

# Poor Pretty Bobby

By Rhoda Broughton

“Yes, my dear, you may not believe me, but I can assure you that you cannot dislike old women more, nor think them more contemptible supernumeraries, than I did when I was your age.”

This is what old Mrs Hamilton says—the old lady so incredibly tenacious of life (incredibly as it seems to me at eighteen) as to have buried a husband and five strong sons, and yet still to eat her dinner with hearty relish, and laugh at any such jokes as are spoken loudly enough to reach her dulled ears. This is what she says, shaking the while her bead, which—poor old soul—is already shaking a good deal involuntarily. I am sitting close beside her arm-chair, and have been reading aloud to her; but as I cannot succeed in pitching my voice so as to make her hear satisfactorily, by mutual consent the book has been dropped in my lap, and we have betaken ourselves to conversation.

“I never said I disliked old women, did I?” reply I evasively, being too truthful altogether to deny the soft impeachment “What makes you think I do? They are infinitely preferable to old men; I do distinctly dislike *them*.”

“A fat, bald, deaf old woman,” continues she, not heeding me, and speaking with slow emphasis, while she raises one trembling hand to mark each unpleasant adjective; “if in the year 1802 anyone had told me that I should have lived to be that, I think I should have killed them or myself! and yet now I am all three.”

“You are not *very* deaf,” say I politely—the fatness and baldness admit of no civilities consistent with veracity—but I raise my voice to pay the compliment

“In the year 1802, I was seventeen,” she says, wandering off into memory. “Yes, my dear, I am just fifteen years older than the century, and it is getting into its dotage, is not it? The year 1802—ah! that was just about the time that I first saw my poor Bobby! Poor pretty Bobby.”

“And who *was* Bobby?” ask I, pricking up my ears, and scenting, with the keen nose of youth, a dead-love idyll; an idyll of which this poor old hill of unsteady flesh was the heroine.

“I must have told you the tale a hundred times, have not I?” she asks, turning her old dim eyes towards me. “A curious tale, say what you will, and explain it how you will. I think I *must* have told you; but indeed I forget to whom I tell my old stories and to whom I do not Well, my love, you must promise to stop me if you have heard it before, but to me, you know, these old things are so much clearer than the things of yesterday.”

“You never told me, Mrs Hamilton,” I say, and say truthfully; for being a new acquaintance, I really have not been made acquainted with Bobby’s history. “Would you mind telling it me now, if you are sure that it would not bore you?”

“Bobby,” she repeats softly to herself, “Bobby. I dare say you do not think it a very pretty name?”

“N-not particularly,” reply I honestly. “To tell you the truth, it rather reminds me of a policeman.”

“I dare say,” she answers quietly; “and yet in the year I grew to think it the handsomest, dearest name on earth. Well, if you like, I will begin at the beginning and tell you how that came about.”

“Do,” say I, drawing a stocking out of my pocket, and thriftily beginning to knit to assist me in the process of listening.

“In the year 1802 we were at war with France—you know that, of course. It seemed then as if war were our normal state; I could hardly remember a time when Europe had been at peace. In these days of stagnant quiet it appears as if people’s kith and kin always lived out their full time and died in their beds. *Then* there was hardly a house where there was not one dead, either in battle, or of his wounds after battle, or of some dysentery or ugly parching fever. As for us, we had always been a soldier family—always; there was not one of us that had ever worn a black gown or sat upon a high stool with a pen behind his ear. I had lost uncles and cousins by the half-dozen and dozen, but, for my part, I did not much mind, as I knew very little about them, and black was more becoming wear to a person with my bright colour than anything else.”

At the mention of her bright colour I unintentionally lift my eyes from my knitting, and contemplate the yellow bagginess of the poor old cheek nearest me. Oh, Time! Time! what absurd and dirty turns you play us! What do you do with all our fair and goodly things when you have stolen them from us? In what far and hidden treasure-house do you store them?

“But I did care very much—very exceedingly—for my dear old father—not so old either— younger than my eldest boy was when he went, he would have been forty-two if he had lived three days longer. Well, well, child, you must not let me wander, you must keep me to it. He was not a soldier, was not my father; he was a sailor, a post-captain in His Majesty’s navy, and commanded the ship *Thunderer* in the Channel fleet

“I had struck seventeen in the year 1802, as I said before, and had just come home from being finished at a boarding school of repute in those days, where I had learnt to talk the prettiest *ancien régime* French, and to hate Bonaparte with unchristian violence, from a little ruined *émigre marichale* had also, with infinite expenditure of time, labour, and Berlin wool, wrought out *Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac*, and *Jacob’s First Kiss to Rachel* in finest cross-stitch. Now I had bidden adieu to learning; had only resolved never to disinter *Télémaque* and Thomson’s *Seasons* from the bottom of my trunk; had taken a holiday from all my accomplishments, with the exception of cross-stitch, to which I still faithfully adhered—and, indeed, on the day I am going to mention, I recollect that I was hard at work on Judas Iscariot’s face in Leonardo da Vinci’s *List Supper*—hard at work at it, sitting in the morning sunshine, on a straight-backed chair. We had flatter backs in those days; our shoulders were not made round by lolling in easy-chairs; indeed, no then upholsterer made a chair that it was possible to loll in. My father rented a house near Plymouth at that time, an in-and-out nooky kind of old house—no doubt it has fallen to pieces long years ago—a house all set round with unnumbered flowers, and about which the rooks clamoured all together from the windy elm tops. I was labouring in flesh-coloured wool on Judas’s left cheek, when the door opened and my mother entered. She looked as if something had freshly pleased her, and her eyes were smiling. In her hand she held an open and evidently just-read letter.

“ ‘A messenger has come from Plymouth,’ she says, advancing quickly and joyfully towards me. ‘Your father will be here this afternoon.’

“ ‘This *afternoon!*’ cry I, at the top of my voice, pushing away my heavy work-frame. ‘How delightful! But how—how can that happen?’

“ ‘They have had a brush with a French privateer,’ she answers, sitting down on another straight-backed chair, and looking again over the large square letter, destitute of envelope, for such things were not in those days, ‘and then they succeeded in taking her. Yet they were a good deal knocked about in the process, and have had to put into Plymouth to rest; so he will be here this afternoon for a few hours.’

“ ‘Hurrah!’ cry I, rising, holding out my scanty skirts, and beginning to dance.

“ ‘Bobby Gerard is coming with him,’ continues my mother, again glancing at her despatch. ‘Poor boy, he has had a shot through his right arm, which has broken the bone! So your father is bringing him here for us to nurse him well again.’

“I stop in my dancing.

“ ‘Hurrah again!’ I say brutally. ‘I do not mean about his arm; of course, I am very sorry for that; but, at all events, I shall see him at last I shall see whether he is like his picture, and whether it is not as egregiously flattered as I have always suspected.’

“There was no photographs you know in those days—not even hazy daguerreotypes—it was fifty good years too soon for them. The picture to which I allude is a miniature, at which I had stolen many a deeply longing admiring glance in its velvet case. It is almost impossible for a miniature not to flatter. To the most coarse-skinned and mealy-potato-faced people it cannot help giving cheeks of the texture of a rose-leaf, and brows of the grain of finest marble.

“ ‘Yes,’ replies my mother, absently, ‘so you will. Well, I must be going to give orders about his room. He would like one looking on the garden best, do not you think Phoebe?—one where he could smell the flowers and hear the birds?’

“Mother goes, and I fall into a meditation. Bobby Gerard is an orphan. A few years ago his mother, who was an old friend of my father’s—who knows! perhaps an old love—feeling her end drawing nigh, had sent for father, and had asked him, with eager dying tears, to take as much care of her pretty forlorn boy as he could, and to shield him a little in his tender years from the evils of this wicked world, and to be to him a wise and kindly guardian, in the place of those natural ones that God had taken. And father had promised, and when he promised there was small fear of his not keeping his word.

“This was some years ago, and yet I had never seen him nor he me; he had been almost always at sea and I at school. I had heard plenty about him—about his sayings, his waggeries, his mischievousness, his softheartedness, and his great and unusual comeliness; but his outward man, save as represented in that stealthily peeped-at miniature, had I never seen. They were to arrive in the afternoon; but long before the hour at which they were due I was waiting, with expectant impatience to receive them. I had changed my dress, and had (though rather ashamed of myself) put on everything of most becoming that my wardrobe afforded. If you were to see me as I stood before the glass on that summer afternoon, you would not be able to contain your laughter; the little boys in the street would run after me throwing stones and hooting, but *then*—according to the then fashion and standard of gentility—I was all that was most elegant and *comme il faut*. Lately it has been the mode to puff one’s self out with unnatural and improbable protuberances; *then* one’s great life-object was to make one’s self appear as scrimping as possible—to make one’s self look as if one had been ironed. Many people *damped* their clothes to make them stick more closely to them, and to make them define more distinctly the outline of form and limbs. One’s waist was under one’s arms; the sole object of which seemed to be to outrage nature by pushing one’s bust up into one’s chin, and one’s legs were revealed through one’s scanty drapery with startling candour as one walked or sat I remember once standing with my back to a bright fire in our long drawing-room, and seeing myself reflected in a big mirror at the other end. I was so thinly clad that I was transparent, and could see through myself. Well, in the afternoon in question I was dressed quite an hour and a half too soon. I had a narrow little white gown, which clung successfully tight and close to my figure, and which was of so moderate a length as to leave visible my ankles and my neatly-shod and cross-sandalled feet I had long mittens on my aims, black, and embroidered on the backs in coloured silks; and above my hair, which at the back was scratched up to the top of my crown, towered a tremendous

tortoise-shell comb; while on each side of my face modestly dropped a bunch of curls, nearly meeting over my nose.

“My figure was full—ah! my dear, I have always had a tendency to fat, and you see what it has come to—and my pink cheeks were more deeply brightly rosy than usual. I had looked out at every upper window, so as to have the furthest possible view of the road.

“I had walked in my thin shoes halfway down the drive, so as to command a turn, which, from the house, impeded my vision, when, at last, after many tantalising false alarms, and just five minutes later than the time mentioned in the letter, the high-swung, yellow-bodied, post-chaise hove in sight, dragged—briskly jingling—along by a pair of galloping horses. Then, suddenly, shyness overcame me—much as I loved my father, it was more as my personification of all knightly and noble qualities than from much personal acquaintance with him—and I fled.

“I remained in my room until I thought I had given them ample time to get through the first greetings and settle down into quiet talk. Then, having for one last time run my fingers through each ringlet of my two curl bunches, I stole diffidently downstairs.

“There was a noise of loud and gay voices issuing from the parlour, but, as I entered, they all stopped talking and turned to look at me.”

“ ‘And so this is Phoebe!’ cries my father’s jovial voice, as he comes towards me, and heartily kisses me. ‘Good Lord, how time flies! It does not seem more than three months since I saw the child, and yet then she was a bit of a brat in trousers, and long bare legs!’

“At this allusion to my late mode of attire, I laugh, but I also feel myself growing scarlet

“ ‘Here, Bobby!’ continues my father, taking me by the hand, and leading me towards a sofa on which a young man is sitting beside my mother; ‘this is my little lass that you have so often heard of. Not such a very little one, after all, is she? Do not be shy, my boy; you will not see such a pretty girl every day of your life—give her a kiss.’

“My eyes are on the ground, but I am aware that the young man rises, advances (not unwillingly, as it seems to me), and bestows a kiss somewhere or other on my face. I am not quite clear *where*, as I think the curls impede him a good deal.

“Thus, before ever I saw Bobby, before ever I knew what manner of man he was, I was kissed by him. That was a good beginning, was not it?

“After these salutations are over, we subside again into conversation—I sitting beside my father, with his arm round my waist, sitting modestly silent, and peeping every now and then under my eyes, as often as I think I may do so safely unobserved, at the young fellow opposite me. I am instituting an inward comparison between nature and art: between the real live man and the miniature that undertakes to represent him. The first result of this inspection is disappointment, for where are the lovely smooth roses and lilies that I have been wont to connect with Bobby Gerard’s name? There are no roses in his cheek, certainly; they are paleish—from his wound, as I conjecture; but even before that accident, if there were roses at all, they must have been mahogany-coloured ones, for the salt sea winds and the high summer sun have tanned his fair face to a rich reddish, brownish, copperish hue. But in some things the picture lied not. There is the brow more broad than high; the straight fine nose; the brave and joyful blue eyes, and the mouth with its pretty curling smile. On the whole, perhaps, I am not disappointed.

“By-and-by father rises, and steps out into the verandah, where the canary birds hung out in their cages are noisily praising God after their manner. Mother follows him. I should like to do the same; but a sense of good manners, and a conjecture that possibly my parents may have some subjects to discuss, on which they would prefer to be without the help of my advice, restrain me. I therefore remain, and so does the invalid.

## II

“For some moments the silence threatens to remain unbroken between us; for some moments the subdued sound of father’s and mother’s talk from among the rosebeds and the piercing clamour of the canaries—fishwives among birds—are the only noises that salute our ears. Noise we make none ourselves. My eyes are reading the muddled pattern of the Turkey carpet, I do not know what his are doing. Small knowledge have I had of men, saving the dancing master at our school; a beautiful new youth is almost as great a novelty to me as to Miranda, and I am a good deal gawkier than she was under the new experience. I think he must have made a vow that he would not speak first I feel myself swelling to double my normal size with confusion and heat; at last, in desperation, I look up, and say sententiously, ‘You have been wounded, I believe?’

“ ‘Yes, I have.’

“He might have helped me by answering more at large, might not he?

But now that I am having a good look at him, I see that he is rather red too. Perhaps he also feels gawky and swollen; the idea encourages me.

“ ‘Did it hurt very badly?’

“ ‘N—not so very much.’

“ ‘I should have thought that you ought to have been in bed,’ say I, with a motherly air of solicitude.

“ ‘Should you, why?’

“ ‘I thought that when people broke their limbs they had to stay in bed till they were mended again.’

“ ‘But mine was broken a week ago,’ he answers, smiling and showing his straight white teeth—ah the miniature was silent about *them!* ‘You would not have had me stay in bed a whole week, like an old woman?’

“ ‘I expected to have seen you much *iller,*’ said I, beginning to feel more at my ease, and with a sensible diminution of that unpleasant swelling sensation. ‘Father said in his note that we were to nurse you well again; that sounded as if you were *quite* ill.’

“ ‘Your father always takes a great deal too much care of me,’ he says, with a slight frown and darkening of his whole bright face. ‘It might be sugar or salt’

“ ‘And very kind of him, too,’ I cry, firing up. ‘What motive beside your own good can he have for looking after you? I call you rather ungrateful.’

“ ‘Do you?’ he says calmly, and without apparent resentment ‘But you are mistaken. I am not ungrateful. However, naturally, you do not understand.’

“ ‘Oh, indeed!’ reply I, speaking rather shortly, and feeling a little offended, ‘I dare say not’

“Our talk is taking a somewhat hostile tone; to what further amenities we might have proceeded is unknown; for at this point father and mother reappear through the window, and the necessity of conversing with each other at all ceases.

“Father stayed till evening, and we all supped together, and I was called upon to sit by Bobby, and cut up his food for him, as he was disabled from doing it for himself. Then, later still, when the sun had set, and all his evening reds and purples had followed him, when the night flowers were scenting all the garden, and the shadows lay about, enormously long in the summer moonlight, father got into the post-chaise again, and drove away through the black shadows and the faint clear shin; and Bobby stood at the hail door watching him, with his arm in a sling and a wistful smile on lips and eyes.

“ ‘Well, we are not left *quite* desolate this time,’ says mother, turning with rather tearful laughter to the young man. ‘You wish that we were, do not you, Bobby?’

“ ‘You would not believe me, if I answered “No,” would you?’ he asks, with the same still smile.

“ ‘He is not very polite to us, is he, Phoebe?’

“ ‘You would not wish me to be polite in such a case,’ he replies, flushing. ‘You would not wish me to be glad at trussing the chance of seeing any of the fun?’

“ ‘But Mr Gerard’s eagerness to be back at his post delays the probability of his being able to return thither. The next day he has a feverish attack, the day after he is worse; the day after that worse still, and in fine, it is between a fortnight and three weeks before he also is able to get into a post-chaise and drive away to Plymouth. And meanwhile mother and I nurse him and cosset him, and make him odd and cool drinks out of herbs and field flowers, whose uses are now disdained or forgotten. I do not mean any offence to you, my dear, but I think that young girls in those days were less squeamish and more truly delicate than they are nowadays. I remember once I read *Humphrey Clinker* aloud to my father, and we both highly relished and laughed over its jokes; but I should not have understood one of the darkly unclean allusions in that French book your mother left here one day. *You* would think it very unseemly to enter the bedroom of a strange young man, sick or well; but as for me, I spent whole nights in Bobby’s, watching him and tending him with as little false shame as if he had been my brother. I can hear *now*, more plainly than the song you sang me an hour ago, the slumberous buzzing of the great brown coated summer bees in his still room, as I sat by his bedside watching his sleeping face, as he dreamt unquietly, and clenched, and again unclenched, his nervous hands. I think he was back in the *Thunderer*. I can see *now* the little close curls of his sunshiny hair straggling over the white pillow. And then there came a good and blessed day, when he was out of danger, and then another, a little further on, when he was up and dressed, and he and I walked forth into the hayfield beyond the garden—reversing the order of things—*he*, leaning on my arm; and a good plump solid arm it was. We walked out under the heavy leaved horse chestnut trees, and the old and rough barked elms. The sun was shining all this time, as it seems to me. I do not believe that in those days there were the same cold unseasonable rains as now; there were soft showers enough to keep the grass green and the flowers undrooped, but I have no association of overcast skies and untimely deluges with those long and azure days. We sat under a haycock, on the shady side, and indolently watched the hot haymakers—the shirt-sleeved men, and burnt and bare armed women, tossing and raking while we breathed the blessed country air, full of adorable scents, and crowded with little happy and pretty winged insects.

“ ‘In three days,’ says Bobby, leaning his elbow in the hay, and speaking with an eager smile, ‘three days at the furthest, I may go back again, may not I, Phoebe?’

“ ‘Without doubt,’ reply I, stiffly, pulling a dry and faded ox-eye flower out of the odorous mounds beside me; ‘for my part, I do not see why you should not go tomorrow, or indeed—if we could send into Plymouth for a chaise—this afternoon; you are so thin that you look all mouth and eyes, and you can hardly stand, without assistance, but these, of course, are trifling drawbacks, and I daresay would be rather an advantage on board ship than otherwise.’

“ ‘You are angry!’ he says, with a sort of laugh in his deep eyes. ‘You look even prettier when you are angry than when you are pleased.’

“ ‘It is no question of my looks,’ I say, still in some heat, though mollified by the irrelevant compliment.

“ ‘For the second time you are thinking me ungrateful,’ he says, gravely ‘you do not tell me so in so many words, because it is towards yourself that my ingratitude is shown. The first time you told me of it, it was almost the first thing that you ever said to me.’

“ ‘So it was,’ I answer quickly-, ‘and if the occasion were to come over again, I should say it again. I daresay you did not mean it, but it sounded exactly as if you were complaining of my father for being too careful of you.’

“ ‘He *is* too careful of me!’ cries the young man, with a hot flushing of cheek and brow. ‘I cannot help if it makes you angry again; I *must* say it, he is more careful of me than he would be of his own son, if he had one.’

“ ‘Did he not promise your mother that he would look after you?’ ask I, eagerly. ‘When people make promises to people on their death beds, they are in no hurry to break them; at least such people as father are not.’

“ ‘You do not understand,’ he says, a little impatiently, while that hot flush still dwells on his pale cheek. ‘My mother was the last person in the world to wish him to take care of my body at the expense of my honour.’

“ ‘What are you talking about?’ I say, looking at him, with a lurking suspicion that, despite the steady light of reason in his blue eyes, he is still labouring under some form of delirium.

“ ‘Unless I tell you all my grievance, I see that you will never comprehend,’ he says, sighing. ‘Well, listen to me, and you shall hear it; and if you do not agree with me when I have done, you are not the kind of girl I take you for.’

“ ‘Then I am sure I am not the kind of girl you take me for,’ reply I, with a laugh for I am fully determined to disagree with you entirely.’

“ ‘You know,’ he says, raising himself a little from his hay couch, and speaking with clear rapidity, ‘that, whenever we take a French prize a lot of the French sailors are ironed, and the vessel is sent into port, in the charge of one officer and several men. There is some slight risk attending it—for my part, I think very slight—but I suppose that your father looks at it differently, for—*I have never been sent.*’

“ ‘It is accident,’ say I, reassuringly. ‘Your turn will come in good time.’

“ ‘It is *not* an accident!’ he answers firmly. ‘Boys younger than I am—much less trustworthy, and of whom he has not half the opinion that he has of me—have been sent; but I, *never*. I bore it as well as I could for a long time, but now I can bear it no longer, it is not, I assure you, my fancy; but I can see that my brother officers, knowing how partial your father is to me—what influences I have with him in *many* things—conclude that my not being sent is my own choice; in short, that I am—*afraid.*’ (His voice sinks with a disgusted and shamed intonation at the last word) ‘Now—I have told you the sober facts—look me in the face’ (putting his hand, with boyish familiarity, under my chin, and, turning round my curls, my features, and the front view of my big comb towards him), ‘and tell me whether you agree with me, as I said you would, or not—whether it is not cruel kindness on his part to make me keep a whole skin on such terms?’

“I look him in the face for a moment, trying to say that I do not agree with him, but it is more than I can manage.

“ ‘You were right,’ I say, turning my head away. ‘I *do* agree with you; I wish to heaven that I could honestly say that I did not.’

“ ‘Since you do, then,’ he cries excitedly—‘Phoebe! I knew you would; I knew you better than you know yourself—I have a favour to ask of you, a *great* favour, and one that will keep me all my life in debt to you.’

“ ‘What is it?’ ask I, with sinking heart.

“ ‘Your father is very fond of you—’

“ ‘I know it,’ I answer curtly.

“ ‘Anything that you asked, and that was within the bounds of possibility, he would do,’ he continues, with eager gravity. ‘Well, this is what I ask of you: to write him a line, and let me take it when I go, asking him to send me home in the next prize.’

“ ‘And if,’ say I, with a trembling voice, ‘you lost your life in this service, you will have to thank me for it; I shall have your death on my head all through my life.’

“ ‘The danger is infinitesimal, as I told you before,’ he says, impatiently; ‘and even if it were greater than it is—well, life is a good thing, very good, but there are better things; and even if I come to grief, which is most unlikely, there are plenty of men as good as—better than—I, to step into my place.’

“ ‘It will be small consolation to the people who are fond of you that someone better than you is alive, though you are dead,’ I say, tearfully.

“ ‘But I do not mean to be dead,’ he says, with a cheery laugh. ‘Why are you so determined on killing me? I mean to live to be an admiral. Why should I not?’

“ ‘Why indeed?’ say I, with a feeble echo of his cheerful mirth, and feeling rather ashamed of my tears.

“ ‘And meanwhile you will write?’ he says with an eager return to the charge; ‘and *soon*? Do not look angry and pouting, as you did just now, but I *must* go! What is there to hinder me? I am getting up my strength as fast as it is possible for any human creature to do, and just think how I should feel if they were to come in for something really good while I am away.’

“ ‘So I wrote.

### III

“I often wished afterwards that my right hand had been cut off before its fingers had held the pen that wrote that letter. You wonder to see me moved at what happened so long ago—before your parents were born—and certainly it makes not much difference now; for even if he had prospered then, and come happily home to me, yet, in the course of nature he would have gone long before now. I should not have been so cruel as to have wished him to have lasted to be as I am. I did not mean to hint at the end of my story before I have reached the middle. Well—and so he went, with the letter in his pocket, and I felt something like the king in the tale, who sent a messenger with a letter, and wrote in the letter, ‘Slay the bearer of this as soon as he arrives!’ But before he went—the evening before, as we walked in the garden after supper, with our monstrously long shadows stretching before us in the moonlight—I do not think he said in so many words, ‘Will you marry me?’ but somehow, by some signs or words on both our parts, it became clear to us that, by-and-by, if God left him alive, and if the war ever came to an end, he and I should belong to one another. And so, having understood this, when he went he kissed me, as he had done when he came, only this time no one bade him; he did it of his own accord, and a hundred times instead of one; and for my part, this time, instead of standing passive like a log or a post, I kissed him back again, most lovingly.

“ ‘Ah! parting in those days, when the last kiss to one’s beloved ones was not unlikely to be an adieu until the great Day of Judgment, was a different thing to the listless, unemotional goodbyes of these stagnant times of peace!

“ ‘And so Bobby also got into a post-chaise and drove away, and we watched him too, till he turned the corner out of our sight, as we had watched father, and then I hid my face among the

jessamine flowers that clothed the wall of the house, and wept as one that would not be comforted. However, one cannot weep for ever, or, if one does, it makes one blind and blear, and I did not wish Bobby to have a wife with such defects; so in process of time I dried my tears.

“And the days passed by, and nature went slowly and evenly through her lovely changes. The hay was gathered in, and the fine new grass and clover sprang up among the stalks of the grass that had gone; and the wild roses struggled into odorous bloom, and crowned the hedges, and then their time came, and they shook down their faint petals, and went.

“And now the corn harvest had come, and we had heard once or twice from our beloveds, but not often. And the sun still shone with broad power, and kept the rain in subjection. And all morning I sat at my big frame, and toiled on the *Last Supper*. I had finished Judas Iscariot’s face and the other Apostles. I was engaged now upon the table-cloth, which was not interesting and required not much exercise of thought. And mother sat near me, either working too or reading a good book, and taking snuff—every lady snuffed in those days: at least in trifles, if not in great things, the world mends. And at night, when ten o’clock struck, I covered up my frame and stole listlessly upstairs to my room. There, I knelt at the open window, facing Plymouth and the sea, and asked God to take good care of father and Bobby. I do not know that I asked for any spiritual blessings for them, I only begged that they might be alive.

“One night, one hot night, having prayed even more heartily and tearfully than my wont for them both, I had lain down to sleep. The windows were left open, and the blinds up, that all possible air might reach me from the still and scented garden below. Thinking of Bobby, I had fallen asleep, and he is still mistily in my head, when I seem to wake.

The room is full of clear light, but it is not morning: it is only the moon looking right in and flooding every object I can see my own ghostly figure sitting up in bed, reflected in the looking-glass opposite. I listen: surely I heard some noise: yes—certainly, there can be no doubt of it—someone is knocking loudly and perseveringly at the hall-door. At first I fall into a deadly fear; then my reason comes to my aid. If it were a robber, or person with any evil intent, would he knock so openly and clamorously as to arouse the inmates? Would not he rather go stealthily to work, to force a silent entrance for himself? At worst it is some drunken sailor from Plymouth; at best it is a messenger with news of our dear ones. At this thought I instantly spring out of bed, and hurrying on my stockings and shoes and whatever garments come most quickly to hand—with my hair spread all over my back, and utterly forgetful of my big comb, I open my door, and fly down the passages, into which the moon is looking with her ghostly smile, and down the broad and shallow stairs.

“As I near the ball-door I meet our old butler also rather dishevelled, and evidently on the same errand as myself.

“ ‘Who can it be, Stephens?’ I ask, trembling with excitement and fear.

“ ‘Indeed, ma’am, I cannot tell you,’ replies the old man, shaking his head, ‘it is a very odd time of night to choose for making such a noise. We will ask them their business, whoever they are, before we unchain the door.’

“It seems to me as if the endless bolts would never be drawn—the key never be turned in the stiff lock; but at last the door opens slowly and cautiously, only to the width of a few inches, as it is still confined by the strong chain. I peep out eagerly, expecting I know not what

“Good heavens! What do I see? No drunken sailor, no messenger, but, oh joy! oh blessedness! my Bobby himself—my beautiful boy-lover! Even *now*, even after all these weary years, even after the long bitterness that followed, I cannot forget the unutterable happiness of that moment

“ ‘Open the door, Stephens, quick!’ I cry, stammering with eagerness.

‘Draw the chain; it is Mr Gerard; do not keep him waiting.’

“The chain rattles down, the door opens wide and there he stands before me. At once, ere anyone has said anything, ere anything has happened, a feeling of cold disappointment steals unaccountably over me—a nameless sensation, whose nearest kin is chilly awe. He makes no movement towards me; he does not catch me in his arms, nor even hold out his right hand to me. He stands there still and silent, and though the night is dry, equally free from rain and dew, I see that he is dripping wet; the water is running down from his clothes, from his drenched hair, and even from his eyelashes, onto the dry ground at his feet.

“ ‘What has happened?’ I cry, hurriedly, ‘How wet you are!’ and as I speak I stretch out my hand and lay it on his coat sleeve. But even as I do it a sensation of intense cold runs up my fingers and my arm, even to the elbow. How is it that he is so chilled to the marrow of his bones on this sultry, breathless, August night? To my extreme surprise he does not answer, he still stands there, dumb and dripping. ‘Where have you come from?’ I ask, with that sense of awe deepening. ‘Have you fallen into the river? How is it that you are so wet?’

“ ‘It was cold,’ he says, shivering, and speaking in a slow and strangely altered voice, ‘bitter cold. I could not stay there.’

“ ‘Stay where?’ I say, looking in amazement at his face, which, whether owing to the ghastly effect of moonlight or not, seems to me ash white. ‘Where have you been? What is it you are talking about?’

“But he does not reply.

“ ‘He is really ill, I am afraid, Stephens,’ I say, turning with a forlorn feeling towards the old butler. ‘He does not seem to hear what I say to him. I am afraid he has had a thorough chill. What water can he have fallen into? You had better help him up to bed, and get him warm between the blankets. His room is quite ready for him, you know—come in,’ I say, stretching out my hand to him, ‘you will be better after a night’s rest’

“He does not take my offered hand, but he follows me across the threshold and across the hall. I hear the water drops falling drip, drip, on the echoing stone floor as he passes; then upstairs, and along the gallery to the door of his room, where I leave him with Stephens. Then everything becomes blank and nil to me.

“I am awoke as usual in the morning by the entrance of my maid with hot water.

“ ‘Well, how is Mr Gerard this morning?’ I ask, springing into a sitting posture.

“She puts down the hot water tin and stares at her leisure at me.

“ ‘My dear Miss Phoebe, how should I know? Please God he is in good health and safe, and that we shall have good news of him before long.’

“ ‘Have not you asked how he is?’ I ask impatiently. ‘He did not seem quite himself last night; there was something odd about him. I was afraid he was in for another touch of fever.’

“ ‘Last night—fever,’ repeats she, slowly and disconnectedly echoing some of my words. ‘I beg your pardon, ma’am, I am sure, but I have not the least idea in life what you are talking about’

“ ‘How stupid you are!’ I say, quite at the end of my patience. ‘Did not Mr Gerard come back unexpectedly last night, and did not I hear him knocking, and run down to open the door, and did not Stephens come too, and afterwards take him up to bed?’

“The stare of bewilderment gives way to a laugh.

“ ‘You have been dreaming, ma’am. Of course I cannot answer for what you did last night, but I am sure that Stephens knows no more of the young gentleman than I do, for only just now, at breakfast, he was saying that he thought it was about time for us to have some tidings of him and master.’

“ ‘A dream!’ cry I indignantly. ‘Impossible! I was no more dreaming then than I am now.’

But time convinces me that I am mistaken, and that during all the time that I thought I was standing at the open ball-door, talking to my beloved, in reality I was lying on my own bed in the depths of sleep, with no other company than the scent of the flowers and the light of the moon. At this discovery a great and terrible depression falls on me. I go to my mother to tell her of my vision, and at the end of my narrative I say:

“ ‘Mother, I know well that Bobby is dead and that I shall never see him any more. I feel assured that he died last night, and that he came himself to tell me of his going. I am sure that there is nothing left for me but to go too.’

“I speak thus far with great calmness, but when I have done I break out into loud and violent weeping. Mother rebukes me gently, telling me that there is nothing more natural than that I should dream of a person who constantly occupies my waking thoughts, nor that, considering the gloomy nature of my apprehensions about him, my dream should be of a sad and ominous kind, but that, above all dreams and omens, God is good, that He has preserved him hitherto, and that, for her part, no devil-sent apparition shall shake her confidence in His continued clemency. I go away a little comforted, though not very much, and still every night I kneel at the open window facing Plymouth and the sea, and pray for my sailor boy. But it seems to me, despite all my self-reasonings, despite all that mother says, that my prayers for him are prayers for the dead.

#### IV

“Three more weeks pass away: the harvest is garnered, and the pears are growing soft and mellow. Mother’s and my outward life goes on in its silent regularity, nor do we talk much to each other of the tumult that rages—of the heartache that bums, within each of us. At the end of the three weeks, as we are sitting as usual, quietly employed, and buried each in our own thoughts, in the parlour, towards evening we hear wheels approaching the hall-door. We both run out as in my dream I had run to the door, and arrive in time to receive my father as he steps out of the carriage that has brought him. Well! at least one of our wanderers has come home, but where is the other?

“Almost before he has heartily kissed us both—wife and child—father cries out, ‘But where is Bobby?’

“ ‘That is just what I was going to ask you,’ replies mother quickly.

“ ‘Is not he *here* with you?’ returns he anxiously.

“ ‘Not he,’ answers mother, ‘we have neither seen nor heard anything of him for more than six weeks.’

“ ‘Great God!’ exclaims he, while his face assumes an expression of the deepest concern, ‘what *can* have become of him? what can have happened to the poor fellow?’

“ ‘Has not he been with you, then?—has not he been in the *Thenderer*?’ asks mother, running her words into one another in her eagerness to get them out.

“ ‘I sent him home three weeks ago in a prize, with a letter to you, and told him to stay with you till I came home, and what can have become of him since, God only knows!’ he answers with a look of the profoundest sorrow and anxiety.

There is a moment of forlorn and dreary silence; then I speak. I have been standing dumbly by, listening, and my heart growing colder and colder at every dismal word.

“ ‘It is all my doing!’ I cry passionately, flinging myself down in an agony of tears on the straight-backed old settle in the ball. ‘It is my fault—no one else’s! The very last time that I saw

him, I told him that he would have to thank me for his death, and he laughed at me, but it has come true. If I had not written you, father, that accursed letter, we should have had him here *now* this *minute*, safe and sound, standing in the middle of us—as we never, *never*, shall have him again!

“I stop, literally suffocated with emotion.

“Father comes over, and lays his kind brown hand on my bent prone head. ‘My child,’ he says, ‘my dear child’ (and tears are dimming the clear grey of his own eyes), ‘you are wrong to make up your mind to what is the worst at once. I do not disguise from you that there is cause for grave anxiety about the dear fellow, but still God is good, He has kept both him and me hitherto; into His hands we must trust our boy.’

“I sit up, and shake away my tears.

“‘It is no use,’ I say. ‘Why should I hope? There is no hope! I know it for a certainty’. He is *dead* (looking round at them both with a sort of calmness); ‘he died on the night that I had that dream—mother, I told you so at the time. Oh, my Bobby! I knew that you could not leave me for ever without coming to tell me!’

“And so speaking, I fall into strong hysterics and am carried upstairs to bed. And so three or four more lagging days crawl by, and still we hear nothing, and remain in the same state of doubt and uncertainty: which to me, however, is hardly uncertainty: so convinced am I, in my own mind, that my fair-haired lover is away in the land whence never letter or messenger comes—that he has reached the Great Silence. So I sit at my frame, working my heart’s agony into the tapestry, and feebly trying to say to God that He has done well, but I cannot. On the contrary, it seems to me, as my life trails on through the mellow mist of the autumn mornings, through the shortened autumn evenings, that, whoever has done it, it is most evilly done. One night we are sitting round the crackling little wood fire that one does not need for warmth, but that gives a cheerfulness to the room and the furniture, when the butler Stephens enters, and going over to father, whispers to him. I seem to understand in a moment what the purport of his whisper is.

“‘Why does he whisper?’ I cry, irritably. Why does not he speak out loud? Why should you try to keep it from me? I know that it is something about Bobby.’

“Father has already risen, and is walking towards the door.

“‘I will not let you go until you tell me,’ I cry wildly, flying after him.

“‘A sailor has come over from Plymouth,’ he answers, hurriedly: ‘he says he has news. My darling, I will not keep you in suspense a moment longer than I can help, and meanwhile pray—both of you pray for him!’

“I sit rigidly still, with my cold hands tightly clasped, during the moments that next elapse. Then father returns. His eyes are full of tears, and there is small need to ask for his message; it is most plainly written on his features—death, and not life.

“‘You were right, Phoebe,’ he says, brokenly, taking hold of my icy hands; ‘you knew best He is gone! God has taken him.’

“My heart dies. I had thought that I had no hope, but I was wrong. ‘I knew it!’ I say, in a dry stiff voice. ‘Did not I tell you so? But you would not believe me—go on!—tell me how it was—do not think I cannot bear it—make haste!’

“And so he tells me all that there is now left for me to know—after what manner, and on what day my darling took his leave of this pretty and cruel world. He had had his wish, as I already know, and had set off blithely home in the last prize they had captured. Father had taken the precaution of having a larger proportion than usual of the Frenchmen ironed, and had also sent a greater number of Englishmen. But to what purpose? They were nearing port, sailing

prosperously along on a smooth blue sea, with a fair, strong wind, thinking of no evil, when a great and terrible misfortune overtook them. Some of the Frenchmen who were not ironed got the sailors below and drugged their grog, ironed them, and freed their countrymen. Then one of the officers rushed on deck, and holding a pistol to my Bobby's head bade him surrender the vessel or die. Need I tell you which he chose? I think not—well" (with a sigh) "and so they shot my boy—ah me! how many years ago—and threw him overboard! Yes—threw him overboard—it makes me angry and grieved even now to think of it—into the great and greedy sea, and the vessel escaped to France."

There is a silence between us: I will own to you that I am crying, but the old lady's eyes are dry.

"Well," she says, after a pause, with a sort of triumph in her tone, "they never could say again that Bobby Gerard was *afraid!*"

"The tears were running down my father's cheeks, as he told me," she resumes presently, "but at the end he wiped them and said, 'It is well! He was as pleasant in God's sight as he was in ours, and so He has taken him.'

"And for me, I was glad that he had gone to God—none gladder. But you will not wonder that, for myself, I was, past speaking sorry. And so the years went by, and, as you know, I married Mr Hamilton, and lived with him forty years, and was happy in the main, as happiness goes; and when he died I wept much and long, and so I did for each of my sons when in turn they went. But looking back on all my long life, the event that I think stands out most dearly from it is my dream and my boy-lover's death-day. It *was* an odd dream, was it not?"