after she had spoken, she hung there thoughtful, half-watching him with impatient lip and flitting, furtive eye, as though expectant of some word from him. And then—as ever he stirred on, slow, and thoughtful, and silent—she seemed suddenly to tire of it; and swinging round the doorpost with a shrug, gazed out, screw-eyed, over the burning sea, with such as appearance of listless abstraction as to give the idea of a complete alienation of self from surrounding. But this again was a mood of no duration; for in almost as brief a space she was back again, biting her lips and watching as before, with an impatient fire growing in her eyes.
“Oh, I know you've small cause to think kindly of me!” she burst out, at last, with a hard laugh. “But what I did, I did with a lie in my ears—you might have seen that. And what I suffered—how I paid the debt! . . . you might imagine that for yourself, and take and stir it among the other things, if it'll make the mixture sweeter to you!”

“Well, then—and now,” she quickened, with a restless movement of her shoulders, “now that my chances for evil towards you are dead and gone—now that there's a shadow less in your quiet path—would it cost you so much to turn and say you'd try and forget the worst of it; and try and remember only the best of it—such as it is?”

Again her tones dropped away into a silence prolonged and unbroken but for the monotonous grating of the spoon upon the pot. Indeed, there was little save that swing of the stirring-arm to prove the man not hewn from stone.

“For the sake of God, say something!” cried the woman, all ablaze. “Don't ye stand stirring like a dead thing! Say something; if it's only—only a curse!”

Something like a shudder shook the man at this. Slowly, sadly, like one roused reluctantly from a sorrowful dream, he lifted his eyes to hers, and then back to the mess he was stirring.

“My little lass,” he said, in a low voice—and there was that in his manner of saying it, in the gentle dignity of his pose, in the very cut and conduct of his obstinate, tufty hair, that was mournful in the extreme—“a man may be more wide-awake than he seems. A man may seem to be sunk in his dreams—and yet may be listening for a footstep. A man may strike ye as slothful—untidy; yet ye'd forgive him the bestrewing of his galley, did ye know it was just his whim to reprove a strange, sweet thing; hard otherwise to believe—aye, though day by day his ears sing wild with it—to prove to himself a friend—a friend, even here!”

He paused, stirring slowly and in silence.

“A man may sit sometimes in the shade of his doorway, and think on the long bleak prospect, and thank his God for this one kind light that comes flickering through with its warmth and its pity to keep him going. . . . And now”—he paused; and lifting his spoon full of the liquid he had been stirring, held it an inch or two over the pot, and sadly watched the great drops as they fell—“now that you say you're going. . . . Why—is there much that a man can say?”

The woman—her head bent, her hair fallen low about her face—was fiddling nervously at her fingers, in the doorway.

“Well!” she said, glancing up with a burst of wild laughter. “Is it blame of mine that ye go looking for sugar in the vinegar pot and burn your
tongue? Am I truly so gentle and nun-like to the eye? I had thought otherwise, yet you must know!"

“I know this,” he cried, slamming down his spoon and turning upon her with a bitter glow. “I know a lie when I hear it! Small talk would there be of keeping to your end of the ship, if they scented or dreamed of a harm! Aye, small talk, indeed; 'twould be acts, chains! You'd needs be sharp with your explanations, how 'twas only a woman's game, and tired soon; he was so credulous. Aye, so clownish, so tame! A dog would have done most as well—a dog will whine if you hurt it!"

“Ah! hush!” broke in the woman, sharply. “It's not that—not that!” But why did she turn away of a sudden, biting her lips and frowning out over the sea?

Lo! here was a marvel! A fastidious fiend—a woman with a low crime at her heart shrinking at the name of a pitiful, pot-house flirt!

“What is it, then?” asked the little man, softly, the glow dying at this. “What is it, lass? Tell me.”

Ah, yes, what was it? She herself might well ponder that. She had called it ‘instinct’ a week or so back when first she had straightened his place while he dreamed. ‘Instinct’ it had been ever since, whenever she sickened at the baleful plan into which the first ‘instinct’ had fallen. What name should she give it now—now that it set her clearing herself in his eyes! They hurt, those eyes. There was something deep in them that would have set a fly pruning.

Ah, God! she was thinking a horrible thing! Ben was all she had in the world—Ben was her sweet, her man! It was nothing, this fancy of voice and manner. She had smoothed away many a such with her hand—her lips. . . . Yet it was frightening sometimes, that voice! And his face—was it fancy only that his face had darkened a little, somewhere above the eyes?

Perhaps—perhaps it was true that his company had lowered him a little. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of her wee, sweet charge—the child—that had waked her to better things. But sometimes it seemed that some other and stranger hap had come to her, whereby the old, grim state of blind, untamed, uncaring recklessness had shrunk away subdued—some new, deep tone for whom the old, shrill chords had been passed over and forsaken, and through whose subtle charm—though as yet it rang but dimly, as though struck by a groping hand—a softening influence was already fallen upon the old, mad melody.

. . . . Well—well! she had chosen her road! What memories held the place for her, that she should linger, moping, there! She had bid him ‘good-bye’; and quite decently too. She had stifled quite a respectable catch in her breath—quite an obvious tremor on her lips; perhaps God could tell her
why! She had not even attempted to kiss the simpleton—though possessed of a nigh-irresistible desire to see what he would do under the circumstances. . . . besides there being that about the quaint little thing that somehow failed to fit kindly to such ridicule, just as there was a something in his presence that had a strange influence for quiet upon her system. . . .

Yes, he might drag alone along his dismal way. She would molest him no more.

And for Ben? So he was to be buried and dreamed over! This was to be the end of Ben; his day was done! Chances like this she was waiving so lightly were not to be had out yonder for the plucking and casting away. Here was a life to be dropped with a word—her life, it almost seemed; for the light of her life was dying with him, who had fashioned her thoughts for so long. . . . Nor was he the one to lie quiet for long. The day must come when he would wait no more. A wild planning: a foolhardy, ill-planned rush; then heavier chains, harder work. And thus on, to a weak sinking in the heat, to a heavy drop under a heavy load one day in the sun, with perhaps a curse where a name might have been!

. . . . Was it her fault that God had given her brains? Was it her fault that this mournful thing had been thrust in her way, forever seeking her face with its quiet, simple eyes? It needed only a hand's-stretch—a movement forward; and she had it all in her power; and the chance of Ben's liberty with it. . . . But where was the hand's-stretch—the movement forward? Was it the thought of the marriage that deterred her, the sin?—that was laughable enough, indeed! Or was it another thought—the thought of what he would do; how he would live; what would be the end of the queer, gentle thing when the trick was over and done with; and he alone, with the news of it?

Thus for quite a while—with bent head, and trembling, murmuring lips—the woman had stood musing in the open door. And all the while behind her the man had waited, very still, and patient, and hopeful, for her answer.

“Jim,” she said at last, in a very low voice—her red passion-tossed head bent close to her working fingers as though she were knitting—“I've nothing that I can tell you. . . . I—I'm not a good woman, and it's better that I shouldn't see you more. . . . So, Jim, I'm going,” she added, with a gasp, turning on him wistfully.

And presently she moved a little nearer to him, and put out her hand—a small, brown, nervous hand—for him to shake it if he cared.

As for the convict, he had observed her while she spoke with a mournful bewilderment in his look, as though lost and left lagging in the race of her quick-changing thoughts. And now that she thrust out her hand to him, he dropped his eyes from her face to that, watching it vaguely as if it were a
thing of irresponsibility, and might be credited with queer intentions.

In the end, however, becoming aware that something further was expected of him, he permitted his hand to make a vague overture in the direction of the suspended fingers. Whereupon the latter, having by this time quite exhausted whatever modicum of patience they possessed, grabbed suddenly at their diffident vis-à-vis, and shook them stiffly, as though ashamed at their own presumption; while the soft, wild face above, bent over so far even as to hide them, as if it too had a sense of their shame—bent over so far that a wisp of hair kissed the man's rough hand, and a tear fell and woke him.

And when he was wakened sufficiently the woman had gone.
Scene III.—‘The Judicious Word.’

“Come s'avvia allo spirar de'venti
Carbone in fiamma.”

—DANTE, Par., can. xvi.

IN through the starboard doorway there rose a ‘pattering’ sound like the rush of footsteps; and the convict shook himself with a slow start from that trance-like absorption in the condition of his own rough hand into which he had fallen since his little friend's ‘good-bye.’

There was something steel-like and dull in the look he raised to the doorway and thence out over the sea. And all the while he kept a tight breast-clasp on that hand of his as though it were some wounded thing in need of gentlest care.

So truly solicitous, indeed, was his regard for the safety of this, that he did not immediately resign it to its fate upon the bursting in of the white, scared woman herself; nor yet upon her panting and sobbing subsidence against the wall just within the doorway. Instead, he seemed to cling to it, if anything, the more frantically, regarding her over it the while with dull, unseeing eyes, in which a fevered gladness strove with wonderment.

Even when the first helplessness of his surprise had left him, he did not immediately move to her help. Perhaps he was casting about in his mind what best to do; perhaps he was ashamed of the gratitude he felt towards this unknown terror that was hurting her so cruelly. . . . It seemed as though the mere fact of her having sprung back into his life—like a flicker among the ashes—were as much of a miracle as he dared realise for the while.

It was later that he moved to her side and stood over her shrinking figure in a manner gently silent and full of sympathy. It was later still that concern got the better of reverence, and he fell to warily patting her shoulder, with prolonged intervals of a range-finding nature between each pat. But it was not until the wild nature of the woman's fears seemed — in the genuineness of its pain — to call for a desperate and more sustained effort on his part, that he bethought himself of stirring up in odd corners of his memory, and producing, a little the worse for wear and over-embellishment, some such startling string of weirdnesses as every successive mother, from Eve downwards, has imagined herself to be coining anew, at the rousing of her own particular maternal sympathies.

Several times the woman dragged herself close against him upon her
knees; and catching at his arms—his sleeve—his breast, strove with all her wild might to impart something to him. But though he did his utmost to meet her and understand—though he hung on her fluttering lips, and half-formed the words with his own—no speech reached him but that which cried from her eyes as the dogs cry. (And God in His mercy has shut our ears to that.)

“Try to forget about it, lass,” he would urge, “and then, maybe, it'll be easier to tell.” And though his arguments were open to question—and, at best, seemed necessitous of further elucidation—they were not without a certain soothing effect; for at such times tone goes further than meaning.

He moved away, at last, to the starboard door; seeking either for help or some solution to the enigma. But the deck beside the galley, and that glimpse of the pen to be caught through the wide-flung gates, had no tale to tell, no mystery to unfold, but the old one of sleep and peace; and he hung there, shading his eyes and wondering.

He was yet in this position, when a faint scream, followed close by a feverish murmur of voices, stuttered over the decks from somewhere aft.

The sound penetrated to his companion's ears almost as sharply as to his own. But while it struck him to a dumb, shocked marvelling, it had the stranger effect upon the woman of abruptly stilling the frenzy of her posture to one of stiff, half-joyous arrestment. Something like a quick-dawning thankfulness fluttered in her face.

“Did ye hear it?” she gasped, tiptoeing to his side with the poised forefinger, and strained, unseeing eye of one who harkens for fate's footsteps. “I—I thought him dead—he lay so still!”

“Quick!” she cried again, catching at his sleeve and leaning out beside him, with her white face peering aft. “Quick! run to the pen-gate! See—see if it be true—if he lies there, white-faced and sickly still. . . . I thought him dead, he lay so still——” The man flung out of the galley with a wondering look, and ran at a brisk trot across the deck, towards the starboard end of the barricade, where the gateway—its great clumsy doors hanging lazily open towards him—stood blistering in the sun.

As he neared the wall, a vapoury glimpse of the interior—caught through the open gate-frame—gradually unfolded and enlarged until it included the main-hatch and a scattering of figures grouped in thin circle-wise around it. A little nearer, and the hurrying convict became sensible of a certain shy restlessness, or sly, neck-straining eagerness, in the general demeanour of the group; bringing half-humorously to his mind the bearing of a parcel of children round a basket of forbidden fruit. While upon reaching the gateway itself, he brought up with a whispered cry at sight of a convict of giant form that lay, grey-faced and bloody, among them.
He had lingered there by the gate but a moment, when the group by the main-hatch parted as though violently rent asunder, and there came bounding out towards him, very hot and fussy, but with a gleeful glamour over it all, the burly form of Dr. M'Bride. The newcomer had the appearance of being too deep-sunk in his own concerns to waste a thought over such everyday furniture as little, eager-faced men that stood aside for him. But as he trundled through the gate, some detail in the convict's dress seemed to catch in his eye, whereupon he threw aside at the man a glance which, though at first remarkable for a quite insulting degree of preoccupation, flashed subsequently into the blatant glare peculiar to the gentleman, and brought him up then and there.

“Here!” he cried, shaking a denunciatory hand towards the galley, “stir ye're stumps, man Jim; an' warm us up some soop—strang, mind ye; none o' they chicken-puddles. The man's as weak as a Thames troot!” And on he went again — still boisterously beckoning up the deck.

“Much hurt?” asked the little man, hoarsely—as he trotted back behind him towards the galley.

“Ou aye—they'll ha' med a bonny mess o' him,” called the other, slackening and throwing his words over his shoulder, absentlly, “a bonny mess. . . . But ut's na fever—ut's na fever,” he added quickly, with the gleeful repetition of one reassuring himself against an ugly dream.

“Aye!” he cried, halting and turning short upon the cook, as the little man was about to re-enter the galley, “and ye may thank ye're blessed stars that ye were on'y the fairest subject for their playful banter —an' that they didna' resairve ye for the later jaulification — they've grown a deal mair saucy in the interval!”

The little cook caught suddenly at the doorpost beside him, and held there, trembling and grey, for a moment.

A glassy look—such as sleep-walkers use—had crept into his eyes; and he pressed himself back against the doorpost in a curious frenzy of fear. Some retrospective spark had kindled to the Doctor's words. Maybe the morning's drowsy brilliancy sank grey and dark under this passing wing of memory; flashing out a suggestion of faces from the shadow—a visionary rush—a grinning circle that narrowed. . . . Whatever it was—and brief as it was—it left the man all limp and horror-struck with its recollections.

“What have they done with him, Doctor?” he cried, leaning out from the door with his breath all gone, and his eyes full of scared concern: “set on him twenty to one—half killed him, maybe?”

“Na—na man,” returned the gentleman, easily, stroking his heavy beard and blinking away absently down the glimmering decks. “He's a great strappin' body—he'll do fine yet. . . . Na—na,” he repeated, still more
absently. “They'll juist ha' bin tramplin' on him a bittie, am thinkin’.

The cook here clenched his fists, and something like a curse swept through his lips; but whether at the Doctor's indifference, or at some evil creation of his own sick fancy, is difficult of decision. Certainly, he kept a hard gaze upon the Doctor; though, in a short while, even this rather doubtful indication of his feelings—as if in imitation of the other's preoccupation—relapsed and softened under a fierce-eyed reverie.

And when presently he spoke again it was in a tone so soft and absent, that it failed even to break into the Doctor's reflections, and might have been part of his own.

“I thought him dead,” he said; “he lay so still!”

And it must have been here that the unquiet vision of a swarthy, strapping prisoner, guardedly whispering with someone through a crack in the barricade, first rose and took shape in his mind. The over-emphasised languor of the lanky figure as it lounged, with crossed legs and lolling neck, against the barricade; the restless hand, presumably scratching with an idle aimlessness against the planking, obviously guarding the eager lips; the dark, heavy face glaring back ever and again over the shoulder with an almost pitiful assumption of sleepy indifference—these were all things he had seen, somewhere.

Instinctively he turned and peered behind him at the figure crouching near his feet in the shadow of the wall. She knelt with her back towards him, one hand grasping at her breast as if to still its feverish beat, the other pressing upon her half-averted cheek with a gesture suggestive of passionate outburst, barely suppressed—her whole attitude betokening an agonising desire to catch what went without.

Perhaps this was the first time that our wizen-faced friend had ever gone deep enough to think of connecting the woman with any one prisoner. Wrapt up in the gloom of so hopeless and gleamless a prospect as had seemed his promise during those first few weeks of pen-life, he had half deceived himself into seeing the entire prison-list in furtive conversation, at different times, with some mysterious person without the barricade. How this person came to be running at large among a shipload of prisoners, or how he or she came to be acquainted with so many different types of human villainy, were questions he had settled with himself but dimly, if at all.

In the same half-hearted, involuntary fashion he had brought himself to fancying some dim connection between this universal convict's friend, and the bitter, little felon-woman who risked certain punishment, almost nightly, for the sake of a few poor lies hissed through at him, there in his misery. “God will repay you!” he had hurled at them, once, below, in a
frenzied fit of loathing at some cruel sight; “God will repay you tenfold!” And they had hated him for what they called his ‘sham fastidiousness,’ and he had known and felt it. “And so,” as he had reasoned out for himself in his weary way as he met their lowering glances from his corner, “so they have lied in some mean form to this poor girl, that she might add her torture to it all.” And at that—half through the woman's cold reticence, half from a constitutional inability to cross-question inherent in himself—the argument had remained until this moment, when the frenzied interest shown by the woman in an event which, in the minds of a large majority of the ship's company, would have yielded precedence to a like mishap to one of the ship's goats, had unearthed a new and disquieting thought in his mind.

It was when his momentary musings had reached this point, and he had restored his wincing eyes from the shadow of the galley interior to the dazzle of the outside morning, that, with a shiver of coldness somewhere within him, he became aware that instead of being absently directed down the slumberous decks as he supposed, the Doctor's little fierce eyes were fixed upon himself with a look that could only have been designated as ‘canny’—the seeming depth and penetration of which was by no means lessened by a caressingly meditative stroking of the great, bushy beard.

The little man clamped his lips together, keeping very dry and quiet under the smarting points. Yet a faint paleness crept into his wizen face, for he was thinking of the half-crazed woman behind him, of the length of time she had been loitering in the galley; of the likelihood of the Doctor having seen her enter there; and, more than all, what it would mean to her, supposing that he had.

The Doctor threw up his chin, at last, with a great silent laugh.

“Eit's fair divertin'!” he cried.

As if in response, the clenched fist of the man in the doorway quivered with a queer suggestion of repression.

“Eh, ye've na call to be flustered, man,” soothed the other, lowering his features to the less hazardous altitude of a portentous grin. “Ye've na call for the fisties; ah ken a' about ut; ah ken weel wha' the wind blows.” And at that he fell to beckoning the convict nearer to him, with a dignified assumption of secrecy and a suitable wink in the direction of the galley.

For so surprising and generous a burst of confidence, this admission of the good Doctor hardly received so ready a return as it seemed on the face of it to deserve. For quite a space, the man clung unmoved to his doorpost, taking stock of the other with a wondering suspicion suggestive of a strange animal or a sly child.

But a little later—won over, perhaps, by the evident goodwill of the
gentleman's overtures, he thawed in so far as to take a few uncertain steps in his direction.

“Ye needna be sae scared, man,” smirked the other, tiptoeing to meet him and crying out his words in a loud, hissing whisper that seemed every moment on the verge of laughter. “Ah kenned a' the while she was but helpin' ye to cook!”

“She comes every morning—for the child——” began the little man bravely; but his halting words were whirled to shreds in a mighty burst of laughter.

“Which o' them, lad?” cried the gentleman; “which o' them? Ah ken mair than one she's minding!”

The eyes of the convict leapt back to the galley with a helpless look.

“If you mean that,” he said, “you mean wrong. . . . She—there's been nothing of that, nothing.” And again he threw back a helpless glance at the galley.

The other's laughter rose again at the sight, to a desultory chuckling.

“If ye could but see ye're rid face , lad,” he whimpered. And then again, since he could get no further answer to his query:

“At t'anyrate, it'll no be fault o' yours ye hev'na spoken!”

Somewhere deep in the man's slow eyes there sprang a glow into light; while a deep flush, like a spreading flame, crept slowly into his face.

“If you'd tell me what ye want of me, sir,” he said, raising the fierce eyes seawards, “I might know what to answer. As it is—it might be anything—it might be just your fun, sir. It might be—just that ye were playing with me; amusing yourself, sir!”

“Playin' wi' ye! amusin' ma'sel'!” cried the Doctor, with sudden heat (so dangerously accurate are these accidental shots). “Ye thick-skulled loon ye—de'ye suppose if ah thought weel to report ye, ah'd be fiddlin' awa' ma' precious time here, diggin' holes in ye're chest, an' tryin' to let a bit light into ye? Eit's because ah ken weel the lassie is fair daft aboot ye, and ye aboot her, that ah canna sit idle and watch ye heepin' up misery aroon' ye fa' want o' a judeecious word!”

“Na—na, man,” he went on, cooling a little, as the convict dropped his head with a hurried shake. “Ah ken weel the wench is as big a fule as ye'sel. She'll ha'e bin sayin' one thing an' meanin' anither—askin' for a needle, maybe, an' expectin' ye to understand eit's a coal-scuttle she's wearyin' fa'. Aye! an' I've sma' doot she'd sooner break baith ye're foolish hearts—an' ruin ye're lives into the bargain—than forego her preliminary rights o' foolin' an' coquettin'. But, man, ye mus'na be seickened at that—eit's the preevilege o' the sex; ye'll see the same thing in the common hoosecat.”
Here the speaker paused with an inquiring smirk at his victim. But the man was wrestling with a quiver that clung upon his lips; and shook his head faintly over the sleepy sea.

“Jim, lad,” said the Doctor, softly—and the hand which he placed upon the other's shoulder, seemed, from a certain uncertainty of movement, to speak for the nonce of something deeper and better than mere blatant artificiality—“ah've had ye baith seick on my hands, an' ah' tak a bit interest in ye—maybe because ah ken what like o' birds ye are, spite o' the hawk's feathers they've stuckit i' ye're tails. An', Jim,” he continued, tapping the man's shoulder gently, and speaking with something near to gentleness in his voice, “eit's a bonny hell ye're baith bound te'. . . . An' she's a guid lass, mind, but peitiful unhappy, an' peitiful reckless. Ye've the power to save her, and ye alone. . . . The soul o' the puir broken lassie lies in ye're hands, for she lo'es ye vera weel, lad.”

Something in the Doctor's words found an echoing-place in the breast of the convict, and his ill-shod feet, and the sunny planking on which they stood, became blurred and out of all proportion as he listened. And in the momentary silence that followed, it seemed to the little man that the slumberous quiet of the ship had grown sleepier; that bolts had forgotten to creak and timbers to groan; that the lazy ‘flop-flopping’ of the swell against the vessel's side had taken to itself a kindly sound. He caught suppressed merriment in the creak of a block; a chuckle in the clumsy ‘lollop’ of a rope; and when at last a sail flapped breathfully, it was with the drowsy, listening laugh of a sympathetic eavesdropper.

Even the familiar ‘simmering’ of the galley kettle held a new sweetness for him, bringing to his mind the shadow whence it came, and the little listening figure kneeling there, with a smile upon her face.

Such, at least, was his fancy as he hung there, bowed and trembling in that moment of silence. While behind him in the galley—and bathed in the murmuring shadows of the place—a woman was crouching close into the wall, and vaguely thrusting the loose hair from her eyes; and vaguely moaning—“I thought he loved me—Ben, my darling!”

And so slipped by both fact and fancy, leaving each its mark. And presently the Doctor—wondering perhaps at his long silence—peeped down over the little man's head, and caught the glint of tears in his eyes. And he drew up sharply at the sight, laughing a breath of a laugh, and favouring the handy shoulders below him with an uncertain pat or two, that—judging from a tendency to nervous apprehension visible in the gentleman's countenance—would appear to have been summoned into requisition in the light of a vague and involuntary peace-offering to a rather qualm-stirring moment.
“Gie ut a trial, ma mannie,” he said, bending kindly over the convict and flinging, at the same time, a quick glance fore and aft, as if loth to be caught in that position. “Gie ut a trial,” he repeated, in a deep stage-whisper, moving off forward with a parting tap or two. “An' dinna forget the soop!”

It was a little later that the convict heard the kettle calling him back to the galley; and there played a quaint, ill-fitting smile upon his lips as he drew his sleeve slowly across his eyes, and moved over to the doorway.

On the threshold he paused abruptly, as though taken aback at some sight within.

. . . . Strange that it should have turned so like! Strange indeed! There was the dim, sacred shadow of the place spreading dark to the sun-splash in the doorway! There was the kettle singing peaceful and low! There was the figure kneeling bowed in the gloom, and glancing half-round at him over her shoulder!

“Ah, my lass—you're smiling!” he cried, leaning forward wonderingly with a light in his eyes.

Yes, she was smiling! truly a somewhat quivering-lipped smile, and one that failed signally to smother the gleam in the eyes above. Yet all the sweeter perhaps for its very fragility.

“Did—did ye hear what he said, lass?”

The woman dropped her head quickly over her nervously fiddling fingers. A fly buzzed noisily into the quiet place, filled it for a moment with its drowsy note, and fled again—dying away in the heavy air like a mournful chord. The spare figure of the woman seemed to quiver a little as she knelt there in the shadow; and presently she put out her hand and groped for the wall at her side. . . . Then a whisper floated over to the man in the doorway:

“Yes—Jim.”

Slowly and a little blindly he moved over to where she knelt; and placing a hand upon her lowered head, stood smiling down at her through brightening eyes.

“Yes—yes, my little lass,” he murmured, “always that. And you'll change your mind, maybe, about saying good-bye. And you'll look in sometimes, perhaps, and say ‘good-morning, Jim,’ in the old way—just to make life worth living for. . . . And ah! lass,” he quickened, with a shudder, “sometimes the thought comes over me that in those dim, dreary forests they tell us of out yonder, and in that burning heat, we'd both of us be better for something to occupy the mind—something worth living and hoping for!”

And then again, with a gentle bending towards her:
“Won't you look up, lass, and let me see your face?”
But the woman would not look up. Instead, she caught at his hand, and kissed it, and laid her cold cheek against it.
“If you think,” she said at last, very low, “we might keep each other straight, out yonder.”
Scene IV.—‘The Sick Man's Broken Song.’

(A week later.)

“Chè mal può dir chi è pien d'altra voglia.”

—DANTE, Pur., can. xxiii.

IT is morning again, and again the decks are streaked with great, still shadows.

They had placed him in a bit of shade beneath the fock'sl—the great, helpless, be-bandaged creature; and he lay now, stretched upon his mattress, with his pale, heavy face turned up to where the sails hung loose and helpless in the sun, and where, perhaps, the deep, cloud-softened sky reminded him of other things.

A pleasant steamy odour as of strong meat-soup issued from the region of the galley a little aft; and presently, framed in the doorway, appeared a little, wizen-faced man, holding in one hand a bowl of smoking liquid, and shading his eyes with the other in the direction of the invalid.

For quite a minute the newcomer hung thoughtfully watching him; then suddenly he turned and called back into the galley.

“Come and look at him, lass,” he said, “so quiet he lies.”

At once a red-haired woman came and peeped over his shoulder—with a wince in her eager eyes; and for a while the two figures lingered thus in silence.

“For hours he'll lie like that watching his clouds,” said the man at length.

“What d'you suppose he sees in them, Nell? A fireside, think you?”

“No,” breathed the woman from behind him with yearning in her look.

“A face—be sure, a face.”

The man laughed quietly.

“Oh,” he said, “a face is it?—poor baby-limbed giant. . . . Ah! see how strange he looks at us now, with his dull, still eyes! It's the soup he sees!”

But a great paleness and a great wildness grew apace in the woman's face under that weak stare, and again and again she would eye the mess in his hand with a hungry, half-ravenous avidity.

“Yes—yes,” she whispered, “it's the soup he sees!” (And she stretched forth a trembling hand round his elbow as if preparing to seize it.) “Give it me, Jim,” she prayed. “Let me take it to the poor, pale wretch. I'll cheer him up a bit—I'll soothe him with a woman's word or two—I'll smooth his
pillow for him. You men can't smooth a pillow! Come now, Jim,” she urged. “It's a woman's gentle word he wants—give it me, Jim.” And she pressed nearer to him with a smile to cover her fear.

Very reluctantly the man turned and yielded the bowl into her hands. But whether he were unfavourably struck by the eager trembling of those members, or whether in turning from him she had too quickly dropped the smiling mask from her face, it was with a slow-growing suspicion that he watched her move from the doorway.

Hastening—wild-faced—over to the sick man, she knelt down softly beside him, with her back to the galley; placing herself so that she might hide his face from the man at the galley door. Then—while she settled the bowl in his reach, or rearranged his coverings with that secret softness women know so well, or smoothed his pillows with a lingering touch—she cried out a torrent of words to him in a hoarse and plaintive murmur, that surged up in gasps like a tide, and seemed every moment to less easily smother a smouldering cry of pain.

“Ben, lad! are ye well—are ye better? It seemed I would never get near to you—never get a word with you more. . . . Yes—yes, but you must listen, my dear! I've only a minute or so; and such a dreadful deal to say. . . . Tell me—can you grasp things? Can you understand?”

The sick man seemed in no way ravenous for his soup. He lay quite still and watched her with the strained fixed gaze of one dead-weak from illness. Presently, in a low, deep growl he answered her:

“Aye—I can grasp things! I can understand. . . . Ye need tell me nothing.”

The woman paused in her work; regarding him with a strange, wild stillness.

“Oh! but you must listen,” she cried, in a trembling voice, bowing her head swiftly and resuming her operations. “You must listen, lad—everything depends on your taking in every word! Yes, it's done, Ben—the horrid thing! It's all arranged and settled—a regular love-feast! I'm to marry him when we get out; and keep house for him. (And you sick and in chains, Ben—and you sick and in chains!) And we're to live at the 'fishing-place' where there's plenty—plenty of boats. And you're to lie quiet, and be the model man for the first few months—mind that. And then you must make your bolt from the jail (it'll be 'jail' for you, Ben; you're 'black-marked'), and I'll be waiting to hide you. . . . Do you hear it,” she hissed, bending closer to him, “do you hear it—must I tell it again?”

Not a muscle changed in the man's heavy face to the unfolding of her tale.

“I hear,” he growled. “They left me my hearing. It's my understanding
I'm in doubt about——"

Here he paused. But from the eager concentration of the stare he still kept fixed upon the woman, it was plain that he had something yet to say.

“Nell!” he rasped, quite breathless of a sudden. “Hadn't ye better give me that cursed chart?”

“Why, Ben?” fluttered the woman's voice.

The sick man raised himself weakly from his elbow, and gazed up into her face with a grim, half-smiling look.

“Aren't ye playing against yourself, Nell?”

“What do you mean?” breathed the woman, white to the lips.

“Mean?” said the man—and he gave a weak, little laugh that was like the cry of a child. “Mean, Nell? You and I should know each other better than that! Give the cursed thing to me. I'll—I'll manage.” And he sank back again upon his mattress, helpless and log-like.

The woman lowered her pale face close to his, and fell to smoothing his couch as she had several times smoothed it already.

“The chart leaves my hands for the fire when you're dead, Ben,” she quavered, with a deep clenched earnestness. “Only then—unless you take it from my dead fingers!”

“No, you fool!” breathed the man, with all the vehemence of his sickly energy.

“Yes, I say!” she hissed, with equal force. “You're weak and sick and fanciful! You're imagining things that don't exist. . . . I may get no chance to speak again—only get well, only remember! And sometimes towards sundown, Ben, I'll pipe the old song, a while; and maybe you'll hear it, lying near.”

“‘Little flower,’ ” smiled the man, with a grim, sad shake of his head, and an awkward lilt to his growl, like a child repeating a lesson, “‘little flower, dying there among the weeds!’ ”

“Aye, so it will be,” said the woman, with a rush of tears, “if you don't come!” And with that she sprang up, and moved away.

But his dull eyes followed her, dog-like, down the deck, and remained fast-fixed upon the doorway for long after she had vanished into the galley. And he troubled the still clouds with no more dreamings; nor could the sails attract him with their languid bosom-throbs, nor yet the sea-maidens with their little, soothing songs; for ever his eyes wandered near the doorway, and ever his lips played upon the same sad air and song:

“Little flower, dying there among the weeds!”

As for the woman, she had stopped abruptly as she was about to pass by the galley, and confronted the wizen-faced man as he wistfully watched her from the doorway.
“Don't say you're jealous of that poor sick thing,” she cried, starting back with a laugh upon her lips.

But he gave her no smile in return; albeit he seemed to relent a little.

“Ah, Jim!” she broke out wildly, pushing him back into the galley, and seizing his hands in hers; “I knew him in the old days. Oh! very close I knew him in the old days! But, Jim, I love a little, grey-haired man!”

And then she gave his hands a little, anguished squeeze, and went wavering out of the port doorway; striking blindly for the passage-way that ran aft between the bulwarks and the pen, and mumbling, mumbling as she went: “A little grey-haired man.”

* * * * *

Simultaneously, a stout ship's officer and a tall, florid subaltern stood on the port side of the poop, looking over-sea and chatting.

“Not she!” the subaltern was spluttering, angrily. “She scratches at a kiss—the wench! Oh, yes! sneer your fill, my jovial skipper! You'll be droning out next, with a grandfatherly air, that ‘women’ need experience like everything else. And yet I dare swear I'd surprise you did I but tell you the half of what my innocent eyes are telling me aboard your sleepy tub!”

“I dare swear!” agreed the other, blandly.

“Now tell me, my aged friend,” continued the first speaker, with an air of coming triumph. “With all that irksome load of experience which you carry, did you ever happen to notice a vague figure hanging about the pen towards dusk; did that fainting-fit of my lady's on the night they went for Dust, strike you as anything curious; did you ever happen to time her when she goes to the galley for the child's soup of a morning? No! I'll bet you didn't. No more than you're aware of the fact that she's already been there three-quarters of an hour this particular morning; and is there still! Now what d'yer say to that for 'games'?” And the soldier opened his jaws to a snorting, vengeful laugh.

“Only a kiss, too,” said the fat officer, with a reflective arching of his eyebrows,—“a kiss aboard ship—in the tropics. . . . Such a little thing—and means so little!”

The soldier flashed a look under his lids at his companion's fat, bland face. Perhaps the semi-serious, semi-jocular tone had puzzled him, as it had puzzled others before him. But it was no lingering search that he made, for this was no face to invite conjecture.

“Larkin,” he said, flinging himself down upon the bulwarks upon his elbows with a deep springing ejaculation, half-snort, half-laugh, “below all that rot of yours, I believe you are a deep beggar—a wily beggar.”

The stout sailor gave a little, stage start of mock depreciation. “O most
sarcastic of centurions!” he smiled, as he settled down comfortably beside his companion and spat reflectively into the water, “you do me an injustice—you do indeed! Deep!” he echoed, with a gentle marvelling; “so it has come at last? Once, I can remember (it was just before my cynical period—the time when you feel so lonely with only your family and friends about you)—once it was ‘Limpid.’ It was a lady who called me so. ‘Limpid Mr. Larkin,’ she used to say with a quiet original wit. She was very amusing in her circle. She was also fat and flippant, I remember; and prone to poetry in the hot weather—it perspired out of her, they used to say. . . . Ah!” added the officer, with a pathos of tone that was lamentably interfered with by the laborious removal of an interesting blemish he appeared to have discovered upon the breast of his jacket, “ah—these memories!”

It was just at that moment that, happening to glance a lazy eye round his vacant side, and thence down along the lower deck, he saw a grey, shrunken something stagger into the forward end of the pen-passage, and begin to feel along blindly—with ever and again an uncertain pausing like one picking a path in the darkness—beside the wall.

The plump features of the officer showed nothing of surprise at this strange development of the sleepy morning. If his face gave expression to anything at all, it was merely to some such show of passing interest in a passing trial of endurance as it might have assumed in its palmier days when, as thought-mirror to the blunted feeling of an English school-lad, it yielded an impression to the struggles of some famished rat that, with the national accessories of blocked holes and watching dogs, fled, creeping and pausing along by the cold, barn wall.

But no further sign it gave, either of censure or amusement.

But suddenly, as the officer hung watching it, the frightened thing peeped up at him; catching his eye and pausing with a pitiful cry—but one (so slight was it and so faint) that only such persons as happened to be observing the object could have heard. And then, in a slow, sad way—as though the hope had gone out of it with the cry—it seemed to grope vaguely at its forehead, and sink in a grey, jumbled heap by the wall.

The rats of his palmy days would have treated him to many such an end as this. (Is it nature, or is it just hunger and weakness, that makes these English rats so tame?) So that perhaps it were only a natural outcome of habit, that he should turn away listlessly from the jumbled heap as from an end of things; and betake himself to a repetition of his former reflective expectoration.

And yet these retrospective explanations and excuses for so queer an indifference to peculiar conditions, and so unnatural a lack of natural
curiosity, will scarcely carry us through the sudden, red-hot exclamation, and the, as sudden, ‘whipping-up’ of the telescope, over the sea, which followed.

“Good Gad!” he was understood to say, in a gasping drawl. “Here's a find!”

The young soldier had also been looking out over the sea; but that he had discovered nothing of an interesting, much less ‘startling’ nature upon the steamy bosom, need appear in no measure strange to us, if we but consider the power of his naked and unaccustomed eye, as against that of the glass and experience of the officer.

“What's that?” he cried, straining his eyes, all agog with the other's excitement, in the direction of the glass. “What's that?”

Now it is good for young men—and more especially those whose walk of life lies measured out before them in regulation steps of feet and inches—to accustom themselves to the strictest rules of patience, and it was possibly with some such fact as this well thrashed out in his mind, and a laudable, if somewhat aggravating, desire to see it furthered in those with whom his own trade brought him in contact, that the officer failed, for some moments, to find fitting answer. Indeed, it was not until the young soldier's impatience had goaded him to a stage of eagerness little short of anger, that his stout premonitor would permit himself to explain.

“Sperm whales! or I'm unwell!” he said, in a husky whisper, still from the shelter of his glass. “Sperm whales, lad!—and we north of ‘thirty.’ . . . If you're a man,” he cried out, suddenly, with a plaintive stress upon the doubt, “if you're a man, you'll be off to my cabin like a wink. I can't leave the blessed deck! It's the large glass. Top shelf—over the bunk—right hand corner——”

Thus—and the soldier was panting away down the companion. And neither did the little, stout officer lose any time, for, toddling in the opposite direction, he made with surprising agility down the poop gangway, and thence across the deck below, and into the very pen-passage itself, as if, indeed, he had very urgent business somewhere forward. As it turned out, however, he went no further than the place where the woman lay. There he brought up with a clumsy start, bending down over her, with his hands resting upon his knees, and his eyes full of well-feigned wonder.

“Some of that damned ‘haggis's’ work,” he said.

The woman was squatted helplessly upon the deck, with her legs tucked in beneath her, and her head thrown backwards against the wall. Her eyes lay open, and glared up towards him in faint appeal.

“It's a fair job for you, my sinner,” says he again, regarding her with a twinkling interest, “that large glasses are as spare in these latitudes as
sperm whales. . . . Come!” he quickened with a snap. “What makes you scratch when kissed, eh?”

And then again, as he laboured her up in his arms, and toddled off, breathlessly, sternwards:

“I'll lend you an arm for just that, you limb! And the other . . . . the other's for the sake of the chisel with which God fashioned your face; for it was a hard-pointed one, that chisel—it allowed Him to take a rough copy before it blunted.”

Something welled up through the woman's closed eyelids, as her head lay nodding on his shoulder. Perhaps it was that, or the look in his little, round face, or both, that helped her to speak.

“I knew there was someone,” she said, “all along.”

And at that the stout officer pulled up, quietly; taking a long look into her face.

“It isn't ‘someone,’ little sinner,” he whispered. “It's just a something that wakes and cries when ye look at me.”
Act II: ‘The Settlement—Evening.’

(Three years elapse between Acts I. and II.)
Scene I.—‘The Pipe and Wail.’

“E vedi omai che'l poggio l'ombra getta.”

—DANTE, Pur., can. vi.

‘JINGLE—jangle; jingle—jangle; jingle—jangle,’ echoing madly round the pale, grey cliffs, whispering metallically through the sombre bracken; floating down in a wild, soft jumble over the little cove, and out across the glistening, mud-brown sand-flats — to skim at last, faint and sad, over the quiet sea. So peals the evening bell.

The cliffs—which, but for one narrow gully leading inland, completely enclose the cove upon its landward side—arch over threateningly; and because of a heavy fringe of bracken and vine-growth, appear to lower down darkly towards their base, where cowers a scattering of huts—rough-built cabins of axe-hewn logs, having scantily improvised thatches of grass and twigs, and windows either coldly boarded, or glaring out nakedly in a total lack of glass.

These dwellings, of which there be eight in number, form together a rough semicircle round the rear of the cove. They appear to have been erected just where the inrushing sweep of the sands begins to mingle with patches of sun-dried earth. And it would seem that some of the happier-minded of the villagers have seized the opportunity thus grudgingly afforded, of rudely cultivating the soil immediately surrounding their respective dwellings; and, in this way, hiding the nakedness of the unshapely walls under a fresh-smelling garment of tangled creeper and vine-growth.

Ever and again, rising drearily from the right of the hut-line, and mingling, not untunefully, with the pealing bell, the voice of child or woman wails out in song. And though there is little, either in the tone or melody, to locate it to any particular dwelling, the novelty of a close-shut door, and—in the frequent intervals of silence—the outline of a sad face lingering at a window, would seem to point to one heavily verdured hut that sits upon a little, lonely eminence to the extreme right of the village, as the probable home of the songster.

Afar in the offing, three deep-laden fishing boats, bobbing easily on the gentle swell, may be seen to ‘out’ their oars, and to commence the landward toil with slow and heavy strokes; while by the open wooden belfry, upon the left horn of the cliffs, a dim figure stands knee-deep in the
bracken, tugging with a sharp and vicious action upon the rope of a rusty ship's bell.

It was a strange figure, this, that tolled there upon the cliff-head among the deepening shadows. Squat and dwarfish, it seemed, in the dim light; with a slight hunch to its back, and a large and over-grown body, from the nether extremity of which two short, supple legs disappeared abruptly in the bracken. A rusty remnant of a red soldier's-tunic, coupled with an aged bayonet-scabbard that dangled from his waist on a bit of frayed rope, gave to his appearance a grotesque flavour of the military, which a dilapidated black ‘slouch,’ pulled well round his head and well over his face, went far to belie.

Dim within the hat-brim loomed a full, broad face, bearing faintly-stamped upon its cunning features a pale suggestion of the prize-ring. But perhaps the grimmest feature of this grim twilight-bird was a dead whiteness of complexion, which neither the dark background of the hat-brim, nor a delicate fringe of silk-black whisker could wholly have suggested.

The closing pall of grim night itself hardly hovered over the little cove with darker suggestions than did the quiet eyes of this pale ringer. The bell-rope might swing the misshapen body when and where it would—the man himself might beguile his labours with the queerest conceivable antics—but the eyes, with their downward trend and their pale, slow scrutiny, kept ever a sidelong spying on the cove; and that with backward lingerings of a reluctant kind, as of one upon the alert for some doubtful sign.

It seemed that, alone, out of the sink of his own dark nature, could have come the venom necessary to such looks as those he cast upon the sleepy line of cots: so peaceful they lay with their long, straight spirals of smoke—so humble in their shadows. Yet down the pale eyes would swoop—lowering, dissatisfied, at this door and at that; staring, fixed and eager, into the black discs of dusky windows; lingering long spaces over pale children that sat—clasping their ears and watching them—in doorways; and pausing, with a cunning pricked-up secrecy, at every over-emphasised cooking-voice or cottage-sound. Then away with a sudden sly sweep, out over the sand-flats and over the sea, where, sputtering with an added venom, they would light upon the boats—splashing and toilingslowly in towards the cove, with oars flashing silvery answers to the summons of the bell.

And so the peal rang on, from light to shadow, and from shadow to gloom, till the peeping children, elbowing each other below in the doorways, gained little for their pains but a dusky impression of the whitened belfry, and a grotesquely bobbing blotch beneath it. Yet their
shy-eyed fascination for the ringer, far from diminishing with his softening outline, seemed rather to gain in strength thereby; while every once-while some little ‘wondering face’ would run in to its mother; and there, hiding in her skirts, would linger, whimpering, “How long it rings to-night!”

It ceased with a plaintive protest at last, but not into silence. A deep, tuneless tavern-voice took its place, and, as it were, bore on the blatant clangour. From up near the belfry it began, jocosely-loud at first, and then slowly falling and fainting, as from the mouth of one hastening away in hoarse glee from the accomplishment of some special task. Further and further inland it seemed to fade, yelling out its queer tavern jingle into the night, and clinging monotonously—as does a slow child at its task—to the one rude break and finish; from the opening shout like a merry echo of some hackneyed flagon-blare, to the long-drawn finishing cry with its burden of weirdly-fading ferocity.

“Ho—’tis the yell o' the evening bell
(Clink o' chains—clank o' chains);
Drown ye the yell o' the evening bell,
Drink and drown——!

“Paid is his wage, and paid his hire
(Clink o' chains—clank o' chains);
Drink to the grey face rotting in the mire,
Drink and drown——!”

So faint it piped, at length, as to tinkle only in scanty snatches into the cove. Yet still the village children—and sometimes an older face or two—would peep up, half-incredulous, at the swaying bell-rope; or listen again, with quiver-eyed fear or clench-lipped challenge, for that savage sinking yell.

And when presently that too had died and ceased, a dreary stir of wind rose gasping where the silence should have been, and rustled through the bracken along the cliff-edge, like the whispered relief of some long spell-bound company—though this again proved only such a passing effervescence as that to which the stillest hour or the calmest temperament is liable—and yielded up the silence in its turn to the gentler mercies of the little cove-waves, who toyed with it, now taking it up, now dropping it, as is ever their half-sad, half-playful wont.

Yet for all the quick stilling of that untimely zephyr, there still remained faint signs of its presence—or of something close akin to it—upon the deepening land-scape of the cove.
At one time it was the massed bracken-fern beyond the belfry, that fell a-nodding, of a sudden, as though stirred by some faint finger-touch of wind. At another—and but a brief period after these first long-suffering clumps had ceased to vibrate—there arose yet another lonely breath, clearing for itself a pathway nearer to the cliff-edge, and close beside the belfry—though inconsistently enough it failed to swing the bell-rope in its passage. Yet again, some seconds on, the fern lying forward still, between the belfry and the brow itself, fell a-quivering to some faint yet vicious force. And such and so, steadily approaching the cliff-edge, in little isolated patches, these twilight gusts crept, unexplained; till it came to the turn of the hardy bushes clinging to the cove-brink to be stealthily thrust aside, and of the shadowy slouch and pale countenance of the zephyr himself to be gingerly thrust through.

The children were tossing and chirping, now, about the sandy house-fronts, like so many sparrows; and their ringing laughter—and the discordant gossiping of the sea-gazing mother, with which nigh every doorway was now amply furnished—tuned the grey cove to a dissonance, as unearthly and strange, as a burst of merriment on dead lips. Only the tiny cot to the extreme right of the village could boast neither mother nor children—could boast little, indeed, save the hard silence of a fast-closed door.

As for the ringer, he lay easily upon his stomach among the bushes, with his prying chin thrust warily over the cove-brink, and his soft eyes wandering over the scene, very quiet in their watchfulness. And musing as he lay, he munched the shreds of fresh, green bracken, as if to sweeten his reflections; sometimes—as something below caught his fancy—lying as strained and still as death, while at others—as one mother bawled extra discordant to another, or some new excitement sent the children shrieking—growing irritably restless and snappy, and even rasping out growling comments for the benefit of some companion of his fancy, against whose previously expressed sentiments he had obviously run afoul.

“Nay—nay, master,” he grumbled, musingly. “What was it in Governor Graham's day—what was it in Laurie's—what in old Crosslight's? Tell me that? Why, it was whip and chains, and safe-sleeping in our virtuous beds! Any old 'bone-jaw' 'll mumble that to ye! ‘Whip and chains,’ he'll say, ‘and safe-sleeping,’ . . . And what's it now—what's it ever since they loosed the parsons on us—what's it ever since the old ‘Briadene’ came dropping in with the tide? Why, seize me, if we ain't all the time a-feeling of our backs for knife-'oles!”

“Look to 'em,” he growled, greeting a fresh sally from the merry crowd below with a snigger of venomous contempt, “look to 'em a-elbowing each
other so free and so friendly. ‘Punishment,’ ye call it! Curse me, if it ain't as near heaven as most o' 'em 'll touch, all the day a-whispering and a-plotting as they see fit, and bare within bell-hearing o' the town—with a blessed string o' red-coats slinking up at every turn to ‘tink’ the bell for meals. Meals! it's chains they want, not meals—bless 'em!

“‘Fishing’—is it? ‘Supplying the town with fresh mullet,’ ye say? Aye—you'd argue and scheme away a gun-muzzle or a knife-point, ye would! Schemes! When did old ‘Ginger Graham’ ever talk o' schemes? The gallows o' Munby Head run up for the ‘green-hands’ to gape at as they swing into the bay, was all the ‘schemes’ he ever had in his old bullet head, and that was grim enough and to waste—I'll answer to that! But these mad-crazy games for the ‘advancement and betterment o' the well-behaved’—they'll turn grim games a-yet, mark me, master——!”

Here some disturbing element seemed to break the train of the ringer's reflections; for, growling himself to an abrupt pause, he dropped into a listening attitude of a queer, canine alertness. Then suddenly breathing out some deep-toned exclamation, he whipped back his head into the seclusion of the bushes and held it there with a secret look.

Yet, upon the face of things, there appeared nothing worthy of such panic or stoppage, no change in the general aspect or atmosphere of the place, other than such trivial one as might have arisen of so gentle a disturbance as that of the sad-pealing song-voice of the lonely hut. For that, finding an outlet through the empty windows, had broken, mournful and dreary sweet, once more, across the cove.

Some simple flower-tale it told: a thing you'd wail to children in the dusk—though there are some will find a meaning under a stone! And so fraught with a slow-toned weariness were both words and melody, that it took more nearly of a sweet-voiced moan than of a song:—

“A flower that grew alone,
In the lone field;
And wist not of its beauty,
Nor how ugly were the weeds.
‘Little flower growing there among the weeds!’

“A flower that loved alone,
In the lone field;
And wist not of its beauty,
Nor how ugly were the weeds.
‘Little flower loving there among the weeds!’

“A flower that died alone,
In the lone field;
And wist not of its beauty,
Nor how ugly were the weeds.
‘Little flower dying there among the weeds!’ ”

So it rose and died. And through it all, to the plaintive questioning of the last faint word, the mothers gossiped on, unheeding, in the doorways, and the children roystered in the sand unhushed: every soul, unless be reckoned in the sighing pause of one tiny, wonder-stilled urchin, or that puckered, bush-veiled ‘whiteness,’ there, aloft upon the cliff—as unmoved to the rising and dying misery of that brief wail, as the grey, grim cove they dwelt in.

And when it was done, and the waves came sighing up along the beach, unchorused, the stealthy listener upon the cliff rose warily from his stomach to his knees, and thrust up a cautious head above the bracken. Yet, strangely enough, his eye did not immediately seek the empty window whence the song had come; but, instead, ran dodging along the feathery cornice of the cliff as far as the opposite horn—searching hither and thither with a strange excitement.

“Pipe and wail!” he muttered, feeling his rasping chin and musing out at the cliff in baffled dissatisfaction, “pipe and wail! And no answering-dance, no answering-mourn these weary months. . . . And them”—he sneered, jerking back his head in an inland direction—“them u'd have me believe a woman moans like that for pleasure!”

With that, and with a yellow side-glance at the lonely cottage, he rose suddenly to his feet; and then, bending himself from his middle, till his head was well below the level of the undergrowth, he crept away—almost upon all-fours—into the ‘swishing’ bracken and the shadows.

Yet it does not seem that the ringer immediately forsook the cove-cliffs.

Some few minutes after his departure from the vicinity of the belfry, a vague figure rose cautiously from among the cliff-shrubs, more towards the centre of the cove; and after a prolonged peep over the edge, upon the hut roofs below, sank and vanished as abruptly as it had come. Later still, a gloomy shape stood out, in momentary clearness, upon the bleak opposite-horn of the cliffs; at one time craning forward as if to gain a clearer view of some object below, at another, crouching hastily back against the leaden sky-line in apparent fear of detection; while above and besides these two appearances, though no actual visual evidence of his further presence was forthcoming, there arose, from time to time, strange eruptions, indicative of stranger pranks, upon the brackeny bosom of the cliff-top—indicative, shall we say, of stealthy crawlings among the bracken, of darting rushes across little open spaces, of endless crouchings in closely-foliaged spots;
for feathery fern-clumps resemble human beings, in that they are not accustomed to shudder in moments of quiet, unless afflicted with some crawling secret; while even a wee, charred tree-stump may hope—with the most insignificant of mortals—to draw attention to itself by sudden disappearance.

Deeper and deeper grew the gloom! The last gleam of glistening light died slowly over the quiet sea. The straggling group of fisher-boats, labouring shoreward to a dim, wild chorus, became a faint, moving blur upon the darkening water-face; while, one by one, dim-flickering beams of candle-light spread themselves over the cove from the windows of the village.

And now it was that the door of that same lonely cot upon the right opened with a snap, and a woman stood outlined in the light of the door-frame. She held a lighted lantern in her hand; and lifting it presently to her arm's length, shaded her eyes and peered seawards through the gloom.

The lantern-light, from without, found a wasting as of some year-long sorrow in her anxious face—a nervous rigidity about her shifting lips—a supple readiness throughout her little frame. The firelight, from within, found a gleam as of gold in her ruddy hair.

Her lips parted, slowly—doubtfully—as she peered out thus in her shadowy questing; and presently she let fall a whispered exclamation, plaintive in its soft impatience. A few minutes later, she seemed to lose all patience in her anxiety; and quickly lowering the light to the step beside her, flung out a succession of long-drawn 'halloos' through her work-worn fingers. And in a while, as she hung, straining and still, in the doorway, there came rolling back from afar in the night, a muffled answering shout—moaning in weirdly with the dying babble of the incoming surf, like the thin, despairing wail of some drowning castaway.

Yet, whatever the significance of this message from the darkness, it was apparently favourable to the woman's designs; for immediately upon the sound, her lips trembled into a smile, and, as if in bravado at some imagined fears, she caught her breath in a sudden, reckless laugh. Then, picking up her lantern again, she stepped out hurriedly into the night.

Casting round a swift, close-lidded glance to where the shapeless mass of the other huts loomed mysteriously immense in the gloom (flickering forth at equal distances across the sands its narrow blades of light, in which, as some busy person within passed and repassed before a candle, a giant, ghostly shadow leaped, fluttering and bobbing, halfway across the cove)—she picked her way swiftly down the neat path of the garden-patch, thence through the little white wicket-gate at the bottom into a maze of shadowy fishing nets triced up lengthwise upon poles beside it, and round eventually
towards the cliffs, towering, like a bank of dense black mist, to the rear of
the hut.

And there was every appearance of haste in the movements of that little
arc of light, as it travelled further inland under the cliffs; and this also was
the suggestion of the many little womanish sounds of distress that
accompanied it. But as if this were not tale-telling evidence enough as to
the manner of its going, twice the woman floundered to a halt in the heavy
drift sand, with the lantern thrust high above her head, the better, as it
seemed, to locate herself; and on each of these occasions that small, pale
face of hers, all wrinkled up and drawn with flurried fear, flared up and
faded on the night in a naked glow of flame.

When close in under the cliffs she halted a third time, and again with the
aid of the lantern, scrutinised her surroundings. Under foot spread the
yielding surface of the drift-sands. About and around, great irregular
masses of shadow-blurred rock reared their squat bulk against her in
serried, threatening ranks, while overhead, the grey silent face of the
cliff—reflecting gloomily the candle-glow—towered and arched up,
grimly, into a vague, far-away murk of rock and shadow.

To this grim, still sterility of stone and shade—haunted as such places
must always be by those dim, conjectural additions with which the human
fancy supplements the more grim of Nature's groupings—the lantern-light
gave trembling emphasis. And presently, as she began to feel her way
forward along the face of the cliff, she lowered the light with a sudden,
scared haste to her side, and cast back a glance of longing at the warm,
still village-lights behind her,—and it may well have been that to a sudden-
chilling fear of seeing too much the lantern owed its fall; and to a growing
dread of what had already been seen, the village-lights, those wistful back-
lingerings.

The silence of her pathway deepened, perceptibly, as she drew away
from the settlement; and with this deepening stillness came a damp,
unwholesome odour as of decaying things, and of the life that joys in such.
The place loomed sacred to decay and death as any tomb. The cricket's
'tick' deepened the solitude with its plaintive stabs of sound. Sad, soft
whispers, faintly rising and falling, like children's sighs, from out the
gloom and mystery of the night-shore, died to a softer, sadder tone in this
dark sepulchre. Still death looked out of the stone-still face of the rock—
out of the smooth, pale sand, out of the gloomy crevices with their
scatterings of little bones. Even the sprays of lank-leaved seaweed that
littered the surface where she trod, cherished each its grim suggestion of
half-buried human hair.

An indistinct jumble of boulders threw up its pigmy heights along the
cliff-base; something as the little green ‘suckers’ will cluster about the bole. So that soon upon the left of the woman, as she stumbled forward into the midst of these, giant rocks rose rigid and forbidding, drowning and almost out-blotting the friendly sound of the sea. While, always, upon her right, that lowering cloud of the cliff hung over her like a shadow—like a shadow of doom.

The place loomed sacred to decay and death as any tomb. And yet the mossiest, silentest, most decayed of tombs will have its moving life—scuttling, scurrying, hiding life, indeed, yet the mightier for that very modesty which leaves the determining of form and substance to the generous mercies of conjecture. So also in this dank-smelling, silent place, where the woman made her prowl, there was moving life of a kind. Here also, as warily she dodged among the boulders—stumbling through the heaped-up sand, feeling round the grim-faced rock, tripping and jarring over earth-hid stone—here also there was a hidden life, a scuttling, pattering vagueness that fled at her approach.

Once, with a terrified gasp, and a jerk that came near to leaving her in darkness, she flung herself back from some vague, black ‘scutler,’ that, as fear-stricken as herself, scrambled desperately up the cliff but a foot from her face. At another time she trod upon some yielding substance that, wriggling to the touch of her foot, lent a speed to it for a few mad yards, that your sinewy sprinter might have gaped at. While once again, as things fell strangely a-still, a pebble came leaping down the cliff—‘clipety-clipety-clip’—a little behind her, every rattle, every syllable, a separate stab to the blind silence of the night. . . . And at this last, she paused, crouching low in the shadow of a rock—either faint or watchful.

Whatever may have been her motive for this crouching pause, she did not far prolong it into the silence that waited upon that solitary pebble. Perhaps she had discovered that tombs—and more especially lantern-lit ones—do not lend themselves to waiting and listening. In any case, she rose of a sudden from her shadowy hiding-place, with a little exclamation like a moan, and went dodging and wading onwards through the rock and sand.

But soon, as she proceeded, it became evident that the episode of that little, falling stone had left its mark upon her. In the watch that she kept continually upon the lantern-lit face of the cliff, there sat a wildness and desperation as of fading resolution. It seemed, also, that she took the lantern further into her counsels; and with that as aider and abetter to her imagination, found at every fresh step new items for her list of threatening mysteries.

Yet for all her growing terror she sped on—on and on. And ever as she went the great rocks grew, the hollow cliffs bowed lower, and the damp,
dead atmosphere fell damper and more dead, till nothing seemed wanting to complete the pale suggestions of the place but the sudden appearance of some quiet, dead-faced thing, that should at first sight seem a rock, but at second, move a little—silently towering there, and disputing all further passage. And presently, as onward through the drift-sand—through the loose and ragged boulders and the sea-refuse of ages — the sad-eyed woman struggled, it seemed as though she had stumbled against some evil thing of the kind; for of a sudden a sharp cry escaped her, and she fell faintly back against a rock with her eyes fixed 'wilderedly upon the cliff-face at her side.

Just at this place of her sudden stoppage, the way—which formerly had wound narrowly in and out among isolated boulders—widened out into a clear, sandy space of a few yards square, surrounded by a semicircle of boulders in the form of a miniature amphitheatre. In place of the inevitable grey wall of the cliff, the lantern-light streamed dimly upon fantastic masses of fresh, dewy vine-growth, which, climbing and creeping upwards into the darkness, hid, almost completely, beneath their snaky folds, the steeply-sloping fall of clay and stones to which they clung.

It was upon that miniature avalanche, and its fresh, green covering, that the woman so wildly cast her eyes; and lurking somewhere in those shadowy leaves was the cause of her sudden strange cry. But, whatever the cause, it rapidly became evident—from her altering pose and demeanour—that the effect was rather one of high-charged relief than of fear; that the look she cast hither and thither over that shimmering screen lay nearer to a frenzied searching for some familiar landmark, than a fearful groping after some hated, hidden presence.

And so it turned.

As her faintness gradually left her, she regarded the ‘fall’ with a glance of less eagerness and more assurance. And presently, with another exclamation, only less sharp than the preceding one, she pushed herself violently from her rock; and placing the lantern carefully on the sand beside her, fell to measuring the ‘fall-side’ with her eye and to bravely bracing her shoulders as though for an effort. Then, suddenly backing away a little, she took a run at the avalanche and clambered desperately, amid a loud rattle of falling earth and stones, a few feet up its side.

At the deafening echo of the falling debris she came to an abrupt and breathless pause; and in a moment of deep quiet that followed, cast down a peep over her shoulder to where the lantern stood glowing out like a jewel from its setting of dark shadows. And perhaps there were a something friendly and reassuring in those sweet surf-murmurs that—now that she was perched up aloft there, free of the boulder gloom—came rolling up,
once more, in great, kind sighs of welcome; for she raised her grey face seawards to the sound, and seemed to smile a little into the sea-smelling gloom. And then, very suddenly, she turned again to her task, battling with renewed vigour at the steep, and ever groping blindly for something in the shadow above her head.

Near to her searching fingers, there projected from the vines an elbow of solid rock; and below this, showing out blacker than its immediate surroundings, was a circular orifice having the appearance of a disused reptilehole. In quick succession her fingers struck upon the rock, travelled round and under it, and disappeared into the hole—to reappear in a flash with some indistinct object in their grasp.

And immediately upon her find there came a reckless rush, a furious rattle of falling refuse, and she was down upon the sand again—kneeling bowed and bent beside the lantern. And lying in her palm—held well to the light—was a little iron box, very much earth-stained and very rusty. And there were tears in the woman's eyes as she regarded it.

It was a while later—when the last, loosened pebble of the disturbed avalanche-heap had buried itself with an abrupt ‘chip’ in the sand beside her, and a tomblike quiet had settled once more upon the place—that, from far up in the more shadowy heights of the cliff-fall, there came a soft, almost inaudible ‘brushing’ sound. The woman caught it, faint as it was, and glanced up sharply from her box and brooding fit; and in a flash, her face was stricken with a dreadful look of fear, and she had sprung, crouching back against the rocks, behind her; for, hopping and flapping, with a quiet viciousness of motion, down the steep towards her, came a tiny, black shape, the like of which she had never seen before.

Softly, yet swiftly, it wormed its way hither and thither over the vine-growth, and down out of the shadow into the quivering circle of lantern-light. But even there its eerie vagueness of form still clung to it; and to the fear-distorted glance of the woman, it could have been little but a formless ball of black, right up to the moment when it reached the very lantern itself—where for the first time it wavered a little, as though fascinated by the light; and then curled itself up like a dog, and lay still.

The thing was as formless as a jelly-fish, as inanimate as a stone. Even now that it lay outlined in the glare, there was nothing upon which the woman might have fixed and said, “that is its head,” or “this its tail.” There was not even the relief of a snarling mouth, or a soft, side-glancing eye; nor yet of some caressing, purr-like sound that would so well have fitted it. There was nothing, in fact, for her to grasp at in her desperation, unless it were a vague suggestion of veiled watchfulness, as of the cat that seems to doze in its beloved firelight, yet all the while is reading the thoughts of the
dog at the other end of the hearth.

And so among the lantern-gleams and the silence the minutes passed, and still the curled-up object by the lantern had not moved; and still, with white, averted face, and lips half-opened to the threatening shriek, the woman eyed it from her rock.

But a motionless ‘fear’ soon loses its power—even the more easily cowed of birds, if given time, will come to perching upon the scarecrow—and in a brief, stark while of further watching, there was less of dread and more of curiosity in her eyes than at the first sharp touch of terror.

Upon a sudden, a puff of wind, gasping and rustling down over the cliff-edge, lifted the dread ‘object’ lightly as a feather, and deposited it, as lightly again, a few feet nearer to the woman. She cowered back at this, with a sob of fear, but a moment afterwards was leaning out again from the rock with her whole gaze concentrated upon it, as though newly struck with some half-realised familiarity in its appearance.

For perhaps a minute—with her eyes glancing and widening to some new-born fear—she watched it thus; and then, with a sudden wild blend of rush and cry, sprang forward from her rock, and blew out the light.

In the moments that followed immediately upon this sudden action of hers—either faint at the thought of its gravity, or dizzy with the blinding darkness that ensued—she swayed and staggered about that little circle of sand like one possessed. Like a mad brother shadow she swayed there among the shadows, ever on the point of falling, yet ever regaining her balance with a final jerk, until at last, snatching up the lantern with a trembling effort, she tottered off with groping hand outstretched, back into that maze of rock and ‘hidden things’ whence she had come.

Yet even when she had gone, with her panting, echoing ‘life’—when the scraping of her halting footsteps and the protesting creak of the lantern had died away dimly in the distant murk with all other signals of human life, and the miniature amphitheatre at the foot of the ‘fall’ was given over once again to its habitual serenity and gloom—even then, all was not as it had been.

Still, half-buried in the sand at the foot of the avalanche heap, lay that black, sand-trodden object. Was there nothing suggestive of human life, nothing slightly out of harmony with so desert a place, in that?

Some would have talked of dead bracken-fern; some might have whispered of dead men's clothes—few would have thought of a little, warm hat, of black and slouching felt.
Scene II.—‘Ashes.’

“. . . si come quei che stima
Le biade in campo pria che sien mature.”

—DANTE, Paradiso, can. xiii.

SHE paused at last, panting and faint, upon the doorstep; and the lantern, slipping weakly from her grasp, fell with a helpless rattle into the room. A wave of puzzled pain swept over her face as she stood blinking wearily in at the dim-lit place; and once every while she would raise her fingers to her eyes with the irritable irresolution of the weary, as though she would rub away the startled look that still hung there. Her glance, as it dwelt about listlessly on this or that rough piece of furniture, was the harassed glance of the sleeper wakened suddenly from some haunting fear into the whispering quiet of his darkened home. She had struggled wearily out of a rushing, blundering pain into a familiar peace of slow-moving lights and shadows; and she could ill reconcile the one with the other. Each detail of the little room had its complacent mock, its gleam of conscious rectitude. The primitive rubble chimney all agape with drowsy glow; the ponderous, heavy-shadowed beams, gleaming and dying in the changing light; the rows of clean, rough crockery, and the cleaner, rougher furniture;—all went to make up one great, soft-eyed reproach against this alien shadow that had broken so rudely into their fire-flashed hush and harmony. But it was upon the more humdrum objects that the eyes of the woman lingered—upon a fresh, green tendril now, that had wormed an entrance through the sloping roof-boards; now upon a grotesque shadow cast upon the wall by an ill-hammered nail; now upon a dropping log in the fire. For it was a dark hour with the woman; and our hours of darkness—as witnessed even in the suicide who winds his watch, or in the poor, pale brute in the condemned cell who sprinkles his last, few crumbs among the birds upon the sill—are essentially hours of humdrum things. Only the sinking firelight lit the room; and in time her glance was caught in and held by the glow. Her eyes grew fixed and thoughtful as she watched the embers; and presently, with a chattering shudder, she dragged forward to the chimney, and spread her hands to the warmth as if chilled. Yet the night was warmly still. Either because the motive for her action was so deep-rooted as to make it instinctive to her, or because she was intent upon her thoughts, she did not
at first appear conscious of the state of her left hand; for while the fingers of her right spread yearningly to the warmth, those of her left clung around some invisible object with as bloodless a tension as that with which the dead soldier clings to his sword. It was a grip that caved the fingers, and drove back the blood from the nails; yet, all the while, she warmed it by its fellow, as though with some notion of thawing it into relaxation.

It seemed that it was this very tenaciousness of hold that presently attracted her towards it. With the sudden back surging to her face of all her previous fear, her eye tailed slowly down towards the stiff, white thing; and, for a while, thrusting herself away from it, she watched it thus. Then, with a flash of loathing, she unclasped her fingers from the imprisoned object, which, falling to the ground, snapped open with the impact as might a metal box, and set, rolling and gleaming, hither and thither, across the room, a half dozen or so of gold and silver coins.

The fall and the havoc it created seemed to frighten the dazed woman yet more than the object had done. She drew back still further at the noise it made, gazing mistily down at the scattered coins, while wiping the released hand slowly up and down upon her skirt as does a child that has inadvertently handled some crawling object unpleasant to the touch.

Among the coins lay, all tumbled sideways, the little metal box that had held them, and though so emptied of its contents by its fall that its rusty, grooved bottom was plainly discernible, it still contained—joined as though damp-stuck to its side—what appeared to be a slip of discoloured paper. Now it came about, that as the woman's questioning eyes wandered, wavering and irresolute, among the fallen coins, they happened, in turn, upon the metal box; and at that a great change came upon them. On a sudden they became fixed, and blazed into life, and then, in a flash, all her mistiness of glance was gone, and she had swooped upon it with a reptile swiftness, snatching it up and hiding it behind her in one movement. Next moment she had gained the door, and seemed to listen as she gazed out, breathless, towards the sound of the waves.

In a while she turned in again with a sighing stretch of her arms, and moved slowly back to the fire. There she sank, presently, to her knees, and removing the paper with some difficulty from the box, dropped the latter carelessly beside her, while essaying to flatten out the former in her palm. It was a crumpled, damp-worn little slip, and crinkled, as she smoothed it, in faint forgotten protest, like the voice of some life-weary thing disturbed in death. Upon its clouded surface lay a few dim lines and letters.

She dropped into a musing fit as she scanned these wavering strokes, her breast moved quicker to some long-dead tune, and soon her lips broke free and quivered out a plaintive word.
“Ah, little grey thing!” she said, “how you would laugh if you could speak! Didn't you laugh just a little when I took you from your grave? or was that only a cry—a weary, weary cry? Why couldn't you lie still where I buried you, little grey thing? I thought I had only to take and bury you out there in the grave among the stones, and you would cease to rack and tear—you would let me be a little. But you were crueller there than here, grey thing—crueller there than here!”

She raised a weary eye to the fire, and, stretching out a hand, warmed it aimlessly for a while; then dropped again to the paper and went on:

“I thought I had buried you—you and the money and the pain all with you. I cried to myself, ‘I will bury them yonder where he was to hide; and then they will let me alone, maybe—while, did he yet come creeping, some terrible night, they would be there to his hand.’ ‘It will not be waiting,’ I said, ‘for it is long past waiting. It will only be—in case’ . . . . But it was ‘waiting.’ . . . But it was ‘waiting,’ ” she whispered, bending lower over the slip. “I only half-killed you, my enemy, in case you might yet be my friend!”

A while she bent thus in dreamy dejection; a while read things in the fire with her chin upon her palm; then stirred and spoke again:

“Ah well—why loiter? Why kneel here crooning over the fire? Do I wait a friend?” she laughed, with a bitter shrug at the embers. “Am I waiting a husband's advice as to whether I should burn it, or whether I should let it lie festering another three years? Am I waiting some neighbourly housewife—some girlish confidant—to tell me that men forget? Or”—and here she drew up with a shiver, and cast round a look at the door—“or some wasted, totter-kneed thing, that comes creeping in out of the dark, to show me that men remember! Ah! merciful God!” she moaned, with her face deep hid in her hands. “I have sinned—I have sinned!”

Nothing stirred in the room for a space. Only the fire fluttered tenderly upon the gold of the woman's bent head, as if her prolonged stillness had touched a note of pity in its heart, and that were its mute way of showing it. The night without had but few voices: and those half-hushed at most as from a whispering leaf or fern. All was very still.

This time, again, of all the many shadows, the red-sorrower by the fire was the first astir. A small movement she made—and almost indiscernible in its minuteness—yet one significant of much. A slight raising of the head, and the removal of the fingers from the eyes to the cheeks—that was all; yet slight and insignificant as it seemed, there lay a look of frightened constraint in the uncovered eyes that spoke strange things.

Then, so gently as at first to be almost inaudible, there broke from somewhere close at hand a quick-following succession of strange
movements—movements soft in themselves, but echoing clear because of the quiet.

They seemed to rustle nearer moment by moment—breathing and brushing along like leaves in the wind. And when presently they ceased, and something like a tiny, compressed cry sounded in the very room itself, the listening woman leaped, frantic, to her feet, and rounded, with limbs all braced and quivering, towards the shadowy corner whence the sound proceeded.

But the cry was merely the ‘creak’ of a rough-hinged door that was opening slowly with a jerky, uncertain movement from the inner wall of the cottage; and the sweeping sound—nothing more forbidding than the trailing of a long night-shift, the garment of a pale, solemn-faced child that stood gravely blinking there.

And there was a sharpness over and above mere motherly concern in the gladness of the woman's greeting; and a queer defiance of both look and gesture—as of some hyper-sensitive maternal fear—in the manner and measure of the caresses she bestowed upon it. . . . Indeed, in regard to this latter appearance, it almost seemed as though she lived in fear of some impending deprivation, some sudden tearing asunder of the maternal affections, so jealous were her paroxysms.

“How you scared me, child!” she gasped, trembling a little. “I must take in your shift a tuck or two; it sounds so—so ghostly when you walk!” And then suddenly she bent her head and fingered aimlessly at the rough grey gown, as if the solemn, winkless gazing of the child half-disconcerted her.

Presently she moved to a little stool at the fireside, with the child in her arms; and, sitting there, fell to chafing its obstinate toes, and crooning to it.

“Solemn-eyes,” she said, laying her pale cheek to its face, and giving it a peremptory shake as if to attract it from its fire-gazing. “What angel sent you here—it was an angel, wasn't it? No? No angel? Just mother, was it—just me? Ah, but how could that be, Solemn-eyes?” she whimpered, bending with a strange eagerness to the child's half-petulant mumblings. “How could I send you? What, dearie?—so I was talking a deal, was I. . . . and you thought it was father come back? Poor father away on the sea—way on the dark, dark sea!” and as if at the thought, she cast round an anxious look towards the door.

“What say you, child?” she ran on, bending with absent eyes to some emphatic and oft-repeated mumble of her imperious questioner. “What?—what do I talk with here, alone? What do I want that I cry so much? Just shadows, Solemn-eyes. Just to talk with the shadows, and to want them, child. As lief talk with and want the 'dead.' . . . But what makes you draw your brows down, mite? you mustn't line your brows! Shadows come with
such lines, dear; and you can have no shadows—yet!” and seized with some vague understroke of fear, she raised a trembling hand to the child's white forehead, and softly stroked it.

But no amount of stroking would smooth away the troubled rift in that white cloud. Fade and lessen it did under the soft suasion of the mother's touch, but not so far as could deceive the penetrating exaggeration of a mother's glance. To an onlooker it might have seemed something less than a 'fire-wrinkle'—a knitting of the brows with too much fire-gazing—for the child had never ceased to bathe its soul in the glow. But to the mother—with her lip and finger-proved knowledge of every dimple and line—there was but the one thing that it could be; and it was with an exaggerated reflection of the child's dim worry that she bent her face to it once more.

“What is it troubles you, mite?” she asked, half-plaintively.

The child drew its gaze, with reluctance, from the glow, and turned up its grave, thin face to hers in solemn inquiry. Long it looked into her faltering eyes, blinking and gazing alternately like some contemplative owlet. And then, as though disappointed at the result of its search, it faltered a little, and turned away to the doorway with a gleam of childish yearning and a little half-drawn sigh that seemed to breathe endearingly of someone absent.

“Oh, mite!” said the woman, sadly. “It is always ‘father’! Can it never—never be me?”

And again the child raised its eyes to hers, and again it broke from their soft, piteous pleading with that doubting falter and that little yearning sound.

“See, child!” beckoned the mother, suddenly, with ringing tremulous tones. “See to this ugly thing! Shall we burn it—shall we make a blaze?” and producing the crumpled paper she had taken from the box, she made as if to drop it into the fire.

The hand which suspended the paper over the glow waved up and shivered like a wind-caught bough. The dry lips waiting on it above, lay wide-drawn to allow free passage to the breaths that wrung the bosom. The head thrown back, the eyes half-closed and wincing, whispered how ill-held was the wrestling fear.

“Oh, child, be quick—be quick!” she said.

A smile crept into the face of the child at sight of the suspended paper; and presently a little laugh pushed through its lips.

“I-ss,” it said, with a dim enthusiasm, and put out a hand as if to help it.

So the crumpled, dog-eared slip fell fluttering among the glowing logs; flung out a feeble flare upon the woman's wan-eyed dreaming, and the
wonder of the child; and sank with a sound like a dim, far-away scream into crinkled, writhing ashes. And the two still figures sat and watched it fade. And for long after it had gone, the mother—one arm encircling the child, the other propping her chin with elbow upon knee—crouched, lowering, with rapt, half-lidded eyes, at the place where it had been.

Some long and silent minutes had passed thus, when the prolonged quiet began to tell upon the child and to beget a gentle restlessness. With its head thrown back upon its mother's shoulder, it fell to crooning tunefully in aimless sing-song; rolling its great, grave eyes about upon this object and on that, and going to its fancy-run brain for amusement where a less lonely child would have made use of its hands.

Yet, though jerked and shifted unmercifully by her restless burden, the mother gave no sign of consciousness to its little moans and movements. Nor, so deeply dream-rapt was she, did she so much as frown a protest when presently the child, with a crow of greater shrillness than usual, slipped softly from her knee to the floor, and began to play in grave delight with a gleaming, golden coin. Indeed, from the heaviness of her lids and the deepness of her breathing, she seemed to sleep.

When eventually—and it must have been some fifteen minutes later—she *did* come sighing and stretching back to a knowledge of her surroundings, it was to find the child pulling frantically at her dress, and crying—with its face deep-buried in her lap—in subdued and frightened moans. Though the vehemence of its repeated appeal and the evident sincerity of its fright were forbidding enough in their suggestions, she did not stop to wonder. At such times the purely animal instincts are apt to float uppermost. In a moment she had it close to her breast, and was crying soft snatches and phrases in its ear, as if no further thought than just its pain were buzzing in her brain.

So that it was not until as many seconds more, that a slight sound from behind brought her sharply whirling round upon her stool.

Low down upon the pitchy background of the doorway, and leering through at her with a grin of vile amusement, was the white shadow of a peeping face.

She saw it, with a catching cry; and springing from her stool, edged back beside the fire, pale and trembling—the child clinging and hiding in her arms.

“You spy—you spy!” she hissed out, breathlessly. “You frightener of children!”

The bell-ringer—for it was he—spat viciously into the gloom beside him, and slid almost without a sound into the room—the woman still backing, but with a gathering venom like that of a cornered cat, as he came. A few
feet within the doorway he stooped easily, and picking up one of the coins upon the floor, laid it ostentatiously upon a rough table beside him. Then moving back from it a little space, as if to make parade of his extreme honesty of purpose, he raised his slow, soft eyes to the woman's face and rested so.

For quite a length they eyed each other thus, these three—silent and still as tableau-actors. The child peeping, round-eyed, from the folds of its mother's skirt; the mother endeavouring to shield it with her half-turned form, yet glaring round at the ringer, the while, with a dazzled, screwed-up glance; the ringer—stumpy and motionless—feeling out softly from under his slouch with still pale eyes: thus they stood. And all the while the fire dropped and sputtered like a drowsy prayer.

“You was always a perfect lady,” he rasped out, presently, dropping his sinister eyes to the fire. “Even upon shipboard they couldn't get a kiss out o' ye, nice spoken gentlemen, some of them too! While us plainer folk was to speak in whispers and pick our language when you passed. You was always curious careful of yourself for a female convict with a record. You was always above suspicion. . . . Yet some o' us plainer folk,” he went on after a short pause, in which he had shifted a step or two nearer the fire and held out his hands to the glow, “some o' us plainer folk can't help a bit o' natural curiosity when we catch a child o' the fishing village a'moosing of its little heart with sovereigns.” And softly his eyes gleamed up at her again.

The woman gave a gasp of recollection at the word, and fluttered forward to where the coins lay scattered about the hearth. These she hastily gathered, and would have taken that one also which lay upon the table by the ringer, but that he made a sudden sidelong lurch as she was about to snatch it, and covered it neatly with a yellow hand.

“The cliff stinks queer o' nights, to them that can smell!” he whispered, peering up into her face with a meaning grin.

Back she flung from him, shivering with indignant repulsion. For his sudden swoop had brought him very close to her.

“You spy!” she breathed again, hanging off from him in helpless frenzy. “You spy!”

“You was always a perfect lady,” grinned he in quiet triumph.

“Give it me, give it me, you spy!” she said, growing incoherent in her trembling helplessness. “By whose word do you come tiptoeing here, scaring the children with your ugly ways?”

“Scaring children!” (The man laughed a deep, windy laugh, and fell to nodding his head at the child.) “Who'd have thought now that the kid 'ud been so easy scared! Who'd have thought,” he ran on, with a snigger,
removing his hat and gently smoothing it as he held it clasped before him—"who'd have thought as a thing like that 'ud scare a child!"

And here he raised again his meaning grin to the woman, who was peeping down at him with the screwed and winking eyes of one who waits a blow.

"It 'ud take a dark night, surely," he sniggered, "and a lone place, and a raw conscience, to be took aback by such a thing as that!"

She turned away quickly towards the fire, with a brave scornful laugh, and a face of sheet-white paleness.

"So they still sell their liquor good and cheap, yonder!" she said, fingering feverishly at the various articles upon the rough board that served as a fire-mantel, with a brave attempt at scornful indifference.

The ringer laughed again, nodding his black, close-cropped poll the more vehemently that he had discovered an added zest it gave to the child's white fear. Then, seating himself with a smooth, noiseless agility upon the table, he seized the coin and spun it neatly into the air.

"Good liquor," he said, catching it and fingering it lovingly, "but not cheap. Nothing good was ever bought cheap! not even favours," he added, softly, and again he fingered the coin with a loving touch—watching the woman and waiting a little.

"But you're right—as you perfect ladies always is," he resumed, replacing his hat well down on his forehead, and regarding her from beneath it through sinister, half-closed lids. "I'm not put here to scare, as you say, but to watch—to spy, if it suits ye—and to report what I see. No, and I'm not put here to draw conclusions, neither. There's them as is paid to do that, and is a queer sight quicker about it than such as I, take me! But when I sees some," he quickened, leaning forward and essaying a stealthy twitch at the woman's sleeve, "some as is accumulating sovereigns——"

"Well!" burst in the woman, rounding on him with the desperate haste of one who sees his chance and must not miss it. "And would you have me believe that the Governor suspects us of no thought—no hope—beyond these ugly sands—no dream of land and stock and wheat, such as many a worse than us has dreamed and realised? Pah! Give me my money."

"But when I sees some," repeated the ringer, leaping down lightly from the table and proffering her, from the floor at her feet, with a sharp gleam of scrutiny peeping like steel 'neath a cowl, through his leering triumph—the rusty iron box that had all along remained lying where she had dropped it. "When I sees some as is accumulating money—and a-hiding o' it"—(he paused as if to give effect to his words)—"why, seize my soul!" he cried, pitching the box from him with a magnanimous air. "A heart o' ship's tallow would harden a' times!"
The woman had turned again to the fire. Her right arm encircled the child as—still moaning faintly—it crouched close in to her side. The other, quivering spasmodically as in a palsy of rage or fear, rested along the rough shelf that did duty as a mantel. Her ruddy head was bowed and turned inward towards the fire, so that the ringer, with all his dodging scrutiny, could catch but a fire-warmed glimpse of cheek and ear.

An evil light stole into his brim-shadowed face as he stood a little behind her, waiting second by second upon her silence; and when he spoke again he had dropped his bantering air for one that was meant to be more hurtfully repellent, but in reality was less repulsive because more honestly aggressive. He was like a snake that has dropped its sting in a moment of impatience and taken to mere ugly wounding.

“Look you, my ‘plume and feathers,’” he said, coming nearer to her and shoving up close under her face the coin he had taken. “I'm a poor man, and poor men can't help but do their duty. As little can I help but report strange things seen of an evening to them as'll jump at conclusions—to them as favour the whip as a remedy for too much thinking... Here's your coin—look ye, I lay it here.” And so saying he laid it upon the shelf near her hand and drew back slowly from it; yet more with the action of an animal gathering its limbs together for a spring, than with that of a misused son of poverty magnanimously relinquishing all claim to a desirable object.

For a short breathing space she made no movement. Stone-still she stood there by the dying, soft-sputtering fire, while behind her watched the ringer with a sly, motionless stare of uneasy triumph.

Presently she stirred a little—it might have been a sigh; it might have been a slow bracing of the shoulders for some violent effort. A moment more, and her eyes made a furtive movement sideways, till they rested upon the little golden disc at the other end of the shelf—her dry lips gradually compressed—her breast heaved to a quicker note—and then, with a little shrill scream, she shot out her hand to the coin and snatched it into her side.

At that there rang out an oath behind her, and clipping short upon it a quick ugly movement like a menace. But when round she swept at the sound with her hand clutching at her fierce-heaving bosom, and a great wild laugh of triumph on her lips and eyes, he backed a little like a wary crab and cursed her from a distance.

“You fool!” she cried, with a shrill, mad rush of scorn. “One would have thought, when they made you the foul, misshapen thing you are, they'd have thrown in a brain or two above the ordinary to level the balance! Ah! don't come near me,” she threatened, as her cruel words bit deep and he turned upon her with bared gums. “Stop where you are—or as there's a
God above us, I'll scream the neighbours on ye! We're a set of weak, drudging women, but the very hate in us will make us strong. Aye! be careful of yourself, I warn you, my fine gentleman! There's Big Janet Bane owes you stripes for John, her husband's sake! There's Mary Field, and Liz, and old witch Bess; all glittering keen to feel you! Ah! take care of yourself, I ask you!"

Here she broke off abruptly, glaring mutely at him, and clutching at her bosom for breath. He had watched her while she spoke, quiet, but for his working fingers, and evil, slow-shifting eyes. Now that she paused, he bent towards her; thumbing it over his shoulder towards the dark door-disc, and grinning.

“I've seen some,” he whispered, hoarsely, “as has offered more than a sovereign after the fourth or fifth cut on the same pulsin' spot. . . . You'd be surprised how them little chaps do scream.”

Again she laughed out, wildly.

“Take that to the play-actors down on the quay,” she cried. “Likely they're in want of a buffoon. . . . And look you, Mr. Government-Spy,” she ran on in her strident scorn, “we know something more of you, down in the cove, than you suppose. We know the high and moral character you hold yonder with them that can draw conclusions. We know that did you so much as dare to go creeping and squirming with a rambling tale of hidden money and strange doings, and nothing to show for it—those whose place it is to draw conclusions would draw them and send you shuffling. Aye! and I don't mind telling you—now that no harm can come of it—what I knew. . . . I knew that if you'd been able to stifle your greed, and carry the money yonder, along with your tale, they'd likely have pricked up their ears; for cash is none so plentiful with you that you can afford to throw it away for the sake of revenge—and they know it. You love your money and what it brings you even more than revenge—and they know that too. But I might have spared myself even that much fear! I might have known that was too simple a bird for your little stone! I might have remembered that money was drink in your hand! Aye! you'd just chance a little, and add a value to your coin! You'd add a gusto to your stolen drinks! I was to give it to you, was I? I was to make you quite sure of it, and sure of myself as well? I was to give you the stop-money that you might know there was something to stop? You forgot I was only a woman, and likely to snatch— —Oh! soul alive!” she cried, with a breathless quiver of laughter. “Did they leave the humour with the brains, fool, that you do not scream——?”

Bending a little under her withering tongue, he had turned and moved off towards the door. Her voice had risen in vehemence as the distance widened between them, till—as he neared the entrance—it had seemed to
touch the pitch of scornful abandon. But when, upon his arrival there, he
turned upon her with a snatching rush, she withered to a breathless pause
and backed a step or two.

The man was in ugly plight. His waxen face was gashed across with a
silly, baffled grin, and his eyes were dull as steel. He had snatched his hat
from his head in a fit of sullen frenzy, and was shifting it this way and that
in his yellow fingers, and dodging about him with his baleful eyes, as if
uncertain whether to go or stay.

On a sudden he seemed to struggle with his mood, and took a heaving
step towards her.

“You say right, wench!” he panted, wresting some silver object from his
pocket and thrusting it out in quivering hand towards her. “You say right! I
love the money—I love the drink! This little shilling’s worth a sovereign to
my poor pocket—worth a mine to me!” Then raising the coin high above
his head, he flung it, clinking and bobbing, at her feet; and with a steely
backward gleam, sprang panting into the night.

Woman-like she sped after him to the door, throwing out peal on peal of
wild, derisive laughter. But it was poor, fluttering, broken-winged stuff at
the best. And so she seemed to feel; for she cried it again and again, with
pitiful attempts at greater force and assurance, and pitifully lessening
results.

She was still leaning there—still crying out her fears after the vanished
ringer—when a quick-springing shadow flittered faint across the doorway;
and again the white, grinning face, with its nodding hat-brim, peered up
abruptly out of the silent gloom. It caught her with a childish jeer upon her
lips, and her excited eyes all gleaming and glowing with her triumphs, and
the reckless abuse they allowed. And it drove her clutching back against
the table, with her poor, limp body waning and withering, yet for all that
spoiling for another fight.

“So there ye stand, mistress,” said the ringer, presently, leaning forward
into the room as he spoke, with one foot raised upon the doorstep. “So
there ye lean with your sunny laughter and your blooming cheeks. And so
ye'll bloom on, and laugh on, like the brackens on the cliff yonder, till ye
snap—like them; and then ye wither, fast—fast! Keep your laughter close,
mistress, for ye may want it. Keep it by ye when the fire drops low, and the
night-gust comes sucking through the bracken, mumblin' to itself and
stirring up the sand around the hut, like it was some crazed animal. Have it
near when things is that black and still, ye begin to fancy footsteps, halting
and creeping, ‘swhip—swhip’ along the walls. Have it handy when ye
wake, peering and listening, in the dark alone—for there's one—out here—
always watching and waiting!”
The voice sank away and was silent. But the face remained framed in the doorway with poison in its look. Presently, without a sound, that too was gone, and from somewhere without the dim hut-walls there came the echo of a low, soft laugh.

Upon his disappearance the woman had pushed forward vaguely a few feet from the table, and there paused, listening, with hand-clasped cheeks and little choking throat-sounds, as a faint ‘swip—swip,’ as of footsteps, rose and died along the wall. When this too had gone, as it did almost upon its birth, she freed herself with a shiver as if from a spell, and ran once again to the doorway with a plaintive murmur on her lips.

“Oh, Jim—if you would but come—if you would but come!” she breathed.

For quite a long while she stood peering out into the darkness, seawards, as though half-expectant of some answer to her appeal, either by approaching footsteps or shadow. And then, as second followed upon second, and the gloom remained empty of all save the sea-breaths, she seemed to weary of her quest, and turned in again, with a queer, little unrestrained sob, towards the fire.

From down near her knees, as she moved, came a wee small echo of her grief—faint and softly-petulant, like a gentle combination of reminder and reproach. And, with a fresh burst of sobbing, she drew the child closer to her, and moved over to the hearth. There, with one arm still around it, she replenished the dying embers with a few fresh billets, and hung over the flare of the new-born flames as though glad of their companionship.

The child's wide eyes were still fixed fearfully upon the doorway, and presently the mother, with a half-sob at the sight, and a quick, shuddering back-glance in the same direction, knelt down upon the hearth, and gently drew the strained face to her cheek.

“Mite! mite!” she moaned, with her eyes deep-set in the fire, “to think that God should let anything so foul come into your innocent life! Oh, Jim—if you would but come—if you would but come!” But here she tripped upon her words in a strange, quick way, and the faint blood fled her cheeks. Passing her disengaged hand into the pocket of her dress, she wrested thence the three or four coins that she had lately picked from the floor.

“Ah, Mite!” she said, holding them gleaming and flashing towards the flames. “They will not burn as did the chart—the hard, cold things! We cannot burn them, Mite. Look how they gleam and flash, all white and gold! I even stinted you to make them, dear, and—and I lied to him! See how they turn on me—see how they gleam and flash!”
Scene III.—‘The Shadow in the Gully.’

“. . . . ma non ciascun segno
E buono, ancor che buona sia la cera.”

—DANTE, *Pur.,* canto xviii.

OUTSIDE, in the shadow of the heavily-creepered walls, the hunched form of the ringer bent, listening.

A few feet along the wall to his left, a flickering path of light streamed out into the night from the hut doorway; and when presently this was blurred by a sudden leaping shadow, and someone peered out seawards from the doorstep, he slid back noiselessly into deeper darkness, and made off, cliffwards, round the rear of the hut.

With an instinct almost supernatural—for his eyes must still have been blinded by the door-dazzle—he leapt the uneven fence of piled logs that surrounded the sand-blown garden, and dodged, zigzagging, through a field of tiny boulders that lay behind it. Then inclining a little to his right, he made at a jerky half-trot across the hundred yards or so of bare flat soil that lay behind the village, and on to the gloomy, bracken-choked gully running inland from the centre of the cove cliffs, where he struck upon a winding pathway leading upward along the gully-bed.

Just in the mouth of the gully he paused—drawing aside a little into the murk of fern and cliff that formed its fringe—and peeped back eagerly into the cove; his slow eyes glinting watchfully along the line of hut-backs as though he feared a possibility of espial in their peaceful, flame-chinked shadow. And then, as if partially reassured by his scrutiny, he turned slowly inland again with a grudging grunt of satisfaction, and resumed, at a more sedate pace, his journey up the gully-path.

The rising moon was barely at the full, and only half-dispelled the darkness with its sickly gleam. Already dreaming—and breathing in its dreams with the softest of dim night-breaths—the rugged, rock-strewn valley lay shrouded in a vague, checkered garment of pale lights and deep-set shadows, and made known its resentment at the ringer's progress with the little stirs and rustles common to half-broken slumber. In every available earth-pocket, tall, rank-stemmed clusters of bracken formed cavern-like blotches upon lighter backgrounds of rock, and teemed with the marshy whisperings and hummings of the night-insects; while one other voice—a single, long-drawn whistle, like the night wail of some belated
marsh-bird—low and sweet and resonant of ineffable loneliness, came rising and falling at intervals out of the inland gloom.

With scabbard flapping and brim nodding to a vague and absent step, the ringer toiled up the winding streak of pathway. Intricate and steep as were its leadings, he seemed to rely entirely upon mere memory, or instinct, as his guide; for his eyes were vague with vicious reminiscence, and his lips overflowed in a perpetual bubbling of invective, that could have had less than little in common with the moment.

It may well have been instinct also—or perhaps a momentary conjunction of both instinct and reminiscence—that provoked him to snatch in reckless petulance at such isolated fronds of bracken as brushed him in his passage, and, with the aid of his strong, white teeth, to tear in vicious meditation the broken fragments that his clutch retained; though it must be admitted there were some few darker moments when—the muttered bubblings effervescing into a sniffling wheeze of laughter, and the savage mastications subsiding to a quiet gustatory sucking of the mutilated fern—there rose a whisper as of some uglier promptings than the two just named.

There was a sensible darkening of the pathway as he drew the further inland; for though the rocks thinned out a little, yet the sides of the gully took a steeper slope, the fern a ranker, closer growth, and here and there a fleshy-leaved ‘wattle’ gloomed the shadow with its bushy head. The man's naturally-bowed body bent yet further towards the earth, while his lips took on a more animated muttering as the valley closed in thus upon him. It seemed that he had unconsciously deepened the colour of his meditations to suit that of his surroundings—much as the insect immigrant of gloom will take a gloomy habit. In this grim, black spot of moving life, crawling its quiet way along the grey-dark depths of the valley, there was added such an intensity to the gloomy scene as that whereby the genius-artist—with that last, semi-accidental dab of his sensitive brush—brings an otherwise masterly landscape to a point of completeness undreamed of even by himself. The ringer was as much a night-bird, as much a part of the gully shadows, as the vague, moss-winged things that flip-flapped over his head, and croaked at him ever and again in the darkening way.

So, brushing through the fern clumps, and clattering carelessly over the loose metal that bestrewed his path, he had perhaps put half a mile between himself and the settlement, when the subtle and audible imaginings with which he was still beguiling the way, dropped upon a sudden from a low, pleasant laughing-fit to a slithering whisper, and jerking himself sharply to a stooping posture with craned and listening head, he came to a noiseless, watchful stop.
Immediately to the right of him—as he hung thus like a pointing dog among the bracken—a faint, grass-grown track branched off from the main path, and twisted sharp to the right up the steep gully-bank with the promise of a short cut seemingly long disused to the bracken-fringed level above. But the thin winding streak had barely threaded its laborious way to a half-way point between the foot and summit of the bank, when the promise given at its birth was rendered doubtful to such stranger eyes as might happen to observe it from the gully below by an apparent wavering, followed by yet another sudden twist to the right, this time out of sight, round a great, ragged shoulder of rock which towered out now from the dim-lit, sparsely-foliaged bank with something of the symmetry and grandeur of a ruined watch-tower.

Deep sunk among the friendly fern—with his pale eyes trained, unwaveringly still, upon this tower-like rock—the ringer wore rather the demeanour of one who waits, with a nicely finished calculation of effects, upon a consummation perfectly grasped and understood, than—as his former movement seemed to indicate—of a man startled into an expectation of he knows not what. In the eager tension of his parted lips—in the easy breaths that brushed them, and the glimmer of a dragging smile they shaped—there was anticipatory suggestion of that enviable frame of mind, best-expressed, perhaps, as ‘confidently aggressive’ (and more usually, it must be admitted, assigned to the hero in melodrama) wherein was shadowed forth the presage of some coming trial of strength, in which the one side was to enter upon the struggle with an unfair knowledge of the other's weakness, and an unrelenting revelling in its own unbounded powers. Into the fingers of the hand with which he up-buoyed his crouching body from the earth, a drawn knife had somehow found its way; while in the grasp of the other, a bracken-stem—twisted, yet still clinging to its root—quivered as if in strained readiness to swing him to his feet.

So—he seemed to wait. And presently, like a titter in the silence, that for which he watched and waited came.

Down over the pathway from the watch-tower rock slid a sudden, pattering rush of displaced gravel and stones.

Rolling and jostling and leaping they came, with a half-human sound like the far-off clatter of tongues, and a quaintly-human suggestion as of a jumbled, frenzied revelling in a life too short to be honestly merry; and coming to nestling stop at last—as must the shortest, merriest life—in a dull rustling silence at the bottom.

The ringer leapt to his feet at the sight, and drew a little backward with the knife clutched uncertainly in his hand, as though half in expectation of a further and more momentous advent behind the gravel. And then as
nothing further appeared to mar the pale surface of the slope, he relaxed his

guard a little, and busied himself in groping after a particular, dark mass of
debris that had found a resting place—strangely in advance of the rest of
the shower—somewhere in the bracken at his feet.

With a little, hoarse breath, he presently snatched out something from the
bushes, and held it close to his eyes. It was neither a stone, nor a lump of
clay—but a shoe, of new, coarse leather; and upon the left side, near the
heel, a rough-burned brand of the broad arrow showed up, faintly, beneath
the crust and dust of recent travel.

Hardly had he given it a look, when with a quick glance up the steep, he
cast it from him; and, with a rapid sidelong motion of both hands and feet,
began to edge silently upward along the path towards the tower rock. As he
neared the dark-looming mass and the shoulder round which the path
disappeared, he slackened to a more cautious pace; and before he actually
rounded it, stopped altogether, changing his knife, which he had ere that
carried betwixt his teeth, to his left hand, and bracing his supple body as if
for a possible encounter. Then stealthily crawling up close, he thrust his
head round the corner.

After turning the shoulder, the path skirted for a few level yards along the
base and shadow of the rock; and then, running out into the pale light again
on the further side, continued its upward journey, in a gentle slope, to the
wall of bracken on the gully-edge. It was up this last vague incline, that—
as the eye of the ringer roved guardedly over the scene—a gaunt, tottering
shadow was weakly scrambling. Poor, terrified, trembling thing! even
weak and lame as it seemed, it had almost reached the desired shelter,
almost blended its unwieldy body with the shadowy wall of bracken at the
edge, when, with a yell, the ringer saw it, and went clattering after it along
the rocky pathway with cruel, echoing shouts.

Even judging the chase from the half-humorous, half-earnest aspect in
which the ringer himself seemed to regard it, it could hardly have been
deemed attractive. There are some few descriptions of the practical jest that
have need of a simultaneous sense of the humorous side—and of the
liabilities respectively entailed—in both of the parties, to become a
complete success, and here, perhaps—as in many cases of the kind—the
quarry was hardly in a condition to throw himself fully into the humour
and necessities of the occasion. And yet if we but look at the question from
his own point of view, the ringer's subsequent outburst of feeling will not
appear so unnatural, for even your more moderate of sportsmen is allowed
a certain latitude of expression and feeling in dealing with a quarry so
devoid of all sense of pluck and precedent as to fall a-whining at the
huntsman's knife in preference to even a nominal attempt to put a safe
distance between itself and the same. So that we may look upon it as a
natural expression of natural disgust that the ringer should show up rather
violently splenetic, when—with hardly a further effort—the gaunt quarry
of the moment sank, tamely groaning, among the bracken on the brink,
and—despite sundry kicks and hustlings that (either in the heat or
furtherance of the sport) it seemed expedient to the disappointed huntsman
to apply—would not or could not budge a further step.

There it lay—this crazy, ragged heap, this frenzied human thing—
cowering down and waiting, as a weak, mangy rat lies waiting the jaws of
the terrier, and squealing a little, too, in a craven, rat-like way, almost
before it felt them.

“Ah! for the love o' God, master!” it croaked, with a hoarse, dry sound.
“You've a heart somewhere—strike harder—strike your heaviest. . . . No—
no, master!” it shrieked out in agony, clinging in weak desperation to the
foot that was spurning it, and laying its gaunt, hungry cheek close beside;
“don't haul me baek—don't haul me back, master! I can't bear it again! The
mere whistle of the thing would drive me crazed! I'm only half alive,
master, no food, no drink for days. . . . Ah! for God's love—ye'd do it for a
broken-backed dog—do it for me!”

And then, as though weakened by the force of his useless appeal, the
grey-haired, tattered creature fell back, weakly sobbing, among the
trampled bracken.

If we are to credit the bell-ringer with a sense of humour, it must partake
of that refined and deep-seated quality that shows a sour face to anything
that is not of the extremest subtilty of wit, or the most delicate incongruity
of suggestion, for he seldom smiled. That he did so now would seem to
bear out our reservation. Here was the grotesque refinement—a rare-met
mingling of such naturally opposed opposites as giant stature, grey, lank
locks, and childish sobs—to give the required fillip to his imagination, and
here a hoarse laugh in his throat as he bent over it in the gloom.

“So here ye are,” he said in semi-soliloquy. “Here ye lies, with your rags
and your cry-blubbering like the rest o' them. . . . What is it ye meet out
yonder in the ‘Blue-scrub,’ all of ye, that ye come mewing back with your
tame-pussies' eyes, and your mammy-prayers, and the spirit all wrung out
o' ye like water from a rag? One 'ud swear the niggers had the truth, with
their water-devils and such!”

“Aye—aye—aye!” came a muffled, frenzied moan—for the creature did
not raise his face to speak. “Patient, panting, persevering devils, gripping
ye by the throat—mocking ye—sticking their dreams o' water in your
eyes—dreams o' water—dreams—o'—water;” and thus repeating like a
weak appeal it dwindled to a whimper, and went out.
At one end of the poor complaining heap, a bony foot showed yellow and bare against the bracken; and at sight of this—like a man flung back by some chance act or word upon a dim-formed, half-forgotten suspicion, the ringer snatched a swift breath like a laugh, and bent down lower into the fern.

“Look you, mate,” he said, stirring up the heap with his foot. “Where was you bound for down that hill?” The man lifted his face from among the fern with a flash of cunning.

“Bound for, master?” he asked, slowly, dwelling on each word as if to give himself thinking time. “Why, for food—for food and for drink.”

“None o’ that!” yelled the other, seizing him viciously by the collar, and shaking him till the grey dust flew.

“Such as you don't go crawling to the bare sands for food, nor to the sea for drink, neither. . . . Come!” (and he panted out an impatient laugh) “what was your game?”

“Game!” mouthed the poor wretch, breathlessly, but the child's word rang like ‘pain’ on his cracked lips. “It's no game! I saw it away down yonder—I swear I saw it!—Look!” he cried, staggering in wild eagerness to his knees, and pointing away down the gloomy gully: “see it now! It's no dream—no Jack-o-lantern! It glimmers steady like the blessed light in a window! There's water—there's food, there!——God!” he whispered, clasping his withered hands, “how my throat aches for it!”

“A—h!”

It was the ringer this time that gave fierce tongue to his pain; for he, too, had caught the light as it lay deep-set in the blackness far below. Many were the pitchy nights he had flung his grateful curses at it and felt a stumbling way down into the cove by its pin-point glimmer. But now as he eyed it, there came rising out of its depths a light so pale and hostile, so smiling-soft and cruel, as to set the man's great dog-teeth driving deep into his lips—a reminiscent gleam of eyes and hair and half-turned cheek: all quivering with insulting triumph, and quavering with an oft-repeated, breathless whisper like a thin-toned woman's curse. “Foul and misshapen—foul and misshapen!” it said.

“Master!” whispered the wretched felon, edging wildly to the other's feet and peering up into his face in a dumb agony of supplication. “You're silent, master! What is it makes ye silent? Is the pity rising in your heart for a half-crazed, half-dead thing? Are ye wondering to yourself whether the old bruised hide's worth the dragging back to the triangles? Ah!” he screamed out in a terrible voice, “I can see it, master! I can see it in your good, white face! pity me!—pity me!”

But the other was deafened by the tumult of his thronging thoughts, and
heard and answered nothing. Plucking at his lips, and trembling a little, he scowled down thoughtfully at the light from beneath his lowered brim. He seemed to calculate.

“Master!” croaked the felon again, worming a little closer through the rustling bracken. “There was a time—true as sin there was—when the weak-kneed, hollow-faced thing ye see took a pride in himself—took a pride in his strength and his looks. . . . Look at me, master! See what they've worked me to! See how they've lashed the spirit out of me! See what they've left to lash again—a few loose bones—a few sharp nerves—for I can feel, master—I can still feel.” And here his cry died plaintively away to a kind of whimpering mumble. And thus, for a space, he hung kneeling there in the bracken; with his dry lips murmuring soundlessly, and his hollow eyes raised, winkless and dog-like, towards the ringer's brooding countenance.

Yet still the ringer moped and brooded; motionless but for, now and then, a trembling shiver—strange in form so sturdy—and now and then a slow, tight wrestling of the yellow fingers that clasped so lovingly behind the brooding back. Further than this, and for many a throbbing second, he was silent. But through it all, though motionless himself, a certain suggestion of half-conscious secrecy, visible in his attitude—such as a man, having plans in his mind as regards another, might unconsciously assume in his presence—seemed to indicate a still lively, if not malicious, interest in the movements of his companion.

At last, dim and swift, like the sputter of a spark, came a change of attitude. It was a movement, or string of movements, so small as to be barely noticeable—a quick up-throwing of the chin, followed as quickly by a gleam as of glass in the hat-shadowed face, and a panting sound that might have been rage or laughter. But dim as were its indications, and insignificant as it appeared, the grey, staring watcher chose to take it as his warrant; and, wheezing out a dreadful imitation of the sound, flung himself in a hopeless tattered heap, face downwards, in the bracken.

He moaned a little, there, like a plaintively-petulant child; and this falling cry of his was, for a while, the only break to the quiet. But, presently, again came that strange soft stir and gleam, and again the choking breath, half-mirth, half-spleen, seeming to stab the silence.

“Curse ye!” cried the wretched man, glaring up suddenly at the sound. “You've little to splutter over, little to plume yourself on! It's my cursed appetite that did for me—that always did for me—!” and he broke off discordantly with a weary smile upon his lips, and a flash of pitiful reminiscence in his eyes.

At this, very thoughtfully, as though but half-roused by the words, the
dim form of the ringer began to face round towards him. The frenzied, upturned face of the prostrate man watched the glint of white flesh beneath the hat brim, as it slowly faced around, with a fixed intensity of expression that only the last lingerings of some hopeless hope could have brought into existence. And when at last the dark, squat shape had ceased to turn, and rested silent and facing him, the maddened creature leapt to his feet with an excited cry, and plunging over to the other's knees, peered up, quaking with dread and eagerness, into his very face.

For a moment the extreme suddenness of the movement startled the ringer into helplessness; but the next, quickly recovering himself, he shot out an arm and an oath, and sent the weak, chattering creature hurtling back into the bracken.

"Don't move—don't shift a hair!" cried he, bending with a glare of menace over the upturned face. Then suddenly dropping his menacing air for one of half-sulky secrecy, he repeated the words in a hissing whisper: "don't shift a hair!"

Only desisting in his warnings for a moment that he might pierce the gloom around them with that same sulky assumption of secrecy in his glance that had distinguished the action preceding it, he then returned upon him with a snap.

"Be still—be silent, fool!" he rasped. "As like as not they watch us now—the soft-eyed curs! The boats must be well in by now! I know of one or two that would go further and do further than hang around of a pleasant night, if by such they might gain a word agen' old Dan! Aye! old Dan Gadban!" he declaimed, in half-soliloquy. "Sneered at for his deformities; cursed because of his prying ways; feared because his name spells 'cat,' and his little finger raised means the feeling o' it! For he's no child's favourite hereabouts, this Gadban; he's the kind of stinging worm to tread upon if ye can do it careful—is Gadban the spy." And at that the dull eyes of the speaker gleamed out a little from their secrecy.

"But see here, friend," he continued, bending closer over the man and dropping his voice a tone further. "This Dan Gadban of ours—chief adviser, inspector, spy, as ye like it—he's sick and tired o' the old scars, sick and tired o' dragging back the old hides to the 'tanners.' Give us something newer, fresher; something more o' the hearty-fed knifer; something less o' the cry-baby; something that don't get you laughed at, and jeered at, and hustled, as ye lump it through the town yonder——"

"Ah! yes—yes!" burst in the felon, clasping his bony arms about the other's knees, and hugging them to his breast. "Sick of it, master—dead-sick of it!"

"Keep off, will ye?" growled the other, freeing himself roughly. "I said,
‘sick of it,’ didn't I? Them's the words I spoke! You're the seventh as come chattering and goggling into my arms, praying for food and drink, as if I was a bible-teacher poking for curiosities upon the sea-shore. I'm no bible-teacher!”

“Aye!” he growled on, working himself to a passion which a certain quiet slyness in his eyes seemed to belie. “Who is it that sets ye all dragging ye're bones here-ways? There's places plenty and to spare where ye can finish it decently—without making me a laughing-stock! There's quietnesses enough back there in the scrub where a man may lie in peace! But 'no,' says you; you must all come adventuring your poor old bones a' Gadban's Beat!”

Here the speaker broke off abruptly, drawing himself up from his victim with a snap of irritation; yet studiously avoiding, even in the heat of these indignant movements, the steady knife-gleam of the felon's eyes.

“Even supposing——” he began again suddenly; and then, as suddenly broke off again, with pursing lips and shaking head, as though he found the thought ridiculous at its birth, and hardly worth the telling.

“Yes—yes, master,” urged the felon, panting and rustling an inch or two nearer to the speaker. “Supposing—supposing——?”

“Even supposing—I'm only supposing, mind ye—I was to let ye free (hands off, will ye, and let me speak!) —free to crawl round a day or so longer, playing go-seek with death in this 'ere thirsty scrub. What 'ud be the finish o' it? I'll tell ye! You'd come moaning and staggering into the town, as others have done, praying for the whip, and a drop 'o cool water with it. . . . Aye—and getting old Gadban wigged and cursed for a'missing of ye for so long—that's the size of it!”

The other was on his knees now in the bracken, quivering mutely, and stretching out his thin, grey paws in supplication.

“No—no!” he crackled hoarsely, urging out the thick, dragging words with a dreadful vehemence. “Oh, no—no! Let me free—only let me free. . . . I'll die here in the brackens sooner than cause ye hurt. . . . I will—I will!”

“That ye would—that ye would,” burst in the spy, in high and righteous dudgeon. “And be found a' Gadban's Beat by some idle, pious fool, starved to death. And who'd be blamed for it—who'd lose his place for it?”

The felon shifted uncertainly at this, and cast round a wan and wondering glance into the grey dusk about him as though he would seek there, among the moon-shadows, for some meaning to it all. And then, as if by that one weary peep he had achieved his object, he threw out a little, cracked laugh like a croak, and dropped back slowly into the bracken.

“Good sport, master!” he cried out, presently. “Good sport—ye soul-less devil!” And then again he laughed; and this time the echoes pealed with the
ugly sound.

As for the spy he had begun to moisten his lips and quake a little as he hung regarding the vagaries of this merry, grotesque gentleman. There was a delicacy of touch required in the little net he was weaving; and so far, but for this untimely din of laughter, all had turned so smoothly. True—it had its grating suggestions: this untimely din. There had been some other distempered cur—one of the wretched seven, it seemed—afflicted much as this when first discovered crawling in the bracken; and he had died in snaps and snarls. True—it had a penetrating sound; and rang in the ears—aye! and in the heart—with something of the helpless and cowardly regret which the inexorable 'trickle—trickle of a leaking sea-dyke might be supposed to hold for the hand and the heart that had mischievously started it. But bah! it would serve its purpose, it would meet its end! A broken jug would do to hold his liquor—he was not fastidious to an appearance.

. . . . Still, it must hold the liquor. . . . there may be too rough a tune for even the tough chord of the human heart. Take care that you bruise it not, lest it play discordant; take care that you do not snap it, for it will not mend.

So, in a little, the bell-ringer dropped a thoughtful gleam upon the far-away light; and, as though debating some doubtful and delicate policy in his mind, took on a lip-gnawing steadfastness a while. And the felon had long since laughed himself into silence, when—darkening his face with a final tug at his hat-brim—the schemer turned again upon him, and stirred him with his foot.

“Look up, man—see yonder light?” he said.

But the grey, dusty heap had now reached a stage when words are sounds and no longer penetrate. Even to give it a semblance of life was a task requiring considerable exertion. And it was only to a prolonged and unceasing treatment of growing prods and nudges, that it, at last, vouchsafed a response; and that, with a fierce up-darting of the head that was more than half-way to a menace, and a covert, winkless eye that sought for no other light than that which glinted fitfully from beneath the ringer's hat.

“See yonder light, fool!” repeated the latter with a show of irritation to cover the quake in his voice. “Yonder—yonder, fool!” and he beckoned away at the light with trembling fingers.

But it was only the swiftest, most transitory of glances he could obtain of him—then back again with a covert flash to his settled, winkless stare.

“There's a settlement down yonder,” said the spy. “A pious set o' snatch-handkerchiefs turned fishermen. I'm set here to keep an eye on their prayer-meetings, and they know it. Them that owns that light is the piousest. I've
been a’watching on them close upon three months—Them that owns that light. And they'll risk it, and take ye in, and give ye food and drink, and welcome, because you're a ‘runaway,’ and agen' me—that's if ye don't say I sent ye. . . . Now be off down,” he cried, turning away quickly, and waving a stiff, vague hand. “Get off down—I'm sick o' bones!”

Upon that he made a swift movement as if about to pace away inland through the bracken, but hardly had he taken a step in that direction when an after-thought seemed to strike him, and he rounded once again upon the silent felon.

“And see here,” he cried, in a spluttering voice, “I'll be watching ye as ye go—mind that! No tricks, mind; no slippings off into that thirsty scrub; no making for anything but the light yonder, and the food and drink it promises ye. . . . I'll be watching ye,” he quickened, “till ye enter the very doorway—and soft moments are rare moments with Dan Gadban!”

The man's harsh tones fell mingling away with the night-whispers, but still the two forms hung watching one another, motionless and silent, like players at the beginning of a doubtful game.

The ringer was the first to move. Perhaps the dim, death-still face of the starving man affected him unpleasantly, as it peered greyly at him over the uneven surface of the bracken; or it may be that a disquieting sense of having overdone his part was beginning to make itself felt within him. In any case he yelled out suddenly with a great impatient oath, and thrust back a menacing step or two towards the other.

“What makes ye squat there, staring like a corpse?” he rasped out. “Be ye waiting till I change my mind? Come, man,” he urged, vainly endeavouring to infuse an element of blunt heartiness into his threatening tones. “Slip down and get a bite o' something—ye look to need it badly. . . . And look ye—it'll be ‘swish—smack—smart’ for you and them that houses ye, if I find ye still lying there in the hut when I call round in the morning, and ye may bet your skin on that!”

Half-walking, half-crawling, with that still, grey face of his back-staring always towards his captor, as if still instinctively fearful that all was not for nothing, the felon began to rustle off in the direction of the gully. In his hungry features there sat a sinister mingling of dazed incredulity and cunning. He seemed to struggle mentally with some elusive problem which his rusty faculties were incapable of entertaining, far less explaining.

On the brink of the gully he stopped, and slowly and warily drew himself up to his full height, while, with his hungry eyes still fixed unwaveringly upon the motionless figure of his companion, he appeared to weigh out something in his mind. This, then, seemed to occupy him, second by second, till, cowering suddenly down as though to ward off some
anticipated onslaught, he threw out a whispering cry across the bracken:—
“Master, supposing you were to call in to-night!”

Almost like an echo of the words, there came a hoarse, bellowing shout, and a mad rustling and tearing of the bracken, and the spy had leapt upon the tottering figure with the fury of a savage animal, and borne it, feebly-struggling, to the earth.

“So ye would make terms,” he bellowed, pinioning the other's arms with his hands, and thrusting his working face to within a few inches of the soft-glowing eyes. “You, with the lash a-hungering for your back; you, with your throat burning for want o' a cooling drop; you, with your child's tears and your flabby limbs, seeking for terms!” And, bursting in a fit of gasping, breathless laughter, he drew himself up from his victim, and spurned him where he lay.

As for the prostrate man, he neither winced nor groaned to the blow. Indeed he seemed scarcely to breathe as he lay there, crouched, upon his side, his chin thrust deep into his chest, and his lids half-shut upon his eyes with the nerveless look of one already dead. Yet for all his death-quiet airs there was glowing a red, live coal beneath those lids, a living spark that needed no livening, a quiet fire not easily quenched.

The ringer hung watching him a while in uneasy laughter and silence, and then either losing patience or taking fear at his quiet, bent with a pettish whisper and peered down into his face.

“Come, none o' them sulks, mate!” he growled, stretching out a hand that quivered with rage or apprehension, and shaking the limp form roughly.

“Be ye going down, or be ye coming with me?”
A little, gruff murmur rose like an answer from the felon.

“Always with you,” it croaked, half dreamily. “Always with you.”

Down bent the other with a great oath.

“Be ye crazy, be ye sun-mad?” he cried, “that ye see no difference between baring and bending your shoulders to the cat and having me, Dan Gadban, police-officer on duty over the fishing-settlement—a-putting in my say, a-using o' my influence, to keep it off ye?”

“Ah!” burst out the wretched man, starting up from his bracken couch, all a-tremble with vague alarms. “Ah master! the stripes, the stripes!” And once again he clasped the ringer's legs in wild appeal.

And this time the ringer did not reject him.

“Aye, aye, mate,” he said, patting the heaving shoulders soothingly. “I see a way, I see a way. There's a chance, a fine chance, mate!”

Mistily feeling his forehead, and as mistily peering about him into the silent gloom, the felon then raised himself to his knees.

“Aye,” he kept repeating, vaguely, to himself. “There's a chance, a
chance.”

And still peering about him with his hunted eyes, sometimes down at the warm glimmering light, sometimes down into the deep-shadowed gully, but again and again returning with a cunning, doubting scrutiny to the shadowy features of the spy, he rose unsteadily to his feet and began to clamber down the gully bank.

He had tottered but a few yards down the steep, when quite suddenly a fit of trembling seemed to seize him, and presently his limbs gave way beneath him and he sank to his knees upon the margin of the path. There, steadying himself by a cluster of coarse fern, he looked up—with his lips working and his hunted eyes full of venom—to where the spy bent watching him from the edge above. And the sound of his laboured breathing came beating up out of the shade.

“A starved, feeble thing, master!” rose his rasping cry. “A starved feeble thing! But not always feeble, not always starved! Don't think to go back on it, to-night; don't think it, master! Or 'fore God! it will grow strong, and be your death!”

Then, jerking himself once again to his feet—but with his venomous eyes fixed to the last upon his captor—the grey, gaunt shadow slunk away downward into the gully, and was swallowed up in the gloom.
Scene IV.—‘The Shadow by the Fire.’

“Iscod di mano a lui che la vagheggia,
Prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla,
Che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
L’anima semplicetta che sa nulla.”

—DANTE, Petr., can. xvi.

HUSHED and empty lay the small bare room, glinting and dimly-flickering in its own soft firelight.

In the lowered tones and settled detail of the place there hung, as it were, a timid, old-maidenly smugness of expectancy—a beaming appearance of homely anticipation—that threw a soft glamour of comfort over its hard and primitive outlines. You had only to glance at the worn pair of lop-sided slippers, insinuatingly agape alongside the stool near the fire; or to peer at the neat white-robed table with its burden of brown-tinted bread and rickety crockery; or to peer into a further corner, where, reared on a rough deal box, stood a wooden bucket of water flanked by soap and towel; or to listen a little to the petulant, gurgling whispers that sprang from the pots by the fire, to get at the tale in the heart of this room.

Through the open doorway the gloom-hidden sea flung up its long sad breaths; and in the intervals of silence that divided these, there would waver through an inner, half-open door, a fragile, faint-drawn respiration like a miniature echo of the waters—the regular breathing of a sleeping child.

The drowsy night had almost ceased to breathe. Out yonder in the blackness of the outside world a sultry heaviness had fallen upon the air, seeming to hush even the faint bickerings of the insects, and those fainter voices of the brushing leaves.

Everywhere a bated quiet hung.

Inside the room again—and high up in the wall to the right of the chimney—a small square window showed a shadowy disc of dark in which a few pale stars hung glimmering through nodding sprays of vine-growth. An observer of more than ordinary circumspection, and one, moreover, whose mind had been already somewhat forcibly attracted by the breeze-less quiet of the night, might reasonably—had his wandering gaze been caught by the evolutions of these restless sprigs—have shown some little surprise at the anomaly; might, indeed, have been led to examine them.
more closely. Enticed still further, perhaps, by his circumspective
tendencies—till wavering even upon the margin-line betwixt mystification
and fear—he might have ended by imagining some sinister motive at work
behind them. And truly, as moment followed moment, and the tendrils took
on a greater exaggeration of movement, there was evident in their cautious
noddings an indefinable something that was sinisterly near to the human:
as though, indeed, they were guardedly satisfying themselves that no such
observer were present, and that those gentle sighing sounds that ever and
again came echoing up to their bower were nothing but the soft fire-songs
of an empty room.

Prepared, then, as we are, by this appearance of peering humanity in a
plant for a disclosure of unusual moment, it will not come so amiss to the
patient and easy-minded listener—if, indeed, it surprise him at all—that
with one last and violent agitation which set the square of nodding leaves
a-whispering and a-dancing among the stars like a window-glimpse of
flashing storm and wind—star-gleams and tendrils gave place to a human
face that hung there trembling upon the ledge with an agonised appearance
of strained effort in its features, and a secret longing in its dancing eyes.

For perhaps a minute, with its quick-flitting gaze seizing in one by one
the details of the room, it trembled thus; and then—the glint of the fire in
the water-bucket seeming to catch in its face—it was gone with a sound
like a catching sob, and the pale stars glimmered through the tendrils as
before.

(And again through the doorway the sound of an outgoing wave fell
away like a harsh-drawn breath; and again from the inner room came its
echo—the gentle breath of the child.)

It could only have been but the merest momentary flash after the
disappearance of the phenomenon at the window, that something flitted—
panting audibly—across one of the larger openings in the front of the hut;
and presently a limp, grey figure stood pausing and peering in the
doorway. For a little space it seemed to hesitate there on the threshold,
panting and blinking and peeping about like a wild and suspicious animal:
but, presently again, falling in one of its vague eye-wanderings upon the
glinting bucket, it sprang tottering in across the floor, and flung itself upon
it with a hoarse unhuman cry that almost before it had risen into pealing
life was falling and spluttering away again in vague and watery gurgles.

Drink—drink—ah! how it drank! The little silver rill runs thin at such a
time, and throats are crazy small! Yet so greedily it drank—so fraught with
throb­bing earnestness the gulps it sucked—that it almost seemed there
were some further matter than mere ‘thirst’ to quench.

Feverishly, in great throbbing gulps, it drank it down, just raising its
dripping face at rare and grudging intervals to prick up its ears and pant and listen like a lapping dog; then plunging and splashing into the bucket again with nothing apparently blunted from that unbluntable edge. Ah! to quench that hot, clinging dread of seeing and hearing things—those dim, dreary lakes, those beautiful inland seas, that everlasting din of running water! Ah! to drink down that terrible, deep-clinging dread of disillusion, of waking, of clearing the poor, swimming eyes to a loathsome reality of parched, sunwithered scrub and shimmering, treeless waste! Ah! to live in it—breathe in it—drown in it!

. . . . Indeed, it was not till long after this—when the first sick cravings had been deadened a little, the fancies forgotten, and the water in the bucket all but finished—that in one of those quick, animal-like pauses that seemed designed as much to regain lost breath as to peep and peer about him, his eyes fell upon a plate of loaves on the table. With a strange little noise in his throat—half-sob, half-gasp—he made a swift plunge towards them, but stopped uncertainly in the midst of it, with a backward glance at the bucket, as though reluctant to relinquish the water now that at last he seemed sure of it. But that ravening lust for food, which follows inevitably upon the quenched thirst of the starving, slowly won its way; and presently, with a headlong stagger towards the table, he seized on the bread and began to devour it.

While thus engaged, his slow but restless gaze was never still for a moment. Hither and thither it travelled with a strained excitement in its look, and bulging, listening pupils; while sometimes he would raise his head, and even cease for a space his ravenous tearing, the better to locate some fancied noise or disturbance.

Presently—as if the sight of the stool gleaming comfortably in the fire-glow recalled him to a sudden and acute sense of his bodily state—he dragged wearily over to the hearth, with his bread in his hands, and sat down opposite the fire. Here, owing either to the drowsy influence of the blaze, or to a fit of languor upon his heavy meal, he lost to a great extent his former watchfulness, and took on in its stead, a fixed fire-gazing mood, to which the periodical jerk occasioned by the frequent lifting and tearing of the bread, seemed rather to fit in as a necessary part and portion, than to break in as an interruption.

And what was this he saw there—the wild tattered creature—that he should sit gazing and munching upon his stool, so fixed and still? Could so cheerful a flame, then, yield such faces as he would call to mind—grey, furtive faces they would be, to look at him—faces that must needs look ill in such a glow, for they would not love the light? Or was it that—as some would have is always the case—the flame could only yield him up such
faces as had sought it formerly, and that among these he had found one that he knew? Or was it, after all, that he was merely basking in the outer semblance of the blaze, as does a dog with its bone; and if conscious of any thought at all, it were at best a sottish wonder as to why the pots were singing, or why the kettle swung, or what had been the burden of that charred, grey wisp of paper which hung half-blackened in the ashes?

. . . . But you too, perhaps, have watched how the drowsy house-dog will drag its bone to the hearth, and lie there blinking and munching.

It was while thus slowly satisfying himself—in a manner more animal than human—that a soft, questioning whisper fell upon his ear from close behind him.

“Father!” it breathed, like a sigh.

The creature shot upright at the sound, drawing in his breath with a wince; while his flurried eyes fled this way and that about the hearth in front of him, with a cowed and helpless look. A portion of bread dropped, sputtering, from his hands to the floor at his feet, which he, thereupon, shifted clumsily as though with some misty intention of hiding it. But he did not turn him towards the sound.

“Father!” repeated the voice, a shade nearer.

Again the man started painfully. But on this occasion it was quite noticeable that his right fist, which was dangling loosely near the floor, clenched up in a stealthy manner, and that there was creeping a sly look into his quick-shifting eyes.

A moment later, with his head and shoulders crouching away from the voice, and his sly eyes winking and blinking to the anticipated blow, he threw round a frightened peep behind him.

A little girl-child, with sleep in her solemn eyes and disordered hair, was advancing slowly towards him out of the shadow. Clasped with a loving fervour to her breast by its upper parts—its lower extremities being left to dangle below in limp and nerveless helplessness—she held a large and much-alarmed cat, which, as it emerged further and further into the light, began to cry out dismally. The two small creatures—the one in its soft-sweeping night-shift, the other in its soft, fur-grey mantle—would have been a sweet and fitting addition to the sleepy comfort of the room, had it not been for the slystaring anomaly by the fire, who with his animal-like ravages upon the furniture of room and table, had changed the spirit of the place to suit his jarring presence, and so had made these gentler corners strange.

On nearing the hearth the gentle madame stopped, and with a relieved sighing as of an arduous duty satisfactorily performed, carefully lowered the tortured animal to the floor—gazing after it in solemn and prolonged
surprise as, taking an unfair advantage of its momentary freedom, it made hastily for the door. Subsequently—still exercised, very evidently, as to the fate or faithlessness of her somewhat harassed friend—she turned her soft eyes, absently, upon the figure by the fire, whereupon they faltered a little, and a shadow of disappointment overcast them.

“You'se not father!” she said, quickly, and in a tone which seemed to imply that the existence of anyone other than the relative named was an unpremeditated catastrophe with an explanation attached. Yet there was nothing of fear or repulsion in her wondering eyes.

From that first tremulous moment when he had turned in his desperation upon her low-toned cry, the man by the fire had never changed his position, nor ever removed his gaze from the little white-robed figure. The ugly gleam of sly relief which that first glimpse of the delicate child had summoned like a noisome stain of some dark and savage pigment to his features, had almost immediately given place to a blaze of scared and gaping wonder, which beginning in a startled flash, had subsided slowly and mistily into a fixed and settled stare.

Later, as the child turned and confronted him with her fearless eyes, this sottish gape of his lost something of its fixity, and presently—the child giving no evidence of an intention to cease her scrutiny—it dropped altogether before hers, and took on a repetition of its former aimless hearth-flitting. But this, as it turned out, was anything but a permanent repulse. For there, a few minutes later—and moment by moment afterwards—there it was again, perking up the child with the same haunting wonder, the same puzzled, questioning stare.

Children resemble little birds in that they grow restive under a too eager scrutiny; and it was not long before our hitherto self-contained heroine gave evidence of discomposure at her new friend's predilection for settled observation. She began to hang back a little and to finger uncertainly at her sleep-crumpled shift, though judging from the still quiet bravery of her returning stare, these restive movements did not receive their impetus so much from shyness, as from a vague feeling of antagonism to something unnatural to her little world and hitherto beyond her sphere. But again—as previously upon her friend's part, so now upon her's—this little wavering proved only to be a temporary repulse in a battle but just began, for, upon a sudden, something in the condition or figuration of the dropping fire—so low-dropping as to be in danger of fainting past recovery—drew her elf-like attention from human interests and fears, and with a little eager cry she pushed her way forward towards the dying embers.

“Sparkles!” she whispered, breaking down suddenly in her forward rush beside her gaunt companion, and peering up into his face in helpless
appeal. “I—I loves sparkles!” and in her childish eagerness she rested a tiny hand for a moment upon his tattered knee.

It was merely the imperious demand of an unreasoning child for the repetition of some humdrum family custom. Yet the gaunt knee trembled to the touch, and the hungry eyes left her face hurriedly as though fearful of trying its softness further with so rude a stare, wandering thence to the fire, and from that to the rough wall beside, and from the wall, swiftly round towards the open door, and from the door, back slowly and warily to the little face. And from somewhere deep in the felon's throat came a hoarse, guttural exclamation, that might have been meant for an affirmative, or may have been merely an oath.

The child, being as yet unversed in the possibilities of the latter, and having doubtless previously made the discovery that little is to be lost and much to be gained by giving oneself the benefit of the doubt in the case of vague answers to pressing requests, showed a face of solemn glee and sped off sedately into the gloom of a farther corner, whence after sundry curious noises of a gasping order, she emerged staggering under the weight of a small billet of wood.

The man had watched her turn from him with a movement of sullen surprise, which had flared up into an expression of dumb regret as her little from fell a-blending with the shadows. Yet even while his eyes were still regretfully fixed on the place of her disappearance, he had stretched down his hand, with a half-conscious stealth, for a chunk of bread at his feet, and he was munching half absently, half aggressively at this when she emerged thus log-laden from the darkness.

Steadily rustling over the floor towards him she reached at last her old position close alongside where he sat. Here she came to an uncertain halt, peeping up doubtfully into his face, as he sat still munching and staring, as though in expectation of some help from him.

And then, judging perhaps from his somewhat preoccupied demeanour that he was unlikely to come up to her expectations in this respect, she drew a little nearer still, and with a quiet deliberation of manner and some expenditure of breath, hoisted the billet on to his knee.

"Help Nell to make it sparkle," she said, her sweet eyes growing plaintive in the firelight. "Frow it in for Nell!"

Slowly, with a growing greyness in his face, the man drew back from the child. Then, suddenly clutching at her tiny arm, he bent towards her with a whispered cry of “hush!” and a scared, listening glance over his shoulder towards the door. The child, half-frightened at his manner, clung a little closer to his knee, and watched the doorway also; but though both the frightened figures listened long, neither of them so much as caught a
Presently he relaxed his grip, and drew away once more. But the stiff, grey terror of a moment before still hung upon his features.

“Ah—hush!” he cried again, hoarsely, and it now became evident that it was her childish words, and no outside terror, that he cried at—“hush!” and then he bowed his head down close to hers and hid his trembling face in his bony hands.

For a long while the little one stood beside him in silence, watching his half-hidden face with big and curious eyes; but as the minutes fluttered by, and, with the further sinkage of the embers the chances of a successful ‘sparkle’ grew dolefully less, her stock of patience reached its limit, and she plucked him gently by the sleeve.

“Sparkles!” she urged, in a tremulous little whisper.

To this the creature raised a face all grey and pain-drawn. “Aye, sparkles!” he wheezed, with a great, dry laugh, and seizing the faggot, threw it with a weak viciousness into the midst of the embers.

And with the rush of brilliant sparks that showered up the chimney like a galaxy of loosened stars, and with the high-pitched cry raised apparently to meet an unusual magnificence in the display, there went up some such prayer as you have heard a dumb dog use against his master—no words, no supplications, no beatings of the well-filled breast, but just a little, pitiful, cowed moan, that asked a question with no hope of answer.

But now, as time crept on, and since the ugly, great man who breathed so loudly, and ate so much bread, and seemed so cold and shivery and ‘starey,’ had proved himself her friend and helpmate, Solemn-eyes, in the long, grey gown, having propped her small self by her sharp elbow against the handiest thing for the purpose she could find (which happened to be the rather rickety knee of the stranger), proceeded, with a portentous gravity of demeanour, to acquaint anyone that happened to be by and who cared to listen, with many interesting and altogether startling facts and fancies, of which ‘fires’ were the main-spring, and ‘sparkles’ an important branch.

She had apparently found plenty of opportunity for getting up a thorough mastery of her subject, and did not hesitate to exercise the free if somewhat bold use of the privilege of transposing fact for fancy and fancy for fact, accorded to persons in such a condition. She had much to say on the mysteries of the sudden expansion of pent-up elements, which she called ‘pops,’ and of the angry hissing of the burning sap, which laboured under the dignified title of ‘sizzles’—not to mention an interesting branch designated as ‘blazes,’ which was doubtless as clearly intelligible to herself as it was utterly and unconditionally impossible to the uninitiated.

She had besides a few thoughtful questions to ask, and far from being in
any measure perturbed or nonplussed at receiving no answers, proceeded with the utmost good fellowship to answer them herself, in a manner, if a shade arbitrary, at least completely satisfactory to the questioner.

The while, upon his stool beside her, but shrinking away as far as his occupied knee would permit him, crouched her eccentric friend. He would probably have benefited to no inconsiderable degree by her sweet-sounding discourse, if only his eyes and the great yearning soul that peered from behind them had not been so intensely occupied with her face. It was merely a thinly-solemn little child's face, seldom or never lit up by a smile, and rather sickly than otherwise. So that this sottish infatuation of his—the fixed half-fearful wonderment with which he continued to regard her, remained the more inexplicable, and must, for the present, be shelved among the myriad other misty features that throng this dust-grim figure.

Once, it should be mentioned, when she had twisted up her wistful eyes towards him with a question, long-drawn and solemnly-fanciful, upon her lips, he had bent a little towards her, and, with elaborate caution, as though determined to be prepared for any sudden violence on her part, had inquired in a slow, dropping voice, full of husky wonder and incredulity, if she “weren't scared?”

This extraordinary proceeding the little maiden apparently decided within herself—after a moment's wide-eyed consideration—to be some hybrid form of mirth-provoker, unearthed at no little mental expense from the depths of an ingenious, if rather difficult nature, and produced for her special delectation. So that for very pity's sake she was constrained to receive it under the generous wing of her approval, and to acknowledge it in the usual manner—a kindly impulse that she proceeded to carry out forthwith, as far and in as prodigal a manner as her inherent solemnity of demeanour would permit.

And, indeed, in what other else might you construe it but as matter for mirth—this suggestion of 'fear' in connection with anything so humdrum as this thin-cheeked, wan-eyed, grey-clad figure? Had not something such as this constituted her only playmate, her only laugh-mate, her only friend, since she could remember anything there by the sea?

And so the poor, crazed creature and his little friend sat wondering together in the still, warm room. And one was wondering—wondering—whether the soft-leaping flames felt love or hatred for the poor, dead log they wrapt and kissed so closely. And the other—God only knows where his dull dreams had wandered! But once he raised a quivering hand close over the child's sleep-tumbled head as though to stroke or strike it; then drew it sharply back, and dropped his head beneath his drooping shoulders.

. . . . And a little later, when again the hungry eyes crept peeping, peering
sideways towards the child, they held ingrained in them a look—deeply-lying, luminous, and something akin to that which you have seen creep into some dull, dotard visage on the resurrection of a once-familiar song.
Scene V.—‘The Fisherman comes Home.’

“E vero frutto verrè dopo 'l friore.”

—DANTE, Par., can. xxvii.

A MAN and a woman, carrying between them a heavy basket of fish, were toiling inland over the dim sand-flats.

Only a few yards behind them—where the harsh call of the breakers and the bubbling and hissing of water upon sand seemed to indicate the immediate presence of the shore—there loomed up mistily in the night-murk a dark massing of still and moving shadows; from which dull wooden sounds as of in-taken oars and tackle, alternated sharply with the murmurous rise and fall of mingled human voices.

Away in front of them spread the distant line of hut-lights glowing out warmly from the dark of the cliffs. And upon these the eyes of the pair hung fixed and winkless with the dull and silent longing of the weary.

“Stay a while, Jim,” cried the woman at last. “They're a big lot,” and she lowered her end of the basket suggestively as she spoke.

Her companion, an undersized, grey-haired, wrinkled-faced man, dropped his end upon the sand without remark and stood looking inland absently. But of the two figures as they lingered side by side upon the flat and open beach, the man with his hollow face and stooping carriage seemed the more in need of rest; and it was plain, if only from the deep concern of one swift and covert glance, that the woman was well aware of this.

Presently he spoke in a voice befitting well the thoughtful longing of his face.

“May her dreams be sweet,” he said, “in that silent, lonely place—God send her sweet, kind dreams . . . She must not wake and find herself alone!” (Then rounding upon the woman with a hardening look), “Why did ye leave her lonely there?” he asked. “What made ye hang about the boats to-night?”

At the words, and the hostile significance of his manner, a shadow of pain withered quick across the woman's face; and she would have caught his arm with her outstretched hand, but that he moved quietly out of her reach.

“I was thinking you were not yourself, Jim,” she threw out timidly. “You haven't seemed yourself of late—Ah!” she burst out, with a quick little
tremor like a laugh, “can't we leave it, Jim—this place? They'd do it for you, maybe! They'd do anything for you! Have we no way of leaving it—you and me?” And as the last word left her lips, she caught very softly and timidly at his arm, and a mighty wistfulness befogged her eyes.

The man would have disengaged himself from her grasp, though there was a gentleness in his movement; but she clung to him with a sort of desperation, again and again repeating her appeal, and re-urging with a perceptible quickening of tone. At her first question his furrowed face had opened to a flash of surprise, which, however, rapidly gave place to a cold, set mask of wondering suspicion.

“I thought,” he said quietly, raising his slow, keen eyes to her face; “I thought you were so happy here. . . . I thought you loved the little cove. . . . I thought” (with a bitter catch-laugh) “we were the happiest couple in the world—for so you used to say! Aye! and there was a time” (and here he paused, watching her face narrowly) “when ye seemed to dread the thought of leaving the place; you seemed to love it so. . . . Maybe it's time such slow-brained owls as I gave up our ‘thinking.’ . . . Come!” and he bent over the basket with a weary sigh.

But the woman clung to him with a tremble in her breath. “Happy, Jim!” she whispered, brokenly. “God knows! they were happy days when I spoke those words—days when the time slipped by like a song, for the thought of the meeting, and the words ye would speak in the dusk by the boat! Yes—yes, Jim, days before my face grew weary, and ye tired of me——”

“Hush!” breathed the man very quietly. Yet his fist and body clenched convulsively as though he could have struck her for her words.

“But the woman clung to him with a tremble in her breath. “Happy, Jim!” she whispered, brokenly. “God knows! they were happy days when I spoke those words—days when the time slipped by like a song, for the thought of the meeting, and the words ye would speak in the dusk by the boat! Yes—yes, Jim, days before my face grew weary, and ye tired of me——”

“Hush!” breathed the man very quietly. Yet his fist and body clenched convulsively as though he could have struck her for her words.

“It's true enough,” she murmured, turning half away.

“And, dear, I wouldn't mind how bitter cold you grew, if you didn't grow so thin—so thin. . . . Ah! what is it?” she cried, rounding with a quick receding and return of voice as a wave falls back to gather. “Tell me about it, Jim—this horrible thing that's grown up between us two! I've watched it, and put it off, and disbelieved it, month by month, and day by day—but there it creeps, ever plainer and plainer, ever harder to bear! Don't let it come, Jim—don't let it grow! Haven't I been a good wife to ye? Is my face really so worn? Perhaps you think with my past I'm not fit to be with the child—to bring it up? Oh! Jim, I'm only a weak, feeble woman—but I've kept things straight for ye; been a true wife to ye; borne ye your child——”

“Hush, woman!” burst in the man at last, like the sudden out-breaking of some quiet, pent-up pool. “Leave her out of it—let her be! How much has it to do with her or me, or you, that you've been a true wife?”

The woman drew back from him, with a slow-dawning fear in her face.

“What do you mean?” she cried, in a wild, grating voice. And then again
— softly — under her breath: “What do you mean?” And with that she crept a step nearer to him, pushing the hair from her forehead in a dazed fashion, and watching for his answer.

In a while he looked up with a gleam of sadness in his face.

“I should not like to tell you what I mean,” he said.

All trembling, the woman flung forward upon him as he stood half-turned from her, and seized him again by the arm.

“Somebody's been whispering to ye things about poor Ben and me!” cried she, peering round into his face with her eyes full of tears.

“Somebody's been digging up old dead things to make trouble between us two!—Just poor Ben, that brought me up from a child in his own poor way; evil enough and bad enough, God knows, but the only way he knew.

“Oh yes, I had a kind of love for him, if ye want to know,” she sped on, quickly, as if she had read some answer in his face. “I've that kind of longing for him still. And—and I'd love him so, and give my two hands to help him if he was here beside us. . . . But that's not the way I like you, Jim, and surely you're raking rather deep for trouble?”

All the while, that clutching grasp on his arm seemed to oppress the man; and all the while his thin frame shook and shifted with a seeming indication of some rising tide within. And when at length he spoke, his slow tones broke and quavered with a deep-set fervour.

“It is you who are raking too deep—maybe you find it pleasanter, safer work. I'm looking nearer where the weeds grow rank and fewer, and the ground's more clear. I'm seeing the things that you see, woman. God make ye feel something of what I feel!”

“Ah! Jim, you're cruel!” she whispered, “cruel and hard!”

“Cruel!” he returned, in a deep, slow tone, his eyes fixed grimly on the sand at his feet. “Hard! maybe so. There's small else left, it seems, to us poor slow-brained clowns—so slow to seize, so slow to part. We're like those queer, green caterpillars one used to see on the roadside of a summer's day; each happy in the thin, green stalk that God has given it; each weaving its fancy-webs, its life, itself, into the one green blade, until so fast bound is it, that, whether it be the careless hand of man, or the blighting of some creeping frost, that withers the stalk—it withers along with it the heart of the little green insect.”

“Maybe you don't remember,” he continued, presently, with a bitter, sudden change in his slow tones, “how he lay, wounded and weak, in the shade of the fock'sl! Maybe you wouldn't know how once he beckoned me to him and tried to injure ye in my blind eyes! Maybe you'd hardly believe that I laughed at his silly, breathless tale of a dupe and a woman—a woman who thought to worm her way into the heart of a simpleton and to break it,
that she might give another a chance of succour——”

“Oh! yes, yes!” broke in the woman in low appeal. “That other who was sick and like to die; that other whose face had been part of her life as long as she could think and see; whose life had been all life to her, whose death in the hot hell we looked for seemed such a simple, natural thing, and whose escape, when all was hopeless, seemed given her with the chart, thrust upon her so that she could not put it by, nor wrench it from her thoughts—all these would need to be considered before you damned this woman. . . . if—if”—(and here her tone grew tremulous and soft, and she drew a little closer to his arm)—“if it wasn't for one small thing that spoils them all—that spoilt them from the beginning. . . . Can't you see, Jim—can't you guess, how that there was more than one dupe—how the poor fool couldn't help herself?”

For quite a space after she had spoken, the woman clung to him with eager, uplifted face; watching for the iron lines to soften or the brows to lift relentlessly. But the rugged, patient face clung grimly to its gloom; the while, it seemed, from the still and patient posture of the man, as if he too were waiting.

“Well!” he said, presently—with a quiet suddenness, and a deep, unconvinced hostility of tone that fetched a painful start from his companion—“Why don't you finish it? Why don't you carry the poor, lame lie to the end? Why don't ye tell me, that it's ‘love’ that sent ye creeping in under the cliffs with your lantern and your scared face: that it's love that makes the money ‘chink’ in the little hid box, and the chart to be pulled out and pored over: that it's love that sends the Judas call out of the darkness, when you think the boats are coming in and the dupe among them?—Aye!” he burst out, jerking himself roughly from her hold, and confronting her with heaving chest and deeply-flashing eyes. “Why don't ye say it's love that urges you to stint the child—to cheat your own small bairn?”

As one by one these bitter, slow-voiced denunciations fell in tremulous vehemence from the fisherman's lips—for ‘fisherman’ his oiled ‘sou'wester’ pointed him to be; whatever the soiled, grey story of the rest of his attire—the face of the woman seemed to blanch anew, and her clinging figure hung the more limply-heavy on his arm; —till, as he wrested himself almost with loathing from her grasp, she fell a-swaying to her knees, her face buried weakly in her work-worn hands.

From this position she presently glanced up; her eyes plaintive and tear-soft.

“Oh, Jim,” she said, “there you stand, thinking you've said my say for me, and hardening your heart against me. But, dear, you've dared me to do a thing; and I've done such things since I was just a wild, little slip. . . .
Would you feel like killing me if I said it was love—if it was love for you and for her that made me stint my bairn——?"

“Hush! Take that wild look out of your eyes, and unclench your hands, and listen a while! Just suppose he had struggled at last through that dry dead scrub and desert; suppose he had crept to my feet one night: draggled, thin, ravenous, half-mad with thirst, beaten and worked to a shadow from former attempts to escape, half-wild at the thought of what he had risked for me! Wouldn't I have owed him something, Jim—wouldn't I have almost owed him myself? Ah! the good God knows I couldn't give that—that was yours, all yours! So I stinted and stole from you and the child that I might stay with you, dear!”

As word by word she pleaded in her faint and tremulous tones, the stone-stiff form of the listener seemed to shrink among its shadows as if with an involuntary bending towards her; and again to straighten suddenly, as one might do who had caught himself in a weakness. And again, when she had ceased to speak, and a hush had fallen upon the pathos of her words, he moved forward a halting step or so and peered down into her upturned face,—then turned away with a sigh.

“I'm sick of words!” he said.

Softly she stretched and touched him, a glimmer-smile twitching, thread-like, upon her lips.

“Give me a little longer, a little longer, Jim,” she whispered.

But the man bent slowly down towards the basket.

“Come,” he said, in a low voice; “it is late, and the child may wake.”

Yet it was still with the same faint dawning of happiness in her face, that she rose and took her place at the other handle. And so, bending to the weight of the basket, they toiled away inland, again, towards the widening lights.

As they drew nearer to the hut-line, the glare of each open doorway—with its glimpse of dim interior, and bustling feminine figure—effectually drew their eyes, and, in so doing, merged all outside objects, excepting those immediately in the paths of the door-beams, into the surrounding night. But if their eyes were blinded to their immediate surroundings, their ears would have been the more sensitive to the alternate calm and stir of the echoing cove; to the moments of surgebroken stillness, into which so small a matter as a wriggle from their gasping burden broke distinct, as opposed to others, when—far and near, soft-rising and sudden, faint and deafening—sounds filled the gloom.

You would linger perhaps, over the harsh, bawling dissonance of some tough-toned fisherman's hail, answered from faint away by a distant, bottled-up cry! You would wonder what door had been opened to that
sudden, clamouring murmur of voices and feet, dying to nothing! You would smile as a rusty-voiced clock fell a-twanging from deep in the huts! You would pause with uplifted finger to the snatch of a song! But if you be wise, if you would preserve some idle imagining in the sounds, you will probe no deeper. You will pass them by with a sigh as mere scenic embellishment (stage-accessory if you will), full of the poetry of the even-fall as they may seem. Hut-clocks in sunny climes have spotted faces, and fishermen all the world over smell of fish! There is ‘pasteboard’ at the back of every drama, there is earth inside us all. Aye! though we sing it, shout it, whisper it, there’s a roughness in the hymn, the comic hymn called ‘life’!

It was towards a door-light to the extreme left of the hut-line, that the feet of the couple seemed to be tending, and, dazzling their sight and confusing their senses the deeper for each step they took, its clear cut stream of light—like a slit of gold in the dusk curtain of the night—spread over the sands to meet them. Objects gleamed up in the bed of this dazzling pathway with a strange, white distinctness of outline—here a protruding rock, here a rusty kettle almost buried in the sand, here a drying net looming half-out of the gloom, and a few steps from the door itself, a little, white lattice-gate, wide upon its hinges. While in the frame of the open doorway was a dim-lit glimpse of a table end, from which a cloth hung draggling upon the floor in white and quaint disorder.

The two were still labouring through the heavy sand some fifty paces from the hut, their eyes still hanging in a kind of wistful anticipation upon the doorway, when the figure of a man emerged suddenly into the beam of light, just in front of the gate, and, pacing slowly across, disappeared as gradually into the gloom beyond.

Flashing as he did with shadowy brevity across the glow, he probably appeared in no more startling guise to the weary couple, than that of a dim-figured passer-by, carrying aloft upon his shoulder some elongated object that glistened in the light, for they both trudged on unmoved.

Yet—a few more seconds, a few further steps—and, with sudden and simultaneous impulse, the basket-carriers dragged in their tracks;—for, with an even, leisurely stride, the figure broke again into the light, returning and disappearing as he had come.

“Did you see it?” panted the woman.

“Twice!” came the man's slow tones. “Wait—he may come again!”

The eyes of the pair hung, full of vague fears, on that point of gloom near the gate, whence the figure had melted into shadow; and for a space, as the long seconds passed, nothing stirred to scare them but their own wild nerves. Indeed, — so dead and lifeless seemed the night—the woman had half-bent earthwards, again, as if to resume her labours, when the dreaded
happened; and again they saw the gloom-curtain give place to a moving 
blur, which, bit by bit, taking shape and form, shone out presently clear and 
strong in the full glare of the door-beam—the belted cloak, tall peaked cap, 
and gleaming rifle of a soldier.

The woman dropped her handle at the sight, and caught at her companion 
with a feverish hand.

“What does it mean?” she cried, in a frightened whisper, her eyes still 
groping at the figure's last vanishing-point. “It's a prison guard! What has 
happened? What does it mean?”

The man made a movement of his head and lips as if to return some 
answer; but the impulse—whatever it was—fell away in a breathful 
whistle, as a crunching sound, like a footstep in the sand, struck soft upon 
his ear from close behind him.

The next moment, a peremptory but guarded voice—having ingrained in 
its stuttering rapidity of utterance a kind of indignant uncertainty as of one 
as unused to, as he was conscious of, the tone of command he used— 
growled out of the darkness almost at their elbow.

“Men—men!” it cried, “in the name of hell, don't gossip! I thought I told 
you to spread out—spread out and keep silence? Whatever's the use——” 
but here it snapped off like a brittle twig, as a tall cloaked figure loomed up 
from the darkness, and paused, with peering face thrust forward, in the 
half-light close beside them.

“Is that you—James Dust?” he cried out sharply.

“Aye—aye! It's me!” came the man's voice, surly in its nervous 
antagonism.

“And—his wife,” put in the woman, in a wavering tone, yet feverishly 
clear, as if she feared he'd mistake it. And, tingling with vague hurt as was 
the moment, her companion seemed struck with the admission, and bent 
his eyes upon her with a sudden look.

“And his wife!” the new-comer had echoed, arresting himself in the 
midst of a sharp, flurried movement, half-turn, half-clutch at his belt, to 
drop a dim look at the woman. “Waes me, Jim Dust—waes me! These 
faithful women help dig our graves! You'll make it devilish clear before 
you've done. . . . Somebody must mind the child—if we're to fetch the 
fish!—Eh, well—well!” And turning away slowly towards the hut—with 
some such enigmatical utterance as the foregoing, still muttering on his 
lips, and his low-capped head nodding in half-whimsical sorrow—he 
put a glittering object to his mouth and blew a low whistle call into the 
night.

As the sound shrilled away into silence, he turned him back again and 
drew closer to his two pale observers, his right hand searching at his belt
the while, and his shadowy gaze bent down upon the pair with a kind of watchful regret.

At first, as he began to lessen the distance between them, the face of our grey-haired fisherman showed signs of a deepening antagonism; the latent fire in his deep-glowing eyes, spluttering and sparkling and threatening, like a slow-kindling match. But presently, as the soldier—for such he now showed himself to be—stepped further into the path of the door-light, and the shy, sympathetic, boyish face beneath the soft forage cap became the more clearly outlined, a cry of relief broke sharply from the little man's lips, and he made a movement forward as though to meet him.

“Why, Captain!” he cried, half-tremulous in his relief; “you quite scared me—it's that dark and still! You quite frightened Nell and me here! We were beginning to think of prison-guards and hand-cuffs! See what weak nerves and a bit of gloom will do——” but here his glad, half-hoping words went dropping away to a stutter; for upon a sudden, the dusk-wall about him seemed to ring with strange ‘clinks’ and murmurs, and to teem besides with hurrying, half-formed shapes, that, shuffling and panting in every direction through dull-thudding sand, began to people the surrounding emptiness with dull grim gleams.

Nearer, clearer, they emerged, these mingling shadows, pressing in over the soft-crunching sand, all similarly armed and belted; their accoutrements whipping out plaintive music; their movements and gestures full of a well-ordered quiet; their cold-eyed interest plainly centred in the two small convict bodies (now crouching close to each other in involuntary sympathy), till at a soft-spoken order from the officer, they halted half-hid in the shadow: leaning grimly indifferent upon their muskets in a dim half-circle around him.

Our Captain, meanwhile, had been peering restlessly among these irregular groupings of shadowy uniforms as if in search of some particular and favoured unit, and from the impatient mutterings that never ceased to issue hot-foot from his lips, and the irritable stampings of his knightly heels, it seemed possible that his search were unsuccessful.

“Where's that Gadban?” he burst out, at last. “Fetch Gadban, one of you—Gadban of the Intelligence Department!” and he cried out the title in a loud-voiced boyish sneer.

“Gadban—Gadban!” echoed a snapping voice from behind. “Where's the use in your slinking about yonder? Come forward will'ee—shove him forward, one of ye!”

At this, from somewhere deep among the soldiers, there arose a faint uproar as of stifled scuffling; and presently, as if impelled forward by some powerful and invisible spring, a small, hunched form came tumbling along
the sand to the Captain's feet, where, in the full glare of the door-light, it
brought up, panting—its evil, hat-darkened face gleaming back murder at
its persecutors, and its yellow claws searching frantically in its bosom as if
for some weapon wherewith to further its wish.

"Why, Gadban!" said the Captain, bending down over the newcomer in
ironical surprise. "Gadban of the Intelligence Department!—a strange
demeanour, this!"

"Strange?" rasped out the ringer, leaping to his feet and confronting the
officer in a fury. "You've hit it, you have! Ye speak true, ye do!—To be
treated like a dog—A gentleman doing his duty, to be treated like a dog!"

To this the young Captain threw out a whispering laugh.

"'Gentleman' and 'duty,' Mr. Gadban,” he said, with a dry irritation,
"seem terms a trifle formal among friends of our familiarity and
profession. Unfortunately the useful term 'duty' can no more smother the
particular 'beastliness' out of to-night's business, than our respective
uniforms can disguise our respective characters one from another;—though
I might say in passing, my friend, that your particular uniform would
disguise you the better if it were a trifle cleaner.”

"Chut—!" growled the spy, clenching his huge fists. "It's easy for you
fine gentlemen to gibe and jeer—it's easy as milk for ye to fling out your
fine-cut phrases with a whip in your fist for them as dares to answer! It's
natural, says you, to get some poor devil to do your dirty work, and then
sneer at the soil on his hands! But where'd ye be without your dirty work?
Where are ye now, that it's done; and served up hot and steaming?—Why
it's still Gadban here and Gadban there; it's still a'searching and a'peering
about in the dark for two feeble, half-starved convicts—an' one a blooming
woman——!

"Neither your help nor your comment is in demand at present, sir,” put in
the Captain, shortly—for truth to tell, the fellow's shots hit unpleasantly
true. "It's your presence—your reassuring presence, we require. . . . Come,
man!” he added, clutching with scant ceremony at the ringer's arm, and
whirling him round towards the two pale fishers, "we've dawdled long
enough!"

"Ah!”—Back sprang the spy with a deep guttural gasp, and an
involuntary resumption of his former weapon-groping, as though to his
distorted eyes, there lay a horrid hostility in the little, pitiable couple now
confronting him—the man erect and quietly brave, with a luminous glow,
half-anger half curiosity, in his simple rugged face: the woman clinging to
him, yet with a dangerous stare in her eyes, and a quiver to her small
clenched fist, that belonged more to defiance than to fear.

"Why, Gadban,” laughed the Captain, as his wiry prisoner made a frantic
attempt to free himself, “what are we to say to this? Does the sight of them rouse an enduring remnant—a last kick, as it were, from the dying horse? Tut! man, don't threaten,” he quickened. “Would you start us wondering? There's food for wonder, surely, in a conscience-stricken Gadban, threatening where threats are dangerous! Best quiet down, if the drink will let you. Come!”

With that—still gripping the protesting ringer—the officer drew a little nearer to that silent couple, and stood looking down at them for a speculative while, with a kind of rough regret in his careless features.

“Ah! James Dust,” he broke out suddenly, with a curious rush of feeling, “such chances as you had—as good as any convict in the settlement! And then, to risk it all on the poor, ragged beast!”

The fisherman drew a little sigh of impatience, and smiled an abstracted glance up the lane of light towards the doorway, as the officer ceased to speak.

“If you could explain a bit, sir,” he suggested, a trifle wearily. “It grows late, and we're thinking of supper—Nell and I.”

“Supper!” cried the other, with a high-pitched nervous laugh, and with the laugh he bent forward and took a look at his face, “I'd swear it's true-blue, it's no mask; and yet the facts are dead against you, man.”

“If ye'd explain,” said the man again.

“Yes, yes, I'll explain,” he continued, testily, with a shy glance at his following. “I'll explain—though some would call me a fool for my pains—though you yourself, Dust, may be grinning behind that simple mask of yours.”

And here he paused, hazarding another shy glance at his men, and resuming in a lowered voice:

“Close upon eight to-night comes my gentleman” (and with the words he indicated by a series of vague tugs the shrinking figure of the spy, whose white face, working with a dreadful anxiety, had been gleaming and shading at intervals from behind the officer's elbow) “chattering a feverish tale of the convict James Dust, whom he had been watching for weeks back, and found to be harbouring an escaped prisoner—a lean, ragged creature, seen this very night in the very hut itself. . . . I come here with my troop, and I find a ragged creature in your hut, James Dust—a convict, sitting and talking with your child——!”

A quiet, unbroken even by the metallic ‘clink’ of swinging bayonet or ‘girn’ of murmuring soldier-voice, followed the officer's strange tale. The ringer, peeping covertly round the bulky form of his keeper, saw the fisherman lean slowly forward towards him with a dazed question in his face—saw the woman's hand shoot up in swift doubt to her lips, and her
eyes glint wild and staring; and he moistened his mouth and grinned a little, like some mischievous frightened animal.

“With the child?” breathed the fisherman suddenly, in an awed and breathless voice; “with Nell—with my Nell?”

The evident sincerity of the little man's words and demeanour seemed to stir up a sudden curiosity among the watchers. The soldiers pressed forward a step, whispering in deep, surprised gutturals. From out the gloom to the rear of the couple, a sprinkling of shy-mannered men and women in dirty grey, shifted spasmodically into clearer outline; while the tall, young officer, drawing back a little, regarded his questioner with a doubting, half-combated sympathy.

“Why—yes, Dust,” he answered, with a nervous lilt to his voice; “sitting there together and without a fear. That's the curse of it, Dust—without a fear. . . . Eh, men?” (and with a helpless jerk of a laugh he turned enquiringly towards the soldiers), “isn't that so?”

A low inarticulate grumbling rose in answer from the shadows, and then above it, gruff and discordant, came a stuttering, breathless voice:

“She wur sort o' peaceful with 'im, wur the lass; an the crittur's eyes wur only dry because he h'an't no tears—bein' that thirsty. . . . You've small cause to fear. It's them as comes here arresting of ye for helping such as has a cause to fear——”

“Silence, there!” broke in the officer, sharply; “or by the Lord I'll give you fresh cause—and that for self-enjoyment!”

Then flashing round on the fisherman, he ran on in the same hot tones:

“I'm a chicken-hearted fool, James Dust, or I'd have finished with you ten minutes ago. Come! get into the door yonder, and then maybe we'll see who is the friend—who is the stranger!”

But the man only edged a step nearer to the speaker with a queer, dull question in his face.

“A stranger?—with the child, with my Nell?” he asked again.

“Yes—yes, man,” cried the other, smothering a dangerous sympathy of feeling beneath a demeanour of irritable impatience. “A stranger—friend—as you will! We've a weakness to see if he's as surprised at sight of you as you at hearing of him. We've a weakness to humour you thus far in virtue of your simple face—useful and misleading as it may be!”

Upon this the woman drew closer to her husband with a trembling appeal in her face.

“It's a prisoner, Jim,” she whispered. “And they want to prove that we know him—know of his being here. They want to know why he sits there, so easy, talking with the child. They think to find that he knows us as he sits there by the fire. . . . And, Jim,” she cried, clinging suddenly to his
breast, and cowering her head upon it, as if expectant of some rudeness from him, “he will—he will!”

But there was nothing hostile in the look which the little man dropped upon the wild, red head; if anything in particular, it was slow, and sagglimmering, like a smile. And presently he put forth his hand, and softly touched the ruffled strands.

“Poor lass,” he said. “It has struck back cruel hard—cruel hard.”

At the word, and the touch that accompanied it, the woman threw up her face with a question, peering at him, and pushing her hair back vaguely. And then a quick, softening gleam blurred out the wildness, suddenly, from her eyes.

“Jim!” she breathed. “Come back, and it will not matter—nothing will matter!”

. . . And for all the sad shakings of his head, there was a light in his eyes that would not stifle.

“Come!” he urged, presently, turning with an effort and motioning towards the cottage. “They beckon—and it mayn't be him. As like as not it's a stranger.”

Then wearily—and quite oblivious of their burden, for which one back at least had ached all day, and both (Unclear:) stil groaned at—they made as if to flounder past the officer, and up the lane of light (the man with quickening steps, and eyes fixed anxiously upon the doorway; the woman following close, all bowed and hopeless), when, with a frantic struggling and a breathless shout, the spy leapt out before them into the glare, his arms outstretched and quivering as if to bar the way.

“What would ye do, master, what would ye do?” he cried, in a high-pitched, almost plaintive rasp; flinging out his words towards the officer, but keeping, all the while, a wary eye upon the couple. “Have ye seen how they talked and whispered, are ye blind to their plotting and planning? Will ye let them play with ye, as they thought to do with me? Do ye suppose they hasn't sign upon sign, wink upon wink, for such a case as this? Is it a bit o' play-acting you're pining for, that ye mistrust your own eyes and senses, that ye cast your ‘die’ on a face? Chut! it's the brightest weeds ye find about the snake holes—it's the cleanest patch what covers the foulest rent——!”

“Mr. Gadban,” said the Captain quickly, staying the torrent with uplifted hand, “you give us credit for a higher tone than we care to affect. We are but human, Mr. Gadban,—even we soldiers. We cannot help but trust the patched and hidden as against the unpatched and evident, even the most enlightened of us. . . . Come, Dust!” he cried, turning brusquely on the convict. “In with you, sir! And, you understand me, I shall miss nothing,
not a wink, not a quivering muscle!”

So, once again, the weary couple started forward towards their still, bright goal (so bright and still, indeed, as to seem utterly incompatible with the accusations laid to its charge), while about them, as they went, arose a faint elusive sound like the soft-sweeping of a rising breeze, as the little concourse of convicts and soldiers—grouped among the shadows before and behind them—made a sand-muffled movement forward towards the closing scene.

For a moment it seemed as if the spy, in the desperation of his mind, were about to dispute their passage. Stoop ing a little, with something of the guarded mischief of a wrestler, he waited; his dark shape hugely and grotesquely outlined in the lane of light, and wicked possibilities in his ‘watching’ pose. But presently, as the muffled might of the crowd, as it advanced from behind, became more and more definitely evident, he began to shift sideways a little, and then to glance back, and to waver, and at last, with a sharp breathless protest, half-oath, half-cry, sprang sidelong into the shadow.

With his hurried exit, there were left but three advancing figures, darkly visible, in the pathway; and these, groping slowly through the sand, dragged every moment nearer to the cottage—the two prisoners shouldering each other as if for sympathy, the tall officer striding close behind, with watchful eyes alternating sharply between the glowing doorway and his charges. A few yards behind these three, the soldiers had fallen into a long single line along the front of the advancing villagers; and sometimes, in the scurry of the forward rush, a stolid-faced file, backed by a grey-garbed, clinging group of curious convicts, would swing for a clear-cut moment into the light of the door-beam—a circumstance which, from the precipitate, side-long retreat that invariably followed the appearance, seemed to partake rather of the nature of an unwelcome accident than of intention.

But of the three—they strode onward, silent and clear-cut, towards the glow. And now they were reaching the half-hidden nets, now passing through the shadow of the wicket, with its silent, motionless sentry; now brushing the coarse-grown geraniums, the stunted but sweet-breathed myrtle, the dead leaves of sand-smothered ‘failures’; —and so on, up the little pathway, cool and sleepy with damp night-smells, to pause at last, silhouetted in pitchy black upon the lighted face of the doorway.

Here there was a moment's hesitation—a moment's trembling lingering in the door-frame; and then, like the falling away of a wall-shadow when the light is moved, the two smaller silhouettes disappeared, and only the larger one remained, stooping down, with its left hand fingeri ng at its sword hilt,
and its head thrust eagerly forward round the lintel, in the constrained position of one watching something of peculiar interest.
Scene VI.—‘The Doorway.’

“Giovanna o altri non ha di me cura.”

—DANTE, Purg., can. v.

WITHIN the little room the fire flared and sputtered with a subdued content. Dreamily hushed was the little, bare place; and everywhere dimly-vague with soft, blurring shadows, but for the glow around the hearth, where, like the lonely spirit of the place, there sat a gaunt and hungry creature, crouching low upon a little child that lay asleep upon his knee.

He sat curled constrainedly about the child—this grim, gaunt spirit—in a position of jealous protection. Yet there were fire-dreams in his sunken eyes, and a smile floating faint upon his parched and crackled lips, that more than half belied the stiff suggestion of his posture; just — it maybe — as there were thoughts in his head other than the misery of want of which he seemed the personification;—voices in his ear that took the place of the sea-voice;—sounds that quite out-sang that new soft-stirring sound, which rose and fell about the hut like the freshening of a night-breeze.

Beyond the mellow-lit hearth, the fire-light flooded and sank away—like a fading blush—towards the back of the room, where, as with a grim and sombre brush, it touched into grotesque life and shape the commonest articles—shadowing to an aggressive pitch the disorder of the table cover; gleaming red in the splashed, slow-creeping puddles round about the water-bucket; rudely emphasizing the multitude of wasted bread-fragments 'neath the table; and lastly, just where its dying power seemed to succumb to the shadows, playing faint and fitfully upon the two small figures, stooping, still-eyed and silent, a few feet within the doorway.

Perhaps it was the slow-kindling glow in the eyes of the fisherman as he gathered himself together there by the doorway as though about to spring forward to the rescue of his child; perhaps it was the fixed and trance-like stare with which the woman (though with feverish grasp half-consciously restraining her companion) dwelt and redwelt on the huddled form of the stranger—that roused him at last from his lethargy-fit to a slow-shifting uneasiness. The child was lying in the hollow of his left arm, with her head pillowed up upon his dusty shoulder. His right arm, elbow upon knee, had up to this, served as a prop to his chin. Now upon a sudden it dropped heavily, and he raised his head a little as if to listen.

The air was dead and tomb-still; the freshening wind of a moment ago
seemed to have subsided. No breath came creeping up from the sea—no
stir from the dropping fire. The silence was as a thing discernible to the
senses.

And through this there came floating at last a little sound, faint and
lonely and still, as might be a random chord struck softly among the
shadows of a church at midnight; for the red lips of the child had opened a
little, and through them a petulant dream-sigh had escaped and floated
away into the room upon the bosom of the silence.

And, at once, as if the elements had been awaiting some such key-note,
sound followed hard on sound, behind the little, lonely sigh; and strange,
whispering stirs and uneasy movements broke into life both within and
without the hut.

But something in the solitary sweetness of the keynote seemed to have
monopolized the ear of our gaunt hearth-spirit to the utter out-thrusting of
all sense and sound of the chorus. Down swept those hungry eyes towards
the drowsy, solemn face, and, fixing there, filled slowly with a queer, mad
joy, too fervent to be else than painful, too deep-springing to receive the
name of gladness, unless it were something of that glad-agony with which
the long but temporarily blind receive their first faint ray of returning light;
for light, again, was in the dust-cold heart, there was a sunbeam in the
forgotten room.

Lower over the child he bent his form, and closer drew it to him there by
the sinking flame; at one time half-casting over his shoulder a vacant,
sightless glance, prompted apparently by some vague uneasiness; at
another, listening, with ear inclined, and eye appealing in furtive glee to the
blaze—to the innocent peace of her breathing; and at one other still,
drawing the friendly embers yet further into his confidence with a
whispered half-laugh and a poor, mazed face of fear:—

“She sleeps! she sleeps!”

It was the woman who made an end of it. With her hands outstretched
before her, and a trance-like fixedness upon her face, she had moved away
from her man and begun to creep and tiptoe slowly forward as if drawn
towards the dreamer by some subtile influence. Now,—as she crept,—she
would incline her head to this side, now to that, hoping, it seemed, to gain a
side-view of him; while, at each fresh step and glance, the grey fear
quickened like a winter's dawn, and hardened in her face.

She had laboured but a few such steps, when something in what she saw
drew a sudden start from her. Very gradually she came to a stop,—her
hand seeking her heart, her breath quickening a little, her eyes clouded
with a sudden yearning,—and a little piteous cry escaped her:—

“So thin—so thin!”
A shiver twisted the bones of the man by the fire at the dim, small sound, and, slowly drawing himself upright from the child, he held there listening. Then, as if drawn thither by the attraction of her presence, he began to edge round, piece by piece, continuing so, till with a curious noise far sunken in his throat, and a cowering back upon his stool as a man might duck to a lightning flash, his eyes lit fair upon the trembling woman.

It was while he still cowered back thus, that the awakened child—unceremoniously forgetful, as children will be, of the last hour's toy—slipped rustling to the floor; and, steadying her too hasty steps for a moment of precarious clutching at her silent mother's skirts, pattered thence with a sleepy cry of delight to where she could see the grey-haired father—upright, still, and staring among the shadows. And there was something sadly ill-timed in such a desertion at such a moment: natural though it was, and though through it all the man's scared eyes remained glued, and seemingly unconscious of all else, upon the woman.

And the officer was laughing and whispering in the shade of the doorpost: “The beggar's cracked!” he said, “—if he isn't strange!”

But presently, with a wary movement, the creature removed the arm with which from the first moment of his fright he had, in a manner, shielded his forehead and eyes; and began to bend cautiously forward towards the object of his wonder, with a kind of breathless awakening to his face and posture. And it was then that a dreadful smile seemed to trickle from, rather than widen, the corners of his mouth; followed in quick succession by a shy drawing-back upon his stool—a little protesting laugh, as one child says “don't!” to another—and a sharp little questioning cry of—“Nell?”

Then again—in a louder tone—with a loud ugly laugh that was half a challenge, and a threatening half-rise from his stool:

“Nell!”

And again,—subsiding back into his seat with a deep dejected burying of his rocking head among his arms and knees—in a wee, merry whisper:

“Nell!”

The woman stepped forward and threw herself down beside him as he crouched thus upon his stool; putting her arms about him and crooning to him as she might have done to a child. But he vouchsafed her little return for her caresses, save to bury his head the deeper in his arms, and take on quivering fits at intervals, as though, for all the world, he were near stifling with his laughter. Indeed, so far was he from heeding her faint persuasions, that he failed even to lift his head to the ‘clumping’ footsteps and lowered feverish voices, that presently broke an echo from both roof and floor.

Nor did the woman seem, herself, to hear the surging and whispering of
the prying crowd. There seemed—in the wide-thrown eyes, and strained and listening face—no room for anything but just this tattered creature: trembling, decrepit ghost of something gone and dim—laughing, or was it sobbing, with his head between his knees. It was only when her warm, feminine waves of persuasion and sympathy had beaten themselves again and again to so much mist and vapour against the petrification of indifference or horror into which he had fallen, and the fruitlessness of further attempt to waken the broken frame to a sense of the present, was thus gradually borne in upon her, that she began to waver a little, and presently to throw up dumb and weary appeals towards the ‘clumping’ footsteps and the doorway: catching in the deep and quiet sadness of the gaze that answered hers, a meaning to it all.

So it was over then! Already the room was grumbling and groaning to a shifting jumble of giant soldiers and soft-glinting weapons. There in the doorway—over the heads of the guard—eager-faced figures were clinging tenaciously to vantage points of a painful temporariness for a peep at the end. There beside the disordered table—where lounged the young officer, crumbling and tossing bread-pellets—the child was clinging close up to its father with a face of solemn trust; while the father was holding out his wrists for the shackles, and meeting her upturned eyes in his simple quiet way. So this was the end.

No. There was something yet to come. Those persevering flat-faced ones in the doorway were to be, in a measure, repaid for their painful clinging; even if—as is to be feared—they found some difficulty in following or sympathizing with the strange turn of matters. For, with a sudden fluttering rush of skirts, the woman had flung herself down at the feet of the officer, and was crying to him a low jumble of desperate words.

“Sir—sir!” she cried. “You don't know what you do—you don't indeed. . . Give me but a moment, Captain—a time or two to get up my courage—and I'll clear him to you! Yes—yes, him you're chaining there; him that hardly knows what it means; him that's as innocent of it all as you are, sir! Ah, sirs!” she quickened, doubtfully, as if already sensible of a bare toleration in her audience, “perhaps his silence is troubling you—perhaps you think because he's quiet and silent, and doesn't take to knees, mouthing and praying to you like the rest, that he's guilty? Ah, you don't know him, sirs—you don't know what you do! It's because of me, his wife, that he's silent—it's because he knows that I'm guilty that he doesn't speak out and clear himself—it's because—Ah! but it's hard for a woman to cry out her shame!” And here for a while her brave spirit bent to the weight of the task she had set it, and she sank to a sitting position upon the floor with a helpless sob.
But a shuffling movement among the soldiers, as the sprinkling of convicts, behind, pressed forward from the doorway craning for a view, was suggestive kindle enough to liven the blaze anew; and she was on her feet in a moment, fluttering over in her blind desperation to the humped-up figure by the fire, and bating him almost roughly in a white fear for her man.

“God's love! You must rouse yourself, Ben!” she cried, flinging down beside him, and shaking his limp, dull form. “Tell them about it, boy! Tell them how you knew me in the old time—tell them what you promised! Tell them how you only came to-night—how and where you've been! Only tell them something! We can save him if you will but rouse!—Ben—Ben—Ben!” and in her frenzy she shook him again and again.

“Aye—!” rose, suddenly, a deep and tremulous growl—which, flinging out sharp and menacing from somewhere near the doorway, set heads back-craning this way and that over shoulders, and opened thus through the crowd a glimpse of the sallow-faced speaker—“Tell them your tale, man! Who'd have thought of ye buckling in so tame! Spin out your yarn—anything—what matters the substance at such a time! Come—come! up with your head, if only to show us ye ain't a'grinning there in your sleeve! Tell them how Dan Gadban met ye at sun-down on the cliffs—how his soft heart melted at the sight of ye—how he couldn't for the life of him do ye a harm—how he even (being, as ye might say, in a soft-livered mood) directed ye on to your friends in the cove in time for a bite o' supper! Come!—some such tale might save ye a stripe or two; and your friends, here, a year or two's ‘chains’; being tickling to the humour!”

At this a titter arose from the huddle of grey forms in the doorway; but died out abruptly as the officer flashed round on them with raised, impatient hand. By the fire, too—though few were aware of it—the spy's jest gained an appreciation; for, as if in answer to his summons, the felon looked up from his knees with a muffled gasp, and fixed an unwinking stare of a curious dog-like shyness upon the jester. Strangely too—for the moment and for long after it—the crowd failed utterly to mark the fact that this same dog-like stare moved neither to right nor to the left after the varying climaxes of the little drama; that it sat, indeed, as though furtively riveted upon the one point; and if it shifted at all, did so only as a needle might shift to a spasmodically restless magnet—watchful and quiet and certain.

Only the jester saw it—having your jester's not unapprehensive curiosity, perhaps, as to the demeanour of the person at whose expense he had made his mark—and, sharp, as he did so, peeped back over his shoulder towards the thickening crowd in the doorway.
As regards the rest of the bystanders—whatever claim upon the general interest the sulker by the fire may be said to have possessed during the woman's *rough-handed* appeal, quitted him upon her subsequent despair and desistance. When, with a final touch of softer persuasion—more pregnant of moving power than all the former passion, because of its very weakening forces—she rose from his side and turned wearily back towards the soldiers, he was straightway relegated to some handy pigeon-hole of the general memory, till such time as they might have exhausted the interest of the wilder and more actively engrossing concern. From the first faint evidences she had given of a tendency to rebel against her fate, each movement of the little, feverish figure had been followed with gathering interest by both soldiers and convicts; for to a certain class of mind few sights can equalize in attractions with that of some small, but pluck-stirred creature, blustering and struggling against impossible odds—and slowly weakening to its fall. Indeed, this is too familiar a picture to need anything but the faintest impression—the dying struggles of a bottled fly hold a curious fascination, even for children.

“Jim,” she whispered, brokenly (she had moved over to his side and caught at his disengaged hand), “it's hard for a woman to tell it, with Ben there watching with his staring eyes, and—and with you. Couldn't you help me a little, couldn't you speak to them, tell them the dreadful thing? Jim, they're a cruel, coarse lot to hear such a tale! Think you how it will sound on a woman's lips! They'll believe it, maybe, coming from you! From me it must come as lame as a lie, for I'll seem as if I loved you while I speak!”

And then she drew back slowly from him, dropping her face in her hands. For his eyes had seemed to glance coldly at her, and he spoke no word.

Presently the officer stirred, where he lounged, crumbling bread at the table.

“Is this all?” he asked.

“All!” cried the woman, flashing wildly upon him. “Ah! sir, I haven't said a word, I haven't breathed a whisper of what I want to tell! And yet,” she added, with a quick depression of tone, “God knows—I try—I try!”

Then plaintively sweeping the loose hair from her face, and bracing her weakening figure, the two actions partaking so fully of the same fierce rush of resolution as rather to resemble one—she moved up closer to the officer, and in a tremulous undertone, poured out her tale.

“It was in the ‘Briadene,’ convict ship, three years gone. We were all three prisoners, I was chosen nurse to the colonel's child. . . . I used to hang about the cabin for news, listening, eavesdropping, if you like, for news. I saw no harm, I was just a woman, master. But it never entered my head—
this cruel thought of mine—till one night they talked of escapes, there in the cabin, and one of them drew a chart, showing how it might be done from here to safety. And I was listening, sir; there, behind the arm-rack. And I seized on the chart when they had gone, snatched it from the table where it lay among the plates and glasses. And Captain—Captain,” she hissed out, clutching at his arm in her excitement, “I have it here,—here safe hid in my breast! I can prove it thus far for you, Captain.”

But here the woman ceased with a gasp, her hand groping feverishly in the bosom of her dress, and her wild-shifting eyes, paling, paling to some grey, slow-creeping fear.

“Ah,” she murmured, ceasing suddenly to grope. “I had forgot, I burned it!” and then, with a slow vague look around, she sank into a chair beside her, dropping her red head weakly upon the arm with which she clasped the chair back.

“Curse it! Dust,” burst in the officer, with a sharp irritable ring in his voice, “have you nothing to say, man, that you stand there gaping at your wife like any outsider from the town? What does it all mean?”

Aye! indeed, was there not ample room and excuse for some slight fizzle of feeling on the part of one, who, against all his higher instincts and principles, had been forced to spy upon the wretched scene from its beginning? Had not the man kept a cowardly—or was it merely sottish?—silence from the moment of his entrance, leaving all the overdose of passion tatters to the red-haired fury of a wife? And was he not even now gaping down at her with a face of stolid wonderment, as though—clown that he was—he were just beginning to ask himself the question, whether, after all, he might not have some secondary part in this woman's misery, whether, after all, he ought not himself to show some feeling in the matter?

“Curse it, Dust!” snapped the officer again. “Are you as ignorant as the rest of us of her meaning?”

At this the fisherman-convict raised his face (in which there certainly did lie something of wonderment, though rather thoughtful than stolid), and stepped forward into the light towards his wife, leading the solemn-faced child by the hand and crooning to it as he walked. And when presently he halted in the silence by the woman, and stood looking down at her with a strange soft light in his eyes, a stir went floating, whisper-like, through the crowd, as though—with one throbbing heart and pulse—it felt and resented the oppression of the moment.

“You ask me what she means,” he said, in a monotone, gentle and slow, and broken grotesquely towards the finish by a quiet laugh. “What should a woman mean at such a time? Is it the way of you soldiers to seek your wisdom in the homes you destroy—in the hearts you break? It may be that
things have crazed her a little—it is more than likely, sir. . . . For she and I” (here he paused, placing his rough hand gently upon her hair), “we're fond of each other—for convicts!”

Nothing spoke or breathed to this. Only the woman threw up her face towards him with the gathering tears in her eyes, then dropped it again to the chair-back with a kind of laughing sob. But in a while the fisherman bent down closer towards her, and spoke again in a whisper that only she could hear.

“Won't you look up lass, and let me see your face?”

And the woman, turning quickly, seized his hand from its ruddy resting-place and laid her wet cheek upon it. And he drew her up towards him, and the little couple kissed each other, there, in the quiet room, where they had grieved so long.

But the onlookers—how silent and engrossed were they! Still by the table stood the officer, crumbling bread as he watched and tossing it thoughtfully in his hand, as if weighing the chances of this strange little pair which found time and inclination to renew its regards in the very track of an onrushing sorrow. While behind him the soldiers, and behind them again the grey sprinkling of convicts, pressed involuntarily nearer to the centre of interest, and so further into the room—the whole line leaving for the moment a little bare passage-like space between it and the door-wall behind.

Looking from the fire—situated as it was at the room-end farthest from the door—one might have peeped away down this open spaceway, and along, behind the straining crowd, to the very doorway itself, now empty and open but for the squat, dark figure of the spy, who, lost like the others in the turn of events, had mounted himself upon a low, deal box, and was peering, with raised and curious chin, over the shoulders of the crowd.

And what shall we say of the ragged sulker by the fire, so long forgotten, yet still low-bowed in the hearth-light; still with that dead face of his half-raised and staring.

Strange, that although no feature, either of his pose or appearance, would seem to have altered since first he had assumed his strange fixity of look, yet some faint unfixable, indefinable change, had, since then, found a place in his visage. It was as if some wayward puff of fire-smoke had enveloped him during the interval, and still hung thinly about him, darkening the shadows of his bony face, yet throwing out the still, yellow eyes with a faint additional gleam. The look was as apparently unmeaning, yet as instinctively repellent, as might have been one of those innocent, thin-coloured Borgia poisons of the Middle Ages; and like them, too, its composition, besides partaking of minute distillations of many and varied
ingredients, seemed also to have required as many parts of good as of evil to produce the repellent whole; for, half-stifling the fear that lay at the root of it all, were traces of joy, grand and deep-moving; courage, half-frenzy though it were; and even of a species of love, wild and gloating and unreasoning as that of the drunkard for his drink.

And again, although it was no longer the eager expression of a creature yearning for food, nor yet the mere feeble ‘desiring’ of an appetite only half-satisfied (for there was cunning in it), yet there sat a terrible ‘want’ in the stare, and that of a kind that heaved and shivered at moments, as if, indeed, it were beating and throbbing, slowly, to a ‘hunger.’

The terms ‘hunger’ and ‘want’ have grown so nearly synonymous in our latter-day etymologies—the prevalence of the one having, apparently, swallowed up the significance of the other—that there may seem a something forced and incongruous in the supposition of a dividing line between them, even as used in their present sense. Yet here it protruded with so sharp and sudden a frankness, so rude a glimpsing of the devil behind the curtain, as to make the distinction inevitable. Like a steady, slow-rising flush it came; wringing up hotly over the yellow-pale face; flooding in a ‘purpose’ on the cunning; flooding out the few scraps of kindness like chips on a rising tide; and suffusing the staring eyes with a red, elusive gleam. And, thereafter, in the dim lying-place of pale and sickly ‘want,’ there sat ‘red hunger,’ as naturally as to seem to have dwelt there always; and withal so deep and soul-clinging, that it appeared little more than a natural dovetailing of events, that it should presently wrest the huge, flabby form, trembling and hideously secret, from its stool; start it furtively sidling thence into the shadows that hung to the right of the great rubble chimney; and later, draw it forth again, silent-inch by silent-inch, along the shadow of the wall behind the crowd, doorwards.

Thus, ever further down this narrow space-way, and deeper into the shadow, the grey, crouching figure went edging; sometimes quite blended and blotted out in the half-gloom, at others showing dimly against the wall like some vague, slow-sliding shadow; but ever with head and chin thrust stiffly forward after the manner of an animal watching warily for its time. At every fresh step he took, it seemed the more certain that someone would turn with a questioning cry towards the stool gleaming bare in the hearth-glow, or catch in the corner of his eye the tail of the slow-jerking shadow; or, at least, cast back an off-glance at the noise of hard breathing behind him. Yet still, unfelt and unseen, past this and that tiptoeing watcher, the creature brushed on—on till the very goal seemed his, if, indeed, the door were his goal; for there was that in the dry, panting lips, in the oft-recurring fits of stiff, clenched shuddering, in the red and bloody slynness of the
watching eyes, that whispered of deeper things than mere ‘escape.’

Meanwhile the eyes of the spy had taken on a glint of pleasure, there, under the sheltering hat-brim, as—still perched upon the box, a few feet on the inner side of the doorway—he followed with eager peepings, through and over the crowd, each fresh turn of the game. He seemed to have smothered for the while the promptings of that lurking fear, which, but a few moments before, had led him, so expeditiously and so viciously, to thrust his way back through the on-pressing crowd to his present safer and more airy position by the door. He appeared to have forgotten—in the delicious triumph of the moment—what he had read in that hollow stare by the fire, and the apparent necessity it had roused in him—even when securely located in his present remote and elevated point of vantage—for quick and frequent glancing in that direction.

And, indeed, now that it had served its purpose, acted its part, was there anything in this tottering ‘bird-scare’ to flutter and sicken over; or even to burden his mind with? What more natural than he should fall to oblivious basking in the beams of his triumph—so extremely golden because so unexpected? What more likely than he should lay himself out to gather the fruits of his sowing—a jeering laugh that might reach her ears; a compassionate gleam that would catch her eye?

What recked it that the wench affected neither to see him nor to heed his laughter; that her face bore fewer signs of the bitterness of her position than was consistent with complete satisfaction; that she met her doom with a smile! Were there not sweets enough and to spare in the mere leisurely overlooking of the fore-doomed three, as, with clownish contradictions, they deepened and depressed the mutual balance—the doting husband spoiling the game of the wench; and the wench spoiled in turn by the starving cur near the——

“Where?”

Twinkling and starting with sudden terror, the eyes of the ringer widened upon the hearth-stool, sitting bare and hollow upon the hearth with its round, work-polished seat gleaming glass-like in the fire-light. Then, breathing hoarse in his fright, like one panting from exertion, he crouched in closer to the crowd in front of him; and, with a wary look, as of guarded terror, began to poke and peer among the preoccupied faces about him for one of another kind. Yet, neither feebly-ducking among the crowd, nor sulking half-hid in that gloomy patch by the chimney, nor yet smothered ostrich-like in the folds of vague garments upon the wall, could he find a sunken face that stared.

“Escaped!”

He breathed the word faintly on the intake (it maybe that he meant to
shout it), and cast out a glance into the blackness behind him, with a glare of swift hope in his eyes.

“Escaped?”

He jerked it out, this time, with something of his normal bluster, though there were beads of relief on his dull, grey face, while the look which he threw up the space-way behind the crowd was still dazed with the fear he had missed so barely.

“Escaped?”

He whimpered the word doubtfully, for his eyes were still full of the fire-light, and he could not satisfy himself that that was merely a fallen coat which lay dim-outlined near his feet and close-shadowed by the left door-post. So presently, shifting away a bit, he bent down, gingerly, a little nearer to the doubtful heap, and came upon it, vaguely, there in the darkness—the sunken, staring thing.

. . . . Then, “A—h!” pealed out a mighty bellow; and down came the ringer, crashing and struggling upon the threshold, with long, thin, loving fingers gripping like fate about his neck, and as surely squeezing the life-breath out of him; so that, in a little while, when he had beaten out his frenzied bluster against the paralyzing horror that enveloped him, and sunk away, further and further, in the effort, from the dim-lit threshold and from hope, there was little to be heard of him, save a petulant, panting wheeze; and little to be seen, save a jumbled, clinging vagueness, rolling and tumbling, feebly, amid the dim flowering shrubs and scents of the shadowy garden.

A little after it—for they were dazed with the abruptness of the yell, and blinded with fear and fire-light—a rumbling jumble of convicts and soldiers came pushing out pell-mell into the gloom; the former impeding the latter with alternate rushings and hesitations; the latter vaguely handling their weapons and peeping about, uncertainly, like so many doubting children—now out into the darkness, now backwards over their shoulders—for someone to speak a word.

Somebody saw it, and shrieked out so. Down near the little wicket there was moving a feeble something, which presently gave forth a petulant sound, like the husky scream of an infant.

“Curse you!” it floated up softly. “He's killing me—shoot! Ah, shoot!”

And the cry brought a grey-haired soldier pressing slowly out of the crowd, his face one petrified doubt—so little did he relish the thought of commanding himself—and his mouth a nervous smirk which he strove in vain to bite down.

“Where's the Captain—the Captain?” he quavered, casting back a helpless glance in the direction of the timid block of waverers that still
struggled uncertainly in the doorway. And then—as nobody gave him heed—he looked down again towards the gateway, fingerling his gun and mumbling.

It may have been a pricking sense of his age, and the responsibility he supposed it to entail—though I think it more likely to have been a little husky sigh that wheezed upwards, at that moment, from the gloom—that decided him so suddenly; but presently he ran forward towards the wicket, stooping as he went, as though peering for his chance, which, to be brief, he seemed eventually to find; for a bursting flash came spitting out of the murk, followed hard by a jerky rustling down near the gate, and afterwards by a silence that only the surges broke and filled with their slow murmurs.

It was into this last that the furious young officer came, thrusting and cursing, through the crowd that choked the doorway; for he had suddenly gotten a doubt into his mind as to the full sincerity of this timidity, which had so long kept him penned up in the cottage, and, as not a few youngsters would have done in his place, had already capped the half-suspicion with the hundred other certainties of guilt which its discovery had seemed to half-reveal. Whether his suspicion were a grim reality, or nothing but the pallid offspring of a boyish misconfidence in self, is one of the many unexplained mysteries that the wanderer may still find bedizening the old fishing-cove with their gloom and shadow.

. . . . So, darting out of the crowd, he too ran forward; stooping as he went, and seeming, like his doubting predecessor, to be peering for his chance. But, unlike the proceedings of that independent worthy, no bursting flash followed the blending of his lanky figure with the darkness. Instead, his voice came quickly quavering up, so thin and discordant as to be almost unrecognisable; but still his masterful voice:

“Here, someone!” it piped. “Help lift the baggar into the light—he's not quite gone.”

Thereupon a file or so detached itself, lingeringly, from the crowd, and went limping wonderingly down, to blend for a silent moment with the other shadows by the gate, and to emerge again presently in slow and heavy procession. . . . And they laid him down half-propped against the door-post, where his sunken face and blinking puzzled eyes looked wearily out of the wan, faint light of the doorway.

Then a wondering whisper went murmuring through the crowd as it pressed in spasmodically round the bearers.

“The prisoner?” it rustled, peering about it for an explanation. “The prisoner!”

But the officer glanced up sharply, where he knelt by the dying man, and motioned them back with impatient hand.
“The other—is dead,” he said, shortly, looking about him, this way and that, as a man might do who was ashamed of the look in his eyes. “We—we'll leave him there.”

Few out of those eager-faced ones, that composed the crowd, seemed to grasp the full purport of the warning implied in the words. One and all fell a'glancing and a'craning down at the gate; while one, indeed, went so far as to shift off a step or two, as if he meant to satisfy his curiosity.

“I'd let it be, mate,” snapped the soldier who had fired the shot, with a strange, quick heat—and his furrowed face showed white and beady, bearing a sheepish look, like that of a guilty child—“If you was me, I'd as lief let it be.” And something in the breathless conviction of the man threw a stillness over the crowd; while even the heavy-jowled gentleman, in whose immediate favour the warning had been given, now eyed the shadow of the little wicket with a species of smug repugnance.

It was some moments later that—trembling painfully—the dying man raised himself upon his arms and hands, and glared back dreamily into the quiet room. The flickering place was empty now, but for the fisherman, his wife, and child, who, standing all crouched together by the table, looked down upon him wincingly, with a kind of horrified pity—the woman's face, in especial, being torn by strange conflicts of feeling; at times, blazing out with such piteous fits of yearning, as seemed very near to fetching her down to his side; yet paling, at others, to so sudden and moving a horror, as almost to threaten a scream.

But the wan eyes raised themselves no higher than the height of the child, as it clung, wide-eyed and serious, to the slack of its mother's skirt; and his words—the living thought of one, with a death still warm on his hands—which he strove so hard to speak, and spoke at last with a dreadful dying effort, will, doubtless, be as fertile of interest to the subtle student of psychology, as they were vague and disappointing to the straining, revelation-expectant bystanders.

Leaning heavily forward into the room, and devouring the child with all the dreary power of his clouding eyes, he smiled and whispered in a dim, faint voice:

“For yours will brighter be——now ours are dim.”
Scene VII.—‘The Threshold.’

“Perchè non pioggia, non grando, non neve,
Non rugiada, non brina più su cade
Che la scalella dei tre gradi breve.”

—DANTE, *Pur.*, can. xxi.

As the body settled, limply, face downwards, on the threshold, the officer shifted a little nearer, and bent down close above it. Presently he reached forth a hand, and felt at the bony wrists, as if to gauge the pulse, and then, with a sharp exclamation, shifted his groping hand from the wrist to the tattered sleeve above it—peering at it and feeling it closely.

“Tattered enough for grave-clothes!” he muttered, excitedly; “yet fresh as paint under the dust—the brand's staring new, while the texture's hardly rubbed! Lord! we're only beginning!” he snapped. “Here's a mingled hell! Store clothes dealt out at Talem Jail only eight days back! Wheugh! he must have galloped to get here in the time! Wheugh!” and he whistled again.

“But my Gadban comes whining of weeks!” he breathed, feeling thoughtfully at the dead man's clothing. “‘Watching him for weeks,’ he says! What a hell it is—and I've no brains!”

He looked up, presently, with his face all beaded and bewildered, and caught the mad, eager eyes of the woman, fixing him and the body in a dumb, sad wail.

“You knew him——” he cried out, snatching at the clue; “I can see that now, if I wasn't certain of it before! Who was he—what was he—woman?”

But this was a question that—at least in the form of the moment—was destined to join that dim, crowded sphere of ghostly and infinite wailings—the sphere of queries unanswered. For, at the moment of its delivery, a strange and unreasonable commotion occurred among the crowd around the doorway, followed, immediately, by its sudden parting and back-rushing from about the threshold, with something of the huddled and affrighted precipitation of a startled flock of sheep. A few, short, gasping cries, too, rose hot-foot from the huddle, as well as a panting curse or two, that were none the more reassuring that they, one and all, sank bated and half-uttered, as though suddenly cut asunder in the midst.

The young officer rose quickly, and turned him, outwards, at the panic; but even he, the reckless youngster, hung affrighted at what he saw.
From where he stood—half in half out of the threshold—the light from the cottage made faintly luminous the path that ran down to the wicket, rendering, only, in the faintest of white luminosities, the little wicket itself. And slowly advancing up the path, as he watched,—and so wearily slow was the pace that it seemed like the slowness of pain—came a figure, dimshadowed and squat, which, as it progressed the further into the glow, shaped, bit by bit, and limb by limb, into a rough-cut resemblance of Gadban, the ringer.

Half-way up the path the figure stopped, still gloomy and vague in the shadows, and seemed to look softly about it, either bewildered at the commotion its advent had occasioned, or secretly enjoying the same. And indeed—as will readily be believed—the latter explanation of its conduct was the only one having acceptance among the affrighted faces, in the dusk, at either side of the way; for the ringer, Gadban—as they whispered one to another—had been more than well used to such shows of sulky hostility from his victims of the cove. For the officer—he was a young man and a nervous. And it was some few moments of transfixed astonishment before his pluck and his pride came rushing to his rescue. Several times over, he was seen to throw back his scared, boyish face—twitching as with a smile—towards the little, pale fisherman behind him, as if, indeed, he, instinctively, realised the presence of something that he lacked in that frail build and care-furrowed face, and were seeking his advice or sympathy. And there are some who go further, and say that his brave, quick action of a moment later—when, bracing himself angrily, he strode out of the doorway towards the still, dark figure, crying, “Gadban—Gadban! Is it you?”—There are some who say that even this had its origin in a smiling question he had found in the steadfast eyes of the fisherman.

But now, into the prevailing murk of our little drama, creeps, as it were, a belated peep of dawn—laid on from a rather remote side-wing, perhaps, but none the less welcome to our eyes, blinded and bewildered (if not surfeited) by so long an acquaintance with gloom; for this was no gruff Gadban's voice that came drawling out of the night in slow answer to the fear-throbblings of so many hearts: this was no growl for the dark of a young-man's days; but a steady, drowsy laugh of a voice, that did not take kindly to the depression of its surroundings—that, in fact, could only have been intended for an atmosphere of mirth or gentle jollity, and had no intention of accommodating itself, with even a becoming decency, to the general fright and pallor.

“No, indeed,” it said, in its drawling, facetious way. “To all appearances it is only the devil.”

At this there was a general rush forward, and an almost as general cry of
relaxed tension and relief—both of which rather startling symptoms of the
general state, coming as they did, abruptly, and doubtless, to the mind of
the newcomer, without appreciable cause, seemed for the first time to cast
a ray of dismay into the heart of that singular personage; for he was
observed to draw back a step before it.

Even as he did so the officer had met him in the pathway, with a husky
rush of joy upon his lips.

“Good Gad! Larkin,” he cried. “And what in the name of heaven brings
you here?—though, to be fair with you, you're welcome enough; for of all
the blessed deductions thrown broad-cast upon a mind made for shoe-
making—this beats—this beats!”

Stepping closer, in his glad enthusiasm, the soldier peered down into his
face. There he met, in close proximity, with the dismayed, but still
phlegmatically-whimsical, countenance of a certain fat-natured and
philosophical sailor of the ‘Briadene’—though in what way he came to be
acquainted with him we never heard; and drawing a comfortable arm
through his own with a laugh that, faint and insignificant as it seemed, was
also a very valuable indication of intense inward relief, led him, talking
earnestly, towards the hut.

“Why,” began our fat friend in unmoved and deliberate answer to the
first question demanded of him, “the moral old metropolis is a'fire yonder,
and 'twas yourself, laddie, that struck the spark. It was your own story in
the first instance, like enough; though you'd hardly claim it now with the
barnacles and weeds adhering. How James Dust here (the paragon of the
settlement) is about to be arrested for ‘harbourage’; and how the old
Governor sits a'cussing in his veranda-porch, that he'll see his own
excellencies very pleasantly condemned before he puts another convict in a
position of trust; that, in short, he'll abolish the whole fishing settlement,
‘wall and roof-tree and blackened soul’—adding the latter advisedly, I
suspect; for they could hardly lie about in the sand.”

“Well”—he drew in, with a sudden, serious twist to his face—“I brought
them out, you know—the two of them—in the old ‘Briadene.’ So that I
feel, to a certain extent, interested in their moral welfare—in fact, I'm in
the habit of ‘puffing’ up here when we get the old ship ‘buoyed,’
comfortable; and smoking his diabolical ‘store’ tobacco, and drinking his
wife's atrocious coffee, and lolling about the fire talking wisdom with the
abominable baby (I hope they can't hear!)—So that when I heard this
rubbish about ‘harbourage’ I came up to see what I could do; for I
happened to recollect James D.'s sentiments in the matter, told over a pipe;
and it fairly beats me——Hallo!”

The speaker pulled up sharply, with a little noise in his throat; for just
outside the threshold, half-in half-out of the fire-beams, lay the body of the dead convict, and, in the deep of his tale, he had overlooked it, till it lay almost under his feet.

“Yes—yes,” explained the young soldier, hardly noting it in his eagerness. “That's a feature of the blessed muddle—death, without explanation. I tell you, Larkin, it'll take all your head to unravel the edge!”

The other did not speak for some moments.

“Yes, you seem to have left no stone unturned,” he said, in a while, bending down quietly, and turning the face into the light (and now that the light was upon him, he showed thinner and greyer than of old). “Poor cold, grey stone—hardly worth the turning, I should have thought, my boy.”

“Tut! it's none of mine,” snapped the soldier, sharply. “Didn't you pass the other one, down by the gate—Gadban, the spy, it was?”

“Gadban, the spy!” echoed the mate, looking up with a little quickening and a little surprise. “Ah, that was Gadban, the steward. He hated her always——”

“Hated her—hated whom?” snapped the boy.

“Nothing—nobody!” whispered the other, bending again over the dead man's face. “Only that the mist clears—only that the mist clears.”

The soldier drew himself up with a quick, exasperated laugh. “One of the old Devon fogs,” he snorted. “Clears only to thicken, old friend.”

“That may be,” said the older man, without moving. “Yet I happen to know the lay of the land. Tell me—I may guide you through.”

The Captain peeped down, cautiously, from his place in the dark of the lintel, swiftly scrutinising the soft-lit dead, and its stout attendant figure, and wondering, a little, it seemed, at the latter's inscrutable face, which appeared, in the glow of the doorway, to be draining the dead of its secrets, and saddening apace with their tale. And then in a low, hurried voice—for the crowd, though discreetly removed, still whitened the surrounding shadow—he told what he knew of the night's work, and what he gathered therefrom. And, indeed, though his tale was boyishly abrupt and brief, he showed himself to have missed no feature in the scene—neither from within, nor without, the door, where he stood.

“You have only to feel,” he added, as a parting word, “how fresh the cloth is to the touch.”

“Aye, and how cold the clay,” said the other, sadly, rising slowly from the threshold. “For it held a queer tale, did this thing—and now God has it.”

“Then we have lost it?” asked the boy.

“No—no,” answered he. “We have our tale. And it is no cuddy yarn—no ordinary misery—even ours! But it was only half of his!”
“And how much of theirs?” queried the Captain, with a nod at the doorway.

“All!” said the little, fat officer, meeting his eyes with an inscrutable smile. “But we can and need but prove a part of it.”

“What!” cried the soldier, surprised, “to implicate them?”

Here the mate rubbed his chin for a meditative while.

“Why, no!” he replied, looking down at the body. “I suppose'd you'd had enough of that. . . . To free them, Captain.”

“Ah, to free them,” muttered the soldier, and he smiled. “They are your friends,” he said.

“Yes, they are my friends,” agreed the other, smiling too. “May I go in and speak to them—alone? I have a word to say.”

The soldier hesitated, smiled again, and looked sharply behind him into the shadows.

“Yes—yes, go!” he said.

So the queer, little sailor stepped up into the cottage, and made softly over to the chimney, where stood the fisherman and his wife—hand in hand, and pale, and silent—looking down into the fire.

“So, Jim,” he said, placing a hand upon the convict's arm, “so, Jim, I am too late.”

And at this the pale couple came round upon him, sharply, as if, indeed, they knew and liked the sound of his voice.

“Ah—and is it really you, sir?” cried the fisherman, warmly. “But no—you're not too late. We're only just beginning, Nell and me, here!”

The sailor held back a little in whimsical bewilderment.

“Why, Jim,” he said, looking slowly from one to the other, “why, Nell—but you choose a queer old time for beginning!”

But the couple smiled at him, only, in answer—a quiet, settled smile.

“Why, Jim,” cried the officer again—and a glinting light was dawning in his little, kindly eyes—“‘Shiver my timbers’ is the only nautical phrase I can think of! Here come I, breaking as gently as possible into your misery, that I may give you the greatest possible shock at the good news I bring you, and so a corresponding sense of righteousness to myself—here come I to find you sitting among it all as calm as a taut rope, and the lady in the same disappointing condition——! Where do you get that light from—the both of you—the light I see in your eyes? Why, I'll be nailing my ‘clothes-hook’ somewhere here beside you, if you'll tell me gleams of that kind grow for the picking among these gloomy rocks!”

The fisherman bent his head, smiling softly in the quietude of his mood.

“Ah, Mr. Larkin,” he said, lifting his hand to the woman's shoulder, and speaking slowly with brightening eyes. “You know yourself, maybe, what
a bit of depression can do—how the darkness comes into your life like a
dull English day, and sits there grinning at you from your very bones. And
you've felt, perhaps, what a little gold would mean at such times, even
though it was hid and double-hid—as it so often is—behind a cloud.”

“Yes—yes, man,” said the sailor, taking his hand in a quiet way, and
looking him deep in the eyes. “And what if the gold should peep through,
showing you again what the darkness had hid, and helping you to forget
the shadows it made—as it sometimes does? Eh? Would that be life?”

“Life!—but you cannot do it, sir!” cried they both with excited pallor.
“They have proved it many times—it could not happen!”

“Strange things happen!” he answered, quietly smiling. “Lies are told and
proved to be such!”

“But this is no lie!” said the woman, sadly.

But their little fat friend came nearer to them and took a hand of each.

“Strange things happen!” he smiled again. “Let me tell you of one. . . .
When last I was here I found the room cold—so cold that I shivered and
rubbed my hands. You remember? I come again to find faces thinner,
perhaps, and eyes a little weary; but something on the hearth that was not
here before. On the whole, I like the change. I shall come and smoke a pipe
with you next week, Jim Dust.”

And then it was, that, leaving them smiling behind him, he turned with
something a trifle sad upon his quiet face, and rolled out across the
shadowy room to the doorway, where he surprised the young soldier,
bending close over the body of the convict, and scrutinising thoughtfully
the grey, cold face.

“Have you discovered the old, old secret, then?” he asked, pausing with
the same, queer smile upon the threshold.

“Ah, Larkin, I know nothing of your secrets,” said the other, half-shy,
half-thoughtful. “But I’ve seen a deal of this kind of dog’s death since I’ve
been out. And it beats me how the beggars manage their smile—see this.”
And leaning over, he indicated, with a clumsy reverence, the dead man's
face, where, indeed, there played some softening influence like a smile.

Then at his word our little friend bent beside him, turning the wan face
towards the light, and looking at it earnestly.

“You may take it from me, lad,” he said, without looking up, but with a
kind of laugh in his low voice, “for I, too—joker, punnist, fool—have
turned my leaves of sadness: the sorrowest sorrow of our little lives is only
stifled laughter!”