

# I Saw Three Ships

By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

## Chapter I.

### The First Ship.

In those west-country parishes where but a few years back the feast of Christmas Eve was usually prolonged with cake and cider, "crowding," and "geese dancing," till the ancient carols ushered in the day, a certain languor not seldom pervaded the services of the Church a few hours later. Red eyes and heavy, young limbs hardly rested from the *Dashing White Sergeant* and *Sir Roger*, throats husky from a plurality of causes—all these were recognized as proper to the season, and, in fact, of a piece with the holly on the communion rails.

On a dark and stormy Christmas morning, as far back as the first decade of the century, this languor was neither more nor less apparent than usual inside the small parish church of Ruan Lanihale, although Christmas fell that year on a Sunday, and dancing should, by rights, have ceased at midnight. The building stands high above a bleak peninsula on the South Coast, and the congregation had struggled up with heads slanted sou' west against the weather that drove up the Channel in a black fog. Now, having gained shelter, they quickly lost the glow of endeavor, and mixed in pleasing stupor the humming of the storm in the tower above, its intermittent onslaughts on the leadwork of the southern windows, and the voice of Parson Babbage lifted now and again from the chancel as if to correct the shambling pace of the choir in the west gallery.

"Mark me," whispered Old Zeb Minards, crowder and leader of the musicians, sitting back at the end of the Psalms, and eying his fiddle dubiously; "If Sternhold be sober this morning, Hopkins be drunk as a fly, or 'tis t'other way round."

"'Twas middlin' wambly," assented Calvin Oke, the second fiddle—a screw-faced man tightly wound about the throat with a yellow kerchief.

"An' 'tis a delicate matter to cuss the singers when the musicianers be twice as bad."

"I'd a very present sense of being a bar or more behind the fair—that I can trewly vow," put in Elias Sweetland, bending across from the left. Now Elias was a bachelor, and had blown the serpent from his youth up. He was a bald, thin man, with a high leathern stock, and shoulders that sloped remarkably.

"Well, 'taint a sueut engine at the best, Elias—that o' yourn," said his affable leader, nor to be lightly trusted among the proper psa' ins, specially since Chris'mas three year, when we sat i' the forefront of the gallery, an' you dropped all but the mouthpiece overboard on to Aunt Belovely's bonnet at 'I was glad when they said unto me' "

"Aye, poor soul. It shook her. Never the same woman from that hour, I do b'lieve. Though I'd as lief you didn't mention it, friends, if I may say so, for 'twas a bitter portion." Elias patted his instrument sadly, and the three men looked up for a moment, as a scud of rain splashed on the window, drowning a sentence of the First Lesson.

"Well, well," resumed Old Zeb, "we all have our random intervals, and a drop o' cider i' the mouthpieces is no less than Pa'son looks for, Chris'mas mornin' s."

"Trew, trew as proverbs."

“Howsever, ’twas cruel bad, that last psa’m, I won’t gainsay. As for that long-legged boy o’ mine, I keep silence, yea, even from hard words, considerin’ what’s to come. But ’tis given to flutes to make a noticeable sound, whether tunable or false.”

“Terrible shy he looks, poor chap!”

The three men turned and contemplated Young Zeb Minards, who sat on their left and fidgeted, crossing and uncrossing his legs.

“How be feelin,’ my son?”

“Very whitely, father; very whitely, an’ yet very redly.”

Elias Sweetland, moved by sympathy, handed across a peppermint drop.

“Hee-hee!” now broke in an octogenarian treble, that seemed to come from high up in the head of Uncle Issy, the bass-viol player; “But cast your eyes, good friends, ’pon a little slip o’ heart’s delight down i’ the nave, and mark the flowers ’pon the bonnet nid-nodding like bees in a bell, wi’ unspeakable thoughts.”

“’Tis the world’s way wi’ females.”

“I’ll wager, though, she wudn’ miss the importance of it—yea, not for much fine gold.”

“Well said, Uncle,” commented the crowder, a trifle more loudly as the wind rose to a howl outside: “Lord, how this round world do spin! Simme ’twas last week I sat as may be i’ the corner yonder (I sang bass then), an’ Pa’ son Babbage by the desk statin’ forth my own banns, an’ me wi’ my clean shirt collar limp as a flounder. As for your mother, Zeb, nuthin’ ’ud do but she must dream o’ runnin’ water that Saturday night, an’ want to cry off at the church porch because ’twas unlucky. ‘Nothin’ shall injuce me, Zeb,’ says she, an’ inside the half hour there she was glintin’ fifty ways under her bonnet, to see how the rest o’ the maidens was takin’ it.”

“Hey,” murmured Elias, the bachelor; “but it must daunt a man to hear his name loudly coupled wi’ a woman’s before a congregation o’ folks.”

“’Tis very intimate,” assented Old Zeb.

But here the First Lesson ended. There was a scraping of feet, then a clearing of throats, and the musicians plunged into “*O, all ye works of the Lord.*”

Young Zeb, amid the moaning of the storm outside the building and the scraping and *zooming* of the instruments, string and reed, around him, felt his head spin; but whether from the lozenge (that had suffered from the companionship of a twist of tobacco in Elias Sweetland’s pocket), or the dancing last night, or the turbulence of his present emotions, he could not determine. Year in and year out, gray morning or white, a gloom rested always on the singers’ gallery, cast by the tower upon the south side, that stood apart from the main building, connected only by the porch roof, as by an isthmus. And upon eyes used to this comparative obscurity the nave produced the effect of a bright parterre flowers, especially in those days when all the women wore scarlet cloaks, to scare the French if they should invade. Zeb’s gaze, amid the turmoil of sound, hovered around one such cloak, rested on a slim back resolutely turned to him, and a jealous bonnet, wandered to the bald scalp of Farmer Tresidder beside it, returned to Calvin Oke’s sawing elbow and the long neck of Elias Sweetland bulging with the *fortissimo* of “*O ye winds of God,*” then fluttered back to the red cloak.

These vagaries were arrested by three words the mouth of old Zeb, screwed sideways over his fiddle.

“Time—ye sawny!”

Young Zeb started, puffed out his cheeks, and blew a shriller note. During the rest of the canticle his eyes were glued to the score, and seemed on the point of leaving their sockets with the vigor of the performance.

“Sooner thee’st married the better for us, my son,” commented his father at the close; farewell to psa’mody!”

But Young Zeb did not reply. In fact, what remained of the peppermint lozenge had somehow jolted into his windpipe, and kept him occupied with the earlier symptoms of strangulation.

His facial contortions, though of the liveliest, were unaccompanied by sound, and, therefore, unheeded. The crowder, with his eyes contemplatively fastened on the capital of a distant pillar, was pursuing a train of reflection upon Church music; and the others regarded the crowder.

“Now supposin’, friends, as *I’d* a-fashioned the wondrous words o’ the ditty we’ve just polished off; an’ supposin’ a friend o’ mine, same as Uncle Issy might be, had a-dropped in, in passin’, an’ heard me read the same. ‘Hullo!’ he’d ‘a said, ‘You’ve a-put the same words twice over.’ ‘How’s that?’ ‘How’s that? Why, here’s *Oye Whales* (pointin’ wi’ his finger), an lo! again, *Oye Wells*.’ ‘Taint the same, I’d ha’ said. ‘Well,’ says Uncle Issy, ‘tis *spoke* so, anyways’—”

“Crowder, you puff me up,” murmured Uncle Issy, charmed with this imaginative and wholly flattering sketch. “No—really now! Though, indeed, strange words have gone abroad before now, touching my wisdom; but I blow no trumpet.”

“Such be your very words,” the crowder insisted. “Now, mark my answer. ‘Uncle Issy,’ says I, quick as thought, ‘you dunder-headed old antic—leave that to the musicianers. At the word “whales,” let the music go snorty; an’ for wells, gliddery; an’ likewise in a moving dulcet manner for the holy an’ humble Men o’ heart.’ Why, ’od rabbetus!—what’s wrong wi’ that boy?”

All turned to Young Zeb, from whose throat uncomfortable sounds were issuing. His eyes rolled piteously, and great tears ran down his cheeks.

“Slap en ’pon the back, Calvin; he’s chuckin’.”

“Ay—an’ the pa’son at ‘here endeth’!”

“Slap en, Calvin, quick! For ’tis clunk or stuffle, an’ no time to lose.”

Down in the nave a light rustle of expectancy was already running from pew to pew as Calvin Oke brought down his open palm with a *whack!* knocking the sufferer out of his seat, and driving his nose smartly against the back-rail in front.

Then the voice of Parson Babbage was lifted:

“I publish the Banns of marriage between Zebedee Minards, bachelor, and Ruby Tresidder, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons—”

At this instant the church-door flew open, as if driven in by the wind that tore up the aisle in an icy current. All heads were turned. Parson Babbage broke off his sentence and looked also, keeping his forefinger on the fluttering page. On the threshold stood an excited, red-faced luau, his long, sandy beard blown straight out like a pennon, and his arms moving windmill fashion as lie bawled:

“A wreck! a wreck!”

The men in the congregation leaped up. The women uttered muffled cries, groped for their husband’s hats, and stood up also. The choir in the gallery craned forward, for the church door was right beneath them. Parson Babbage held up his hand, and screamed out over the hubbub:

“Where’s she *to*?”

“Under Bradden Point, an’ comin’ full tilt the Raney!”

“Then God forgive all poor sinners aboard!” spoke up a woman’s voice, in the moment’s silence that followed.

“Is that all you know, Gauger Hocken?”

“Iss, iss; can’t stop no longer—must be off warn the Methodeys! ’Stablihed Church first, but fair play’s a jool, say I.”

He rushed off inland toward High Lanes, where the meeting-house stood. Parson Babbage closed the book without finishing his sentence, and his audience scrambled out over the graves and forth upon the headland. The wind here came howling across the short grass, blowing the women’s skirts wide and straining their bonnet-strings, pressing the men’s trousers tight against their shins, as they bent against it in the attitude of butting rams and scanned the coast-line to the sou’west. Ruby Tresidder, on gaining the porch, saw Young Zeb tumble out of the stairway leading from the gallery and run by, stowing the pieces of his flute in his pocket as he went, without a glance at her. Like all the rest, he had clean forgotten the banns.

Now, Ruby was but nineteen, and had seen plenty of wrecks, whereas these banns were to her an event of singular interest, for weeks anticipated with small thrills. Therefore, as the people passed her by, she felt suddenly out of tune with them, especially with Zeb, who, at least, might have understood her better. Some angry tears gathered in her eyes at the callous indifference of her father, who just now was revolving in the porch like a weathercock, and shouting orders east, west, north, and south for axes, hammers, ladders, cart-ropes, in case the vessel struck within reach.

“You, Jim Lewarne, run to the mowliay, hot-foot, an’ lend a hand wi’ the datchin’ ladder, an’—hi! Stop!—fetch along my second-best glass, under the Dook o’ Cumberland’s picter i’ the parlor, ’longside o’ last year’s neck; an’—hi! cuss the chap—he’s gone like a Torpointer! Ruby my dear, step along an’ show en—Why, hello!—”

Ruby, with head down, and scarlet cloak blown out horizontally, was already fighting her way out along the headland to a point where Zeb stood, a little apart from the rest, with both palms shielding his eyes.

“Zeb!”

She had to stand on tiptoe and bawl this into his ear. He faced round with a start, nodded as if pleased, and bent his gaze on the Channel again.

Ruby looked too. Just below, under veils of driving spray, the seas were thundering past the headland into Ruan Cove. She could not see them break, only their backs swelling and sinking, and the puffs of foam that shot up like white smoke at her feet and drenched her gown. Beyond, the sea, the sky, and the irregular coast with its fringe of surf melted into one uniform gray, with just the summit of Bradden Point, two miles away, standing out above the wrack. Of the vessel there was, as yet, no sign.

In Ruby’s present mood the bitter blast was chiefly blameworthy for gnawing at her face, and the spray for spoiling her bonnet and taking her hair out of curl. She stamped her foot and screamed again:

“What is’t, my dear?” he bawled back in her ear, kissing her wet cheek in a preoccupied manner.

She was about to ask him what this wreck amounted to, that she should for the moment sink to nothing in comparison with it. But, at this instant, a small group of men and women joined them, and, catching sight of the faces of Sarah Ann Nanjulian and Modesty Prowse, her friends, she tried another tack:

“Well, Zeb, no doubt ’twas disappointing for you; but don’t ’ee take on so. Think how much harder ’tis for the poor souls i’ that ship.”

This astute sentence, however, missed fire completely. Zeb answered it with a point-blank stare of bewilderment. The others took no notice of it whatever.

“Hav’ee seen her, Zeb?” called out his father.

“Nor I nuther. ‘Reckon ‘tis all over a’ready. I’ve a-heard afore now,” he went on, turning his back to the wind the better to wink at the company, “that ‘tis lucky for some folks Gauger Hocken bain’ t extra spry ‘pon his pins. ‘tis a gift that cuts both ways. Be any gone round by Cove Head to look out?”

“Iss, a dozen or more. I saw ‘em ‘pon the road, a minute back, like emmets runnin’.”

“‘Twas very nice feelin’, I must own—very nice indeed—of Gauger Hocken to warn the church-folk first; and him a man of no faith, as you may say. Hey? What’s that? Dost her, Zeb?”

For Zeb, with his right hand pressing down his cap, now suddenly flung his left out in the direction of Bradden Point. Men and women craned forward.

Below the distant promontory, a darker speck had started out of the medley of tones. In a moment it had doubled its size—had become a blur—then a shape. And at length, out of the leaden wrack, there emerged a small schooner, with tall, raking masts, flying straight toward them.

“Dear God!” muttered someone, while Ruby dug her finger-tips into Zeb’s arm.

The schooner raced under bare poles, though a strip or two of canvas streamed out from her fore-yards. Yet she came with a rush like a greyhound’s, heeling over the whitened water, close under the cliffs, and closer with every instant. A man, standing on any one of the points she cleared so narrowly, might have tossed a pebble on to her deck.

“Hey, friends, but she’ll not weather Gaffer’s Rock. By crum! if she does, they may drive her in ‘pon the beach, yet!”

“What’s the use, i’ this sea? Besides, her steerin’ gear’s broke,” answered Zeb, without moving his eyes.

This Gaffer’s Rock was the extreme point of the opposite arm of the cove—a sharp tooth rising ten feet or more above high-water mark. As the little schooner came tearing abreast of it, a huge sea caught her broadside, and lifted as if to fling her high and dry. The men and women on the headland held their breath while she hung on its apex. Then she toppled and plunged across the mouth of the cove, quivering. She must have shaved the point by a foot.

“The Raney! the Raney!” shouted young Zebb, shaking off Ruby’s clutch. “The Raney, or else—”

He did not finish his sentence, for the stress of the flying seconds choked down his words. Two possibilities they held, and each big with doom. Either the schooner must dash upon the Raney—a reef, barely covered at high water, barring entrance to the cove—or avoiding this, must be shattered on the black wall of rock under their very feet. The end of the little vessel was written—all but one word; and that must be added within a short half-minute.

Ruby saw this; it was plain for a child to read. She saw the curded tide, now at half-flood, boiling around the Haney; she saw the little craft swoop down on it, half buried in the seas through which she was being impelled; she saw distinctly one form, and one only, on the deck beside the helm—a form that flung up its hands as it shot by the smooth edge of the reef, a hand’s-breadth off destruction. The hands were still lifted as it passed under the ledge where she stood.

It seemed, as she stood there shivering, covering her eyes, an age before the crash came, and the cry of those human souls in their extremity.

When at length she took her hands from her face the others were twenty yards away, and running fast.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE SECOND SHIP.

Fate, which had freakishly hurled a ship's crew out of the void upon this particular bit of coast, as freakishly preserved them.

The very excess of its fury worked this wonder. For the craft came in on a tall billow that flung her, as a sling might, clean against the cliff's face, crumpling the bowsprit like paper, sending the foremast over with a crash, and driving a jagged tooth of rock five feet into her ribs beside the breastbone. So, for a moment, it left her, securely gripped and bumping her sternpost on the ledge beneath. As the next sea deluged her, and the next, the folk above saw her crew fight their way forward up the slippery deck, under sheets of foam. With the fifth or sixth wave her mizzenmast went; she split open amidships, pouring out her cargo. The stern slipped off the ledge and plunged twenty fathoms down out of sight. And now the forepart alone remained—a piece of deck, the stump of the foremast, and five men clinging in a tangle of cordage, struggling up and toppling back as each successive sea soused over them.

Three men had detached themselves from the group above the cliffs, and were sidling down its face cautiously, for the hurricane now flattened them back against the rock, now tried to wrench them from it; and all the way it was a tough battle for breath. The foremost was Jim Lewarne, Farmer Tresidder's hind, with a coil of the farmer's rope slung round him. Young Zeb followed, and Elias Sweetland, both similarly laden.

Less than half-way down the rock plunged abruptly, cutting off farther descent.

Jim Lewarne, in a cloud of foam, stood up, slipped the coil over his head, and unwound it, glancing to right and left. Now Jim, amid ordinary events was an acknowledged fool, and had a wife to remind him of it; but perch him out of female criticism, on a dizzy foothold such as this, and set him a desperate job, and you clarified his wits at once. This eccentricity was so notorious that the two men above halted in silence, and waited.

Jim glanced to right and left, spied a small pinnacle of rock about three yards away, fit for his purpose, sidled toward it, and, grasping, made sure that it was firm. Next, reeving one end of the rope into a running noose, he flung it over the pinnacle, and with a tug had it taut. This done, lie tilted his body out, his toes on the ledge, his weight on the rope, and his body inclined forward over the sea at an angle of some twenty degrees from the cliff.

Having by this device found the position of the wreck, and judging that his single rope would reach, he swung back, gained hold of the cliff with his left hand, and with his right caught and flung the leaded end far out. It fell, true as a bullet, across the wreck. As it dropped, a sea almost swept it clear; but the lead hitched in a tangle of cordage by the port cathead; within twenty seconds the rope was caught and made fast below.

All was now easy. At a nod from Jim, young Zeb passed down a second line, which was lowered along time first by a noose. One by one the whole crew—four men and a cabin-boy—were hauled up out of death, borne off to the vicarage, and so pass out of our story.

Their fate does not concern us, for this reason—men with a narrow horizon and no wings must accept all apparent disproportions between cause and effect. A railway collision has other results besides wrecking an ant-hill, but the wise ants do not pursue these in time Insurance Reports. So it only concerns us that the destruction of the schooner led in time to a lover's difference between Ruby and young Zeb—two young people of no eminence outside of these pages. And, as a matter of fact, her crew had less to do with this than her cargo.

She had been expressly built by Messrs. Taggs & Co., a London firm, in reality as a privateer (which explains her raking masts), but ostensibly for the Portugal trade; and was homeward bound from Lisbon to the Thames, with a cargo of red wine and chestnuts. At Falmouth, where she had run in for a couple of days, on account of a damaged rudder, the captain paid off his extra hands, foreseeing no difficulty in the voyage up Channel. She had not, however, left Falmouth harbor three hours before she met with a gale that started her steering-gear afresh. To put back in the teeth of such weather was hopeless; and the attempt to run before it ended as we know.

When Ruby looked up, after the crash, and saw her friends running along the headland to catch a glimpse of the wreck, her anger returned. She stood for twenty minutes at least, watching them; then, pulling her cloak closely round her, walked homeward at a snail's pace. By the church gate she met the belated Methodists hurrying up, and passed a word or two of information that sent them panting on. A little beyond, at the point where the peninsula joins the mainland, she faced round to the wind again for a last glance. Three men were following her slowly down the ridge with a burden between them. It was the first of the rescued crew—a lifeless figure wrapped in oil-skins, with one arm hanging limply down, as if broken. Ruby halted, and gave time to come up.

“Hey, lads,” shouted Old Zeb, who walked first, with a hand round each of the figure's sea-boots; “now that's what I'd call a proper womanly masterpiece, to rin home to Sheba an' change her stockings in time for the randi-voose.

“I don't understand,” said his prospective daughter-in-law haughtily.

“O boundless depth! Rest the poor mortal down, mates, while I take breath to humor her. Why, my dear, you must know from my tellin' that there *hey* a-been such a misfortunate goin' s on as a wreck, hereabouts.”

He paused to shake the rain out of his hat and whiskers. Ruby stole a look at the oilskin. The sailor's upturned face was of a sickly yellow, smeared with blood and crusted with salt. The same white crust filled the hollows of his closed eyes, and streaked his beard and hair. It turned her faint for the moment.

“An' the wreck's scat abroad,” continued Old Zeb; “an' the interpretation thereof is barrels an' nuts. What's more, tide'll be runnin' for two hour yet; an' it hasn' reached my ears that the fashion of thankin' the Lord for His bounty have a-perished out o' this old-fangled race of men an' women; though no doubt, my dear, you'd get first news o' the change, with a bedroom window facin' on Ruan Cove.”

“Thank you, Old Zeb; I'll be careful to draw my curtains,” said she, answering sarcasm with scorn, and turning on her heel.

The old man stooped to lift the sailor again. Better clog your pretty ears wi' wax,” he called after her, “when the kiss-i' -the-ring begins! Well-a-fine! What a teasin' armful is woman, afore the first-born comes! Hey, Sim Udy? Speak up, you that have fifteen to feed.”

“Ay, I was a low feller, first along,” answered Sim Udy, grinning. “ ‘Sich common notions, Sim, as you do entertain!’ was my wife's word.”

“Well, souls, we was a bit tiddlywinky last Michaelmas, when the *Young Susannah* came ashore, that I must own. Folks blamed the Pa'son for preachin' agen it the Sunday after. ‘A disreppitable scene,’ says he, “specially seein' you had nowt to be thankful for but a cargo o' sugar that the sea melted afore you could get it.’ (Lift the pore chap aisy, Sim.) By crum! Sim, I

mind your huggin' a starved rum cask, and kissin' it, an' cryin,' 'Aw, Ben—dear Ben!' an' 'After all these years!' fancyin' 'twas your twin brother come back, that was killed aboard the *Agamemny*—”

“Well, well—prettily overtook I must ha' been. (Stiddy, there, Crowder, wi' the legs of en.) But to-day I'll be mild, as 'tis Chris'mas.”

“Iss, iss; be very mild, my sons, as 'tis so holy a day.”

They tramped on, bending their heads at queer angles against the weather, that erased their outlines in a bluish mist, through which they loomed for a while at intervals, until they passed out of sight.

Ruby, meanwhile, had hurried on, her cloak flapping loudly as it grew heavier with moisture, and the water in her shoes squashing at every step. At first she took the road leading downhill to Ruan Cove, but turned to the right after a few yards, and ran up the muddy lane that was the one approach to Sheba, her father's farm.

The house, a square, two-storied building of gray stone, roofed with heavy slates, was guarded in front by a small courtlage, the wall of which blocked all view from the lower rooms. From the narrow mullioned windows on the upper floor, however, one could look over it upon the duck-pond across the road, and down across two grass meadows to the cove. A white gate opened on the courtlage, and the path from this to the front door was marked out by slabs of blue slate, accurately laid in line. Ruby, in her present bedraggled state, avoided the front entrance, and followed the wall round the house to the town-place, stopping on her way to look in at the kitchen window.

“Mary Jane, if you call that a roast goose, I call it a burning shame!”

Mary Jane, peeling potatoes with her back to the window, and tossing them one by one into a bucket of water, gave a jump, and cut her finger, dropping forthwith a half-peeled magnum bonum, which struck the bucket's edge, and slid away across the slate flooring under the table.

“Awgh—awgh!” she burst out, catching up her apron and clutching it round the cut, “Look what you've done, Miss Ruby, an' me miles away, thinkin' o' shipwrecks an' dead, swollen men.”

“Look at the Chris'mas dinner, you mazed creature!”

In truth, the goose was fast spoiling. The roasting apparatus in this kitchen was a simple matter, consisting of a nail driven into the center of the chimneypiece, a number of worsted threads depending therefrom, and a steel hook attached to these threads. Fix the joint or fowl firmly on the hook, give it a spin with the hand and the worsted threads wound, unwound, and wound again, turning it before the blaze—an admirable jack, if only looked after. At present it hung motionless over the dripping-pan, and the goose wore a suit of motley, exhibiting a rich Vandyke brown to the fire, an unhealthy yellow to the window.

“There now!” Mary Jane rushed to the jack and gave it a spin, while Ruby walked round by the back door, and appeared dripping on the threshold. “I declare 'tis like Troy Town this morning: wrecks and rumors o' wrecks. Now 'tis 'Ropes! ropes!' an' nex' 'tis 'Where be the stable key, Mary Jane, my dear?' an' then agen, 'Will'ee be so good as to fetch master's second-best spy-glass, Mary Jane, an' look slippy?'—an' me wi' a goose to stuff, singe, an' roast, an' 'tatties to peel, an' greens to cleanse, 'an' apples to chop for sauce, an' the hoarders no nearer away than the granary loft, with a gatherin' 'pon your second toe an' the half o' 'em rotten when you get there. The pore I be in! Why, Miss Ruby, you'm streamin'-leakin'!”

"I'm wet through, Mary Jane; an' I don't care if I die." Ruby sank on the settle, and fairly broke down.

"Hush 'ee now, do!"

"I don't, I don't, an' I don't! I'm tired o' the world, an' my heart's broke. Mary Jane, you selfish thing, you've never asked about my banns, no more' n the rest; an' after that cast-off frock, too, that I gave you last week so good as new!"

"Was it very grand, Miss Ruby? Was it shuddery an' yet joyful—lily-white an' yet rosy-red—hot an' yet cold—'don't lift me so high,' an' yet 'praise God, I'm exalted above women'?"

"'Twas all and yet none. 'Twas a voice speakin' my name, sweet an' terrible, an' I longed for it to go on an' on; and then came the Gauger stunnin' and shoutin' 'Wreck! wreck!' like a trumpet; an' the church was full o' wind, an' the folk ran this way an' that, like sheep, an' left me sittin' there. I'll—I'll die an old maid, I will, if only to s—spite such ma—ma—manners!'

"Aw, pore dear! But there's better tricks than dyin' unwed. Bind up my finger, Miss Ruby, an' listen. You shall play Don't Care, an' change your frock, an' we'll step down to th' cove after dinner an' there be heartless and fancy-free. Lord! when the dance strikes up, to see you carryin' off the other maids' danglers an' treating your own man like dirt!"

Ruby stood up, the water still running off her frock upon the slates, her moist eyes resting beyond the window on the midden-heap across the yard, as if she saw there the picture Mary Jane conjured up.

"No. I won't join their low frolic; an' you ought to be above it. I'll pull my curtains an' sit upstairs all day, an' you shall read to me."

The other pulled a wry face. This was not her idea of enjoyment. She went back to the goose sad at heart, for Miss Ruby had a knack of enforcing her wishes.

Sure enough, soon after dinner was cleared away (a meal through which Ruby had sulked and Farmer Tresidder eaten heartily, talking with a full mouth about the rescue, and courseily ignoring what he called his daughter's "faddles"), the two girls retired to the chamber upstairs; where the mistress was as good as her word, and pulled the dimity curtains before settling herself down in an easy-chair to listen to extracts from a polite novel as rendered aloud, under dire compulsion, by Mary Jane.

The rain had ceased by this, and the wind abated, though it still howled around the angle of the house and whipped a spray of the monthly-rose bush on the quarrels of the window, filling the pauses during which Mary Jane wrestled with a hard word. Ruby herself had taught the girl this accomplishment—rare enough at the time—and Mary Jane handled it gingerly, beginning each sentence in a whisper, as if awed by her own intrepidity, and ending each in a kind of gratulatory cheer. The work was of that class of epistolary fiction then in vogue, and the extract singularly fitted to Ruby's mood.

"My dearest Wil-hel-mina," began Mary Jane, "racked with a hun-dred conflicting em-otions, I resume the nar-rative of those fa-tal moments which rapt me from your affection-ate em-brace. Suffer me to re—to recap—"

"Better spell it, Mary Jane."

"To r.e, re—c.a.p., cap, recap—i.t, it, re-capit—Lor'! what a twister!—u, recapitu—l.a.t.e, late, re-cap-it-u-late the events de-tailed in my last letter, full stop—there! if I han' t read that full stop out loud! Lord Bel-field, though an ad-ept in all the arts of dis-sim-u-la-tion (and how of-ten do we see these arts al-lied with un-scm-pu-lous pas-sions?), was un-able to sus-tain the gaze of my in-fu-ri-a-ted pa-pa, though he com-por-ted himself with suf-fic-ient p.l.e.g.m—Lor'! what a funny word!"

Ruby yawned. It was true she had drawn the dimity curtains—all but a couple of inches. Through this space she could see the folk busy on the beach below like a swarm of small black insects, and continually augmented by those who, having run off to snatch their Christmas dinner, were returning to the spoil. Some lined the edge of the breakers, waiting the moment to rush in for a cask or spar that the tide brought within reach; others (among whom she seemed to descry Young Zeb) were clambering out with grapnels along the western rocks; a third large group was gathered in the very center of the beach, and from the midst of these a blue wreath of smoke began to curl up. At the same instant she heard the gate click outside, and pulling the curtain wider, saw her father trudging away down the lane.

Mary Jane, glancing up, and seeing her mistress crane forward with curiosity, stole behind and peeped over her shoulder.

“I declare they’m teening a fire!”

“Who gave you leave to bawl in my ear so rudely? Go back to your reading, this instant.” (A pause.) “Mary Jane, I do believe they’m roastin’ chestnuts.”

“What a clever game!”

“Father said at dinner the tide was bringin’ ’em in by bushels. Quick! put on your worst bonnet an’ clogs, an’ run down to look. I *must* know. No, I’m not goin’—the idea! I wonder at your low notions. You shall bring me word o’ what’s doin’—an’ mind you’re back before dark.”

Mary Jane fled precipitately, lest the order should be revoked. Five minutes later, Ruby heard the small gate click again, and with a sigh saw the girl’s rotund figure waddling down the lane. Then she picked up the book and strove to bury herself in the woes of Wilhelmina, but still with frequent glances out of window. Twice the book dropped off her lap; twice she picked it up and laboriously found the page again. Then she gave it up, and descended to the back door, to see if anyone were about who might give her news. But the town-place was deserted by all save the ducks, the old white sow, a melancholy crew of cocks and hens huddled under the dripping eaves of the cow-house. Returning to her room, she settled down on the window-seat, and watched the blaze of the bonfire increase as the short day faded.

The gray became black. It was six o’clock, and neither her father nor Mary Jane had returned. Seven o’clock struck from the tall clock in the kitchen, and was echoed ten minutes after by the Dutch clock in the parlor below. The sound whirred up through the planching twice as loud as usual. It was shameful to be left alone like this, to be robbed, murdered, goodness knew what. The bonfire began to die out, but every now and then a circle of small black figures would join hands and dance round it, scattering wildly after a moment or two. In a lull of the wind she caught the faint sound of shouts and singing, and this determined her.

She turned back from the window and groped for her tinder-box. The glow, as she blew the spark upon the dry rag, lit up a very pretty but tear-stained pair of cheeks; and when she touched off the brimstone match, and, looking up, saw her face confronting her, blue and tragical, from the dark-framed mirror, it reminded her of *Lady Macbeth*. Hastily lighting the candle, she caught up a shawl and crept downstairs. Her clogs were in the hall; and four horn lanterns dangled from a row of pegs above them. She caught down one, lit it, and throwing the shawl over her head, stepped out into the night.

The wind was dying down and seemed almost warm upon her face. A young moon fought gallantly, giving the massed clouds just enough light to sail by; but in the lane it was dark as pitch. This did not so much matter, as the rain had poured down it like a sluice, washing the flints clean. Ruby’s lantern swung to and fro, casting a yellow glare on the tall hedges, drawing queer

gleams from the holly-bushes, and flinging an ugly, amorphous shadow behind that dogged her like an enemy.

At the foot of the lane she could clearly distinguish the songs, shouts, and shrill laughter above the hollow roar of the breakers.

“They’re playin’ kiss-i’-the-ring. That’s Modesty Prowse’s laugh. I wonder how any man *can* kiss a mouth like Modesty Prowse’s!”

She turned down the sands toward the bon-fire, grasping as she went all the details of the scene.

In the glow of the dying fire sat a semicircle of men—Jim Lewarne, sunk in a drunken slumber, Calvin Oke bawling in his ear, old Zeb on hands and knees, scraping the embers together, Toby Lewarne (Jim’s elder brother) thumping a pannikin on his knee and bellowing a carol, and a dozen others—in stages varying from qualified sobriety to stark and shameless intoxication—peering across the fire at the game in progress between them and the faint line that marked where sand ended and the sea began.

“Zeb’s turn!” roared out Toby Lewarne, breaking off *The Third Good Joy* midway, in his excitement.

“Have a care—have a care, my son!” old Zeb looked up to shout. “Thee’rt so good as wed already; so do thy wedded man’s duty, an’ kiss th’ hugliest?”

It was true. Ruby, halting with her lantern a pace or two behind the dark semicircle of backs, saw her perfidious Zeb moving from right to left slowly round the circle of men and maids that with joined hands and screams of laughter, danced as slowly in the other direction. She saw him pause once—twice, feign to throw the kerchief over one, then still pass on, calling out over the racket:

*“I sent a letter to my love,  
I carried water in my glove,  
An’ on the way I dropped it—dropped it—dropped it*

He dropped the kerchief over Modesty Prowse.

Young Zeb whipped the kerchief off Modesty’s neck, and spun round as if shot.

The dancers looked; the few sober men by the fire turned and looked also.

“’Tis Ruby Tressider!” cried one of the girls; “‘Wudn’ be i’ thy shoon, Young Zeb, for summat.”

Zeb shook his wits together and dashed off toward the spot, twenty yards away, where Ruby stood holding the lantern high, its ray full on her face. As she started she kicked off her clogs, turned, and ran for her life.

Then, in a moment, a new game began upon the sands. Young Zeb, waving his kerchief and pursuing the flying lantern, was turned, baffled, intercepted—here, there, and everywhere—by the dancers, who scattered over the beach with shouts and peals of laughter, slipping in between him and his quarry. The elders by the fire held their sides and cheered the sport. Twice Zeb was tipped up by a mischievous boot, floundered, and went sprawling; and the roar was loud and long. Twice he picked himself up and started again after the lantern, that zig-zagged now along the fringe of the waves, now up toward the bonfire, now off along the dark shadow of the cliffs.

Ruby could hardly sift her emotions when she found herself panting and doubling in flight. The chase had started without her will or dissent; had suddenly sprung, as it were, out of the ground. She only knew that she was very angry with Zeb; that she longed desperately to elude him; and that he must catch her soon, for her breath and strength were ebbing.

What happened in the end she kept in her dreams till she died. Somehow she had dropped the lantern and was running up from the sea toward the fire, with Zeb's feet pounding behind her, and her soul possessed with the dread to feel his grasp upon her shoulders. As it fell, old Zeb leaped up to his feet with excitement, and opened his mouth wide to cheer.

But no voice came for three seconds; and when he spoke this was what he said:  
"Good Lord, deliver us!"

She saw his gaze pass over her shoulder; and then heard these words come slowly, one by one, like dropping stones. His face was like a ghost's in the bonfire's light, and he muttered again—"From battle and murder, and from sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us!"

She could not understand at first; thought it must have something to do with young Zeb, whose arms were binding hers, and whose breath was hot on her neck. She felt his grasp relax, and faced about.

Full in front, standing out as the faint moon showed them, motionless, as if suspended against the black sky, rose the masts, yards, and square-sails of a full-rigged ship.

The men and women must have stood a whole minute—dumb as stones—before there came that long curdling shriek for which they waited. The great masts quivered for a second against the darkness; then heaved, lurched, and reeled down, crashing on the Raney.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE STRANGER.

As the ship struck, night closed down again, and her agony, sharp or lingering, was blotted out. There was no help possible; no arm that could throw across the three hundred yards that separated her from the cliffs; no swimmer that could carry a rope across those breakers; nor any boat that could, with a chance of life, put out among them. Now and then a dull crash divided the dark hours, but no human cry again reached the shore.

Day broke on a gray sea still running angrily, a tired and shivering group upon the beach, and on the near side of the Haney a shapeless fragment pounded and washed to and fro—a relic on which the watchers could in their minds rebuild the tragedy.

The Raney presented a sheer edge to seaward—an edge under which the first vessel, though almost grazing her side, had driven in plenty of water. Shorewards, however, it descended by gradual ledges. Beguiled by the bonfire, or mistaking Ruby's lantern for the tossing stern-light of a comrade, the second ship had charged full-tilt on the reef and hung herself upon it, as a hunter across a fence. Before she could swing round, her back was broken, her stern parted, slipped back and settled in many fathoms, while the fore-part heaved forward, toppled down the reef till it struck, and there was slowly brayed into pieces by the seas. The tide had swept up and ebbed without dislodging it, and now was almost at low-water mark.

"May so well go home to breakfast," said Elias Sweetland, grimly, as he took in what the uncertain light could show.

"Here, young Zeb, look through my glass," sang out Farmer Tresidder, handing the telescope. He had been up at the vicarage drinking hot grog with the parson and the rescued men, when Sun Udy ran up with news of the fresh disaster; and his first business on descending to the Cove had been to pack Ruby and Mary Jane off to bed with a sound rating. Parson Babbage had descended also, carrying a heavy cane (the very same with which he broke the head of a Radical agitator in

the bar of the "Jolly Pilchards," to the mild scandal of the diocese), and had routed the rest of the women and chastised the drunken. The parson was a remarkable man, and looked it, just now, in spite of the red handkerchief that bound his hat down over his ears.

"Nothing alive there—eh?"

Young Zeb, with a glass at his left eye, answered:

"Nothin' left but a frame o' ribs, sir, an' the foremast hangin' over, so far as I can see; but 'tis all a raffle o' spars and riggin' close under her side. I'll tell 'ee better when this wave goes by."

But the next instant he took down the glass, with a whitened face, and handed it to the parson.

The parson looked too. "Terrible!—terrible!" he said, very slowly, and passed it on to Farmer Tressider.

"What is it? Where be I to look? Aw, chaps—pore chaps! Man alive—but there's one movin'!"

Zeb snatched the glass.

"'Pon the riggin', Zeb, just under her lee! I saw en move—a black-headed chap, in a red shirt—"

"Right, Farmer—he's clingin', too, not lashed." Zeb gave a long look. "Darned if I won't!" he said. "Cast over them corks, in Sim Udy! how much rope have 'ee got, Jim?" he began to strip as he spoke.

"Lashes," answered Jim Lewarne. "Splice it up, then, an' hitch a dozen corks along it."

"Zeb, Zeb!" cried his father, "What be 'bout?"

"Swimmin'," answered Zeb, who by this time had unlaced his boots.

"The notion! Look here, friends—take a look at the bufflehead! Not three months back his mother's brother goes dead an' leaves en a legacy, 'pon which he sets up as jowter—han'some painted cart, tidy little mare, an' all complete, besides a bravish sum laid by. A man of substance, sirs—a life o' much price, as you may say. Aw, Zeb, my son, 'tis hard to lose 'ee, but 'tis harder still now you're in such a very fair way o' business!"

"Hold thy clack, father, an' tie thicky knot, so's it won't slip."

"Shan't. I've a-took boundless pains wi' thee, my son, from thy birth up; hours I've a-spent curin' thy prepensities wi' the strap—ay, hours. D' ee think I raised 'ee up so carefully to chuck thyself away 'pon a come-by-chance furriner? No, I didn'; an' I'll see thee jiggered afore I ties 'ee up. Pa'son Babbage

"Ye dundering old shammick!" broke in the parson, driving the ferule of his cane deep in the sand, "be content to have forgotten a fool, and thank Heaven and his mother he's a gamey fool."

"Thank'ee, Pa'son," said Young Zeb, turning his head as Jim Lewarne fastened the belt of corks under his armpits. "Now the line—not too tight round the waist, an' pay out steady. You, Jim, look to this. R-r-r—mortal cold water, friends!" He stood for a moment, clenching his teeth—a fine figure of a youth for all to see. Then, shouting for plenty of line, he ran twenty yards down the beach and leapt in on the top of a tumbling breaker.

"When a man's old," muttered the parson, half to himself, "he may yet thank God for what he sees, sometimes. Hey, Farmer! I wish I was a married man and had a girl good enough for that naked young hero."

"Ruby an' he'll make a han' some pair."

"Aye, I dare say: only I wasn't thinking o' *her*. How's the fellow out yonder?" The man on the wreck was still clinging, drenched twice or thrice in the half-minute and hidden from sight, but always emerging. He sat astride of the dangling foremast, and had wound tightly round his wrist the end of a rope that hung over, the bows. If the rope gave, or the mast cleared off the tangle that held it and floated off, he was a dead man. He hardly fought at all, and though they shouted

at the top of their lungs, seemed to take no notice—only moved feebly, once or twice, to get a firmer seat.

Zeb also could only be descried at intervals, his head appearing, now and again, like a cork on the top of a billow. But the last of the ebb was helping him, and Jim Lewarne, himself at times neck-high in the surf, continued to pay out the line slowly. In fact, the feat was less dangerous than it seemed to the spectators. A few hours before, it was impossible; but by this there was little more than a heavy swell after the first fifty yards of surf. Zeb's chief difficulty would be to catch a grip or footing on the reef where the sea again grew broken, and his foremost dread lest cramp should seize him in the bitterly cold water. Rising on the swell, he could spy the seaman tossing and sinking on the mast just ahead.

As it happened, he was spared the main peril of the reef, for in fifty more strokes he found himself plunging down into a smooth trough of water with the mast directly beneath. As he shot down the mast rose to him, he flung his arms out over it, and was swept up, clutching it, to the summit of the next swell.

Oddly enough, his first thought, as he hung there, was not for the man he had come to save, but for that which had turned him pale when first he glanced through the telescope. The foremast across which he lay was complete almost to the royal mast, though the yards were gone; and to his left, just above the battered foretop, five men were lashed, dead and drowned. Most of them had their eyes wide open, and seemed to stare at Zeb and wriggle about in the stir of the sea as if they lived. Spent and wretched as he was, it lifted his hair. He almost called out to them at first, and then he dragged his gaze off them and turned it to the right. The survivor still clung here, and Zeb—who had been vaguely wondering how on earth he contrived to keep his seat and yet hold on by the rope without being torn limb from limb—now discovered this end of the mast to be so tightly jammed and tangled against the wreck as practically to be immovable. The man's face was about as scaring as the corpses'; for, catching sight of Zeb, he betrayed no surprise, but only looked back wistfully over his left shoulder, while his blue lips worked without a sound. At least, Zeb heard none.

He waited while they plunged again, and emerged, and then, drawing breath, began to pull himself along toward the stranger. They had seen his success from the beach, and Jim Lewarne, with plenty of line yet to spare, waited for the next move. Zeb worked along till he could touch the man's thigh.

"Keep your knee stiddy," he called out; "I'm goin' to grip hold o't."

For answer, the stranger only kicked out with his foot, as a pettish child might, and almost thrust him from his hold.

"Look'ee here: no doubt you'm 'mazed, but that's a curst foolish trick, all the same. Be that tangle fast, you'm holding by?"

The man made no sign of comprehension.

"Best not trust to't, I reckon," muttered Zeb; "must get past en an' make fast round a rib. Ah! would 'ee, ye varment?"

For, once more, the stranger had tried to thrust him off; and a struggle followed, which ended in Zeb's getting by and gripping the mast again between him and the wreck.

"Now list to me," he shouted, pulling himself up and flinging a leg over the mast: "ingratitood's worse than witchcraft. Sit ye there an' inwardly digest that sayin', while I saves your life."

He untied the line about his waist, then, watching his chance, snatched the rope out of the other's hand, threw his weight upon it, and swung in toward the vessel's ribs till he touched one,

caught and pressed the line around it, high up, with a quick double half-hitch. Running a hand down the line, he dropped back upon the mast. The stranger regarded him with a curious stare, and at last found his voice.

“You seem powerfully set on saving me.”

His teeth chattered as he spoke, and his face was pinched and hollow-eyed from cold and exposure. But he was handsome, for all that—fellow not much older than Zeb, lean and strongly made. His voice had a cultivated ring.

“Yes,” answered Zeb, as with one hand on the line that now connected the wreck with the shore, he sat down astride the mast facing him; “I reckon I’ll do’t.”

“Unlucky, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“To save a man from drowning.”

“Maybe. Untie these corks from my chest and let me slip ’em round yourn. How your fingers do shake, to be sure!”

“I call you to witness,” said the a shiver, “you are saving me on your own responsibility.”

“Can ’ee swim?”

“I could yesterday.”

“Then you can now, wi’ a belt o’ corks an’ me to help. Keep a hand on the line an’ pull yoursel’ along. Tides s’ runnin’ agen by now. When you’m tired, hold fast by the rope an’ sing out to me. Stop; let me chafe your legs a bit, for how you’ve lasted out as you have is more than I know.”

“I was on the foretop most of the night. Those fools—” he broke off to nod at the corpses.

“They’m dead,” put in Zeb, curtly.

“They lashed themselves, thinking the foremast would stand till daylight. I climbed down half an hour before it went. I tell you what, though; my legs are too cramped to move. If you want to save me you must carry me.”

“I was thinkin’ the same. Well, come along; for tho’ I don’t like the cut o’ your jib, you’m a terrible handsome chap, an’ as clean-built as ever I see. Now then, one arm round my neck and t’other on the line, but don’t bear too hard on it, for I doubt ’tis weakish. Bless the Lord, the tide’s running.”

So they began their journey. Zeb had taken barely a dozen strokes when the other groaned and began to hang more heavily on his neck. But he fought on, though very soon the struggle became a blind and horrible nightmare to him. The arm seemed to creep round his throat and strangle him, and the blackness of a great night came down over his eyes. Still he struck out, and, oddly enough, found himself calling to his comrade to hold tight.

When Sim Udy and Elias Sweetland dashed in from the shore and swam to the rescue, they found the pair clinging to the line, and at a standstill. And when the four were helped through the breakers to firm earth, Zeb tottered two steps forward and dropped in a swoon, burying his face in the sand.

“He’s not as strong as I,” muttered the stranger, staring at Parson Babbage in a dazed, uncertain fashion, and uttering the words as if they had no connection with his thoughts. “I’m afraid—sir—I’ve broken—his heart.”

And with that he, too, fainted, into the parson’s arms.

“Better carry the both up to Sheba,” said Farmer Tresidder.

Ruby lay still abed when Mary Jane, who had been moving about the kitchen, sleepy-eyed, getting ready the breakfast, dashed upstairs with the news that two dead men had been taken off the wreck and were even now being brought into the yard.

“You coarse girl,” she exclaimed, “to frighten me with such horrors!”

“Oh, very well,” answered Mary Jane, who was in a rebellious mood, “then I’m goin’ down to peep; for there’s a kind o’ what-I-can’t-tell-’ee about dead men that’s very enticin’, tho’ it do make you feel all-overish.”

By and by’ she came back panting, to find Ruby already dressed.

“Aw, Miss Ruby, dreadful news I ha’ to tell, tho’ joyous in a way. Would ’ee mind catchin’ told o’ the bed-post to give yoursel’ fortitude? Now let me cast about how to break it softly. First, then, you must know he’s not dead at all—”

“Who is not?”

“Your allotted husband, miss—Mister Zeb.”

“Why, who in the world said he was?”

“But they took en up for dead, miss—for he’d swum out to the wreck, an’ then he’d a-swum back with a man ’pon his back—an’ touchin’ shore, he fell downward in a swoond, marvelous like to death for all to behold. So they brought en up here, ’long wi’ the chap he’d a-saved, an’ dressed en i’ the spare room blankets, an’ gave en clane sperrits to drink, an’ lo! he came to; an’ in a minnit, lo! agen he went off; an’—”

Ruby, by this time, was half way down the stairs. Running to the kitchen door she flung it open, calling “Zeb! Zeb!”

But young Zeb had fainted for the third time, and while others of the group merely lifted their heads at her entrance, the old crowder strode toward her with some amount of sternness on his face.

“Kape off my son!” he shouted. “Kape off my son, and go upstairs agen to your prayers; for this be all your work, in a way—you gay good for-nuthin’!”

“Indeed, Mr. Minards,” retorted Ruby, firing up under this extravagant charge, and bridling, “pray remember whose roof you’re under, with your low language.”

“Begad,” interposed a strange voice, “but that’s the spirit for me, and the mouth to utter it!”

Ruby, turning, met a pair of luminous eyes gazing on her with bold admiration. The eyes were set in a cadaverous, but handsome, face; and the face belonged to the stranger, who had recovered of his swoon, and was now stretched on the settle beside fire.

“I don’t know who you may be, sir, but—”

“You are kind enough to excuse my rising to introduce myself. My name is Zebedee Minards.”

#### CHAPTER IV.

#### YOUNG ZEB FETCHES A CHEST OF DRAWERS.

The parish of Ruan Lanihale is bounded on the west by Porthlooe, a fishing town of fifteen hundred inhabitants or less, that blocks the seaward exit of a narrow coombe. A little stream tumbles down this coombe toward the Hauen, divides the folk into parishioners of Lanihale and Landaviddy, and receives impartially the fish offal of both. There is a good deal of this offal, especially during pilchard time, and the townfolk live on their first stories, using the lower floors as fish cellars or “pallaces.” But even while the nose most abhors, the eye is delighted by jumbled houses, crazy stairways leading to green doors, a group of children dabbling in the mud

at low tide, a congregation of white gulls, a line of fishing boats below the quay where the men lounge and whistle and the barked nets hang to dry, and beyond all, the shorn outline of two cliffs with a wedge of sea and sky between.

Mr. Zebedee Minards the elder dwelt on the astern or Lanihale side of the stream, and a good way back from the Hauen, beside the road that winds inland up the coombe. Twenty yards of garden divided his cottage door from the road, and prevented the inmates from breaking their necks as they stepped over its threshold. Even as it was, Old Zeb had acquired a habit of singing out "Ware heads!" to the wayfarers whenever he chanced to drop a rotund object on his estate; and if any small article were missing indoors, would descend at once to the highway with the cheerful assurance, based on repeated success, of finding it somewhere below.

Over and above its recurrent crop of potatoes and flatpoll cabbages, this precipitous garden depended for permanent interest on a collection of marine curiosities, all eloquent of disaster to shipping. To begin with, a colossal and highly varnished Cherokee, once the figure-head of a West Indiaman, stood sentry by the gate and hung forward over the road, to the discomfiture of unwarned and absent-minded bagmen. The path to the door was guarded by a low fence of split-bamboo baskets that had once contained sugar from Batavia; a coffee bag from the wreck of a Dutch bark served for door-mat; a rum-cask with a history caught rain-water from the eaves; and a lapdog's pagoda—a dainty affair striped in scarlet and yellow, the jetsam of some passenger ship—had been deftly adapted by Old Zeb, and stood in line with three straw bee-skips under the eastern wall.

The next day but one after Christmas dawned deliciously in Porthlooe, bright with virginal sunshine, and made tender by the breath of the Gulf Stream. Uncle Issy, passing up the road at nine o'clock, halted by the Cherokee to pass a word with its proprietor, who presented the very antipodes of a bird's-eye view, as he knocked about the crumbling clods with his visgy at top of the slope.

"Mornin', Old Zeb; how be 'ee, this delicate day?"

"Brave, thankee, Uncle."

"An' how's Coden Rachel?"

"She's charmin', thankee."

"Comely weather, comely weather; the gulls be comin' back down the coombe, I see."

"I be jealous about its lastin'; for 'tis overrathe for the time o' year. Terrible topsy-turvy the seasons begin to run, in my old age. Here's May in Janewarry; an' 'gainst May, comes th' east wind breakin' the ships o' Tarshish."

"Now, what an instructive chap you be to converse with, I do declare! Darned if I didn' stand here two minits, gazin' up at the seat o' y'our small-clothes, tryin' to think 'pon what I wanted to say; for I'd a notion that I wanted to speak, cruel bad, but cudn' lay hand on't. So at last I takes heart an' says 'Mornin',' I says, beginnin' i' that very common way an' hopin' 'twould come. An' round you whips wi' 'ships o' Tarshish' pon your tongue; an' henceforth 'tis all Q's an' A's like a cattykism."

"Well, now you say so, I *did* notice, when I turned round, that you was lookin' no better'n a fool, so to speak. But what's the notion?"

"'Tis a question I've a-been daggin' to ax'ee ever since it woke me up in the night to spekilate thereon. For I felt it very curious there shud be three Zebedee Minards' i' this parish a-drawin' separate breath at th' same time."

"Ias, 'tis an out-o' -the-way fact."

“A stirrin’ age, when such things befall! If you’d a-told me, a week agone, that I shud live to see the like, I’d ha’ called ’ee a liar; an’ yet here I be a-talkin’ away, an’ there you be a-listenin’, an’ here be the old world a-spinnin’ us round as in bygone times—”

“Iss, iss—but what’s the question?”

“All the same when that furriner chap looks up in Tresidder’s kitchen an’ says ‘my name is Zebedee Minards,’ you might ha’ blown me down wi’ a puff; an’ says I to mysel,’ wakin’ up las’ night an’ thinkin’—‘I’ll ax a question of Old Zeb when I sees en, blest if I don’t.’”

“Then why in thunder don’t ’ee make haste an’ do it?”

Uncle Issy, after revolving the question for another fifteen seconds, produced it in this attractive form:

“Old Zeb, bein’ called Zeb, why did ’ee call young Zeb, Zeb?”

Old Zeb ceased to knock the clods about, descended the path, and leaning on his visgy began to contemplate the opposite slope of the coombe, as if the answer were written, in letters hard to decipher, along the hillside.

“Well, now,” he began, after opening his mouth twice and shutting it without sound, “folks may say what they like o’ your wits, Uncle, an’ talk o’ your looks bein’ agen ’ee, as they do; but you’ve a-put a twister, this time, an’ no mistake.”

“I reckoned it a banger,” said the old man complacently.

“Iss. But I had my reasons all the same.”

“To be sure you had. But rabbet me if I can guess what they were.”

“I’ll tell ’ee. You see when Zeb was born, an’ the time runnin’ on for his chris’nin’, Rachel an’ me puzzled for days what to call en. At last I said, ‘Look ’ere, I tell ’e what; you shut your eyes ’an open the Bible, anyhow, an’ I’ll shut mine an’ take a dive wi’ my finger, an’ we’ll call en by the nearest name I hits on.’ So we did. When we tuk en to church, tho’, there was a pretty shape. ‘Name this cheeld,’ says Pa’son Babbage. ‘Selah,’ says I, that bein’ the word we’d settled. ‘Selah?’ says he; ‘pack o’ stuff! that aint no manner o’ name. You might so well call en Amen.’ So bein’ hurried in mind, what wi’ the cheeld kickin,’ an’ the water tricklin’ off the pa’son’s forefinger, an’ the sacred natur’ of the deed, I cudn’ think ’pon no name but my own, an’ Zeb he was christened.”

“Deary me,” commented Uncle Jssy, “that’s a very life-like history. The wonder is, the self-same fix don’t happen at more chris’nins, ’tis so very life-like.”

A silence followed, full of thought. It was cut short by the rattle of wheels coming down the road, and Young Zeb’s gray mare hove in sight, with Young Zeb’s green cart, and Young Zeb himself standing up in it, wide-legged. He wore a color as fresh as on Christmas morning, and seemed none the worse for his adventure.

“Hello!” he called, pulling up the mare; “’mornin’, Uncle Jssy——’mornin’, father.”

“Same to you, my son. Whither away?—as as the man said once.”

“Aye, whither away?” chimed Uncle Issy; “for the pilchards be all gone up Channel these two months.”

“To Liskeard for a chest-o’-drawers.”

Young Zeb, to be ready for married life, had taken a house for himself—a neat cottage with a yard and stable, further up the coombe. But stress of business had interfered with the furnishing until quite lately.

“Rale meogginy, I suppose, as befits a proud tradesman.”

“No; painted, but wi’ the twiddles put in so artfully you’d think ‘twas rale. So, as ’tis a fine day, I’m drivin’ in to Mister Pennyway’s shop o’ purpose to fetch it afore it be snapped up, for

'tis a captivatin' article. I'll be back by six, i' time to get into my clothes an' grease my hair for the court, up to Sheba."

"Zeb," said his father, abruptly, "'tis a grand match you'm makin', an' you may call me a nincom, but I wish ye wasn'."

"'Tis lookin' high," put in Uncle Issy.

"A cat may look at a king, if he's got his eyes about en," Old Zeb went on, "let alone a legacy an' a green cart. 'Taint that; 'tis the maid."

"How's mother?" asked the young man, to shift the conversation.

"Hugly, my son. Hi! Rachel!" he shouted, turning his head toward the cottage; and then went on, dropping his voice, "As between naybors, I'm fain to say she don't shine this mornin'. Hi, mother! here's Zebedee waitin' to pay his respects."

Mrs. Minards appeared on the cottage threshold, with a blue check duster round her head—a tall, angular woman, of severe deportment. Her husband's bulletin, it is fair to say, had reference rather to her temper than to her personal attractions.

"Be the Frenchmen landed?" she inquired, sharply.

"Why, no; nor yet likely to."

"Then why be I called out i' the midst o' my clanin'? What came I out for to see? Was it to pass the time o' day wi' an aged shaken-by-the-wind kind o' loiterer they name Uncle Issy?"

Apparently it was not, for Uncle Issy by this time was twenty yards up the road, and still fleeing, with his head bent and shoulders extravagantly arched, as if under a smart shower.

"I thought I'd like to see you, mother," said Young Zeb.

"Well, now you've done it."

"Best be goin', I reckon, my son," whispered Old Zeb.

"I be much the same to look at," announced the voice above, "as afore your legacy came. 'Tis only up to Sheba that faces ha' grown kindlier."

Young Zeb touched up his mare a trifle savagely.

"Well, so long, my son! See 'ee up to Sheba this evenin', if all's well."

The old man turned back to his work, while Young Zeb rattled on in an ill-temper. He had the prettiest sweetheart and the richest in Lanihale parish, and nobody said a good word for her. He tried to think of her as a wronged angel, and grew angry with himself on finding the effort hard to sustain. Moreover, he felt uneasy about the stranger. Fate must be intending mischief, he fancied, when it led him to rescue a man who so strangely happened to bear his own name. The fellow, too, was still at Sheba, being nursed back to strength; and Zeb didn't like it. In spite of the day, and the merry breath of it that blew from the sea upon his right cheek, black care dogged him all the way up the long lull that led out of Porthlooe, and clung to the tail-board of his green cart as he jolted down again toward Ruan Cove.

After passing the Cove-head, Young Zeb pulled up the mare, and was taken with a fit of thoughtfulness, glancing up toward Sheba farm, and then along the highroad, as if uncertain. The mare settled the question after a minute, by turning into the lane, and Zeb let her have her way.

"Where's Miss Ruby?" he asked, driving into the town-place, and coming on Mary Jane, who was filling a pig's bucket by the back door.

"Gone up to Parc Dew 'long wi' maister an' the very man I seed i' my tay-cup, a week come Friday."

"Iss, fay; an' a great long-legged stranger he was. So I stuck en 'pon my fist an' gave en a scat. 'To-day,' says I, but he didn't budge. 'To-morrow,' I says, an' gave en another; and then 'Nex' day;' and t' third time he flew. 'Shall have a sweet'eart Sunday, praise the Lord,' thinks I;

'wonder who 'tis? Anyway, 'tis a comfort he'll be high 'pon his pins, like Nanny Painter's hens, for mine be all the purgy-bustious shape just now.' Well, Sunday night he came to Raney Rock, an' Monday mornin' to Slieba farm; and no thanks to you that brought en, for not a single dare-to-deny-me glance has he cast *this* way."

"Which way, then?"

"Can't stay to causey, Master Zeb, wi' all the best horn-handled knives to be took out o' blue-butter 'gainst this evenin's courant. Besides, you called me a liar last week."

"So you be. But I'll believe 'ee this time."

"Well, I'll tell 'ee this much—for you look a very handsome jowter i' that new cart. If I were you, I'd be careful that gay furriner *didn' steal more'n my name*"

Meantime, a group of four was standing in the middle of Parc Dew, the twenty-acred field behind the farmstead. The stranger, dressed in a blue jersey and outfit of Farmer Tresidder's, that made up in boots for its shortcomings elsewhere, was addressing the farmer, Ruby, and Jim Lewarne, who heard him with lively attention. In his right hand he held a walking-stick armed with a spud, for uprooting thistles; and in his left a cake of dark soil, half stone, half mud. His manner was earnest.

". . . I see," he was saying, "that I don't convince you; and it's only for your own sakes I insist on convincing you. You'll grant me that, I suppose. To-morrow, or the next day, I go; and the chances are that we never meet again in this world. But 'twould be a pleasant thought to carry off to the ends of the earth that you, my benefactors, were hiving in wealth, enriched (if I may say it without presumption) by a chance word of mine. I tell you I know something of these matters

"I thought you'd passed your days privateerin'," put in Jim Lewarne, who was the only hostile listener, perhaps because he saw no chance of sharing in the promised wealth.

"Jim, hold your tongue!" snapped Ruby. "I ask you," went on the stranger, without deigning to answer, "I ask you if it does not look like Providence. Here have you been for years, dwelling amid wealth of which you never reamed. A ship is wrecked close to your doors, and of all her crew the one man saved is, perhaps, the one man who could enlighten you. You feed him, clothe him, nurse him. As soon as he can crawl about he picks a walking stick out of a half-dozen or more in the hall, and goes out with you to take a look at the farm. On his way he notes many things. He sees (you'll excuse me, Farmer, but I can't help it) that you're all behind the world, and the land is yielding less than half of what it ought. Have you ever seen a book by Lord Dundouald on the connection between Agriculture and Chemistry? No? I thought not. Do you know of any manure better than the ore-weed you gather down at the Cove? Or the plan of malting grain to feed your cattle on through the winter? Or the respective merits of oxen and horses as beasts of draught? But these matters, though the life and soul of modern husbandry, are as nothing to this lump in my hand. What do you call the field we're now standing in?"

"Parc Dew."

"Exactly—the 'black field,' or the 'field of black soil'; the very name should have told you. But you lay it down in grass, and but for the chance of this spud and a lucky thistle, I might have walked over it a score of times without guessing its secret. Man alive, it's red gold I have here—red, wicked, damnable, delicious gold—the root of all evil and of most joys."

"If you lie, you lie enticingly, young man."

"By gold, I mean stuff that shall make gold for you. There is ore here, but what ore exactly I can't tell till I've streamered it: Lead, I fancy, with a trace of silver—wealth for you, certainly; and in what quantity you shall find out—"

At this juncture a voice was heard calling over the hedge, at the bottom of the field. It came from Young Zeb, the upper part of whose person, as he stood up in his cart, was just visible between two tamarisk bushes.

“Ru-b-y-y-y!”

“Drat the chap!” exclaimed Ruby’s father, wheeling round sharply. “What d’ye w-a-a-a-n-t?” he yelled back.

“Come to know ’bout that chest o’ dra-w-w-ers!”

“Then come ’long round by th’ ga-a-ate!”

“Can’t st-a-ay! Want to know, as I’m drivin’ to Liskeard, if Ruby thinks nine-an’-six too mu-u-ch, as the twiddles be so very cle-v-ver!”

“How ridiculous!” muttered the stranger, just loud enough for Ruby to hear. “Who is this absurd person?”

Jim Lewarne answered, “A low-lived chap, mister, as saved your skin a while back.”

“Dear, dear—how unpardonable of me! I hadn’t the least idea at this distance. Excuse me, I must go and thank him at once.”

He moved toward the hedge with a brisk step that seemed to cost him some pain. The others followed, a pace or two behind.

“You’ll not mind my interruptin’, Farmer,” continued Young Zeb, “but ’tis time Ruby made her mind up, for Mister Pennyway won’t take a stiver less. ‘Mornin’, Ruby, my dear.”

“And you’ll forgive me if I also interrupt,” put in the stranger, with the pleasantest smile. “but it is time I thanked the friend who saved my life on Monday morning. I would come round and shake hands if only I could see the gate.”

“Don’t ’ee mention it,” replied Zeb, blushing hotly. “I’m glad to mark ye lookin’ so brave a’ ready. Well, what d’ ye say, Ruby?”

“I say ‘please yoursel’.”

For of the two men standing before Ruby (she did not count her father and Jim Lewarne), the stranger, with his bold features and easy, conciliating carriage, had the advantage. It is probable that he knew it, and threw a touch of acting into his silence as Zeb cut him short.

“That’s a fair speech,” replied Zeb. “Iss, turn it how you will, the words be winnin’ enow. But be danged, my dear, if I wudu’ as lief you said, ‘Go to blazes!’ ”

“Fact is, my son,” said Farmer Tresidder, candidly. “you’m good but untimely, like kissin’ the wrong maid. This here surpassin’ young friend o’ mine was speech-makin’ after a pleasant fashion in our ears, when you begins to bawl—”

“Then you don’t want to hear about the chest-o’-drawers?” interrupted Zed in dudgeon, with a glance at Ruby, who pretended not to see it.

“Well, no. To tell ’ee the slap-bang truth, I don’t care if I see no trace of ’ee till the dancin.’ begins to commence to-night.”

“Then good-day t’ ye, friends,” answered Young Zeb, and turned the mare. “Cl’k, Jessamy!” He rattled away down the lane.

“What an admirable youth!” murmured the stranger, falling back a pace and gazing after the back of Zeb’s head as it passed down the line of the hedge. “What a messenger! He seems eaten up with desire to get you a chest-of-drawers that shall be wholly satisfying. But why do you allow him to call you ‘my dear’?”

“Because, I suppose, that’s what I am,” answered Ruby, “because I’m goin’ to marry him within the month.”

“Wh-e-e-w!”

But, as a matter of fact, the stranger had known before asking.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE STRANGER DANCES IN ZEE' S SHOES.

It was close upon midnight, and in the big parlor at Sheba the courrant, having run through its normal stages of high punctilio, artificial ease, zest, profuse perspiration, and supper, had reached the exact point when Modesty Prowse could be surprised under the Kissing-bush, and old Zeb wiped his spectacles, thrust his chair back, and pushed out his elbows to make sure of room for the rendering of "Scarlet's my Color." These were tokens to be trusted by an observer who might go astray in taking any chance guest as a standard of the average conviviality. Mr. and Mrs. Jim Lewarne, for example, were accustomed on such occasions to represent the van and rear guard respectively in the march of gayety; and in this instance Jim had already imbibed too much hot "schenachrum," while his wile, still in the stage of artificial ease, and wearing a lace cap, which was none the less dignified for having been smuggled, was perpending what to say when she should get him home. The dancers, pale and dusty, leant back in rows against the wall, and with their handkerchiefs went through the motions of fanning or polishing, according to sex. In their midst circulated Farmer Tresidder, with a three-handled mug of schenachrum, hot from the embers, and furred with wood-ash.

"Take an' drink, thirsty souls. Niver do I mind the Letterpooch so footed i' my born days."

"'Twas conspirator—very conspirator," assented Old Zeb, screwing up his A string a trifle, and turning *con spirito* into a dark saying.

"What's that?"

"Greek for elbow-grease. Phew!" He rubbed his fore-finger round between neck and shirt-collar. "I be vady as the inside of a winder."

"Such a man as you be to sweat, crowder!" exclaimed Calvin Oke. "Set you to play six-eight time an' 'tis beads right away."

"A slice o' saffern-cake, crowder, to stay ye. Don't say no. Hi, Mary Jane!"

"Thank 'ee, Farmer. A man 'ud say you was in sperrits to-night, makin' so bold."

"I be; I be."

"Might a man ax wherefore, beyond the nat'ral hail-fellow-well-met of the season?",

"You may, an' yet you mayn't," answered the host, passing on with the mug.

"Uncle Issy," asked Jim Lewarne, lurching up, "I durst' n g-glint over my shoulder—but wud 'ee mind tellin' me if th' old woman's lookin' this way—afore I squench my thirst?"

"Iss, she be."

Jim groaned. "Then wud 'ee mind a-hofferin' me a taste out o' your pannikin'? an' I'll make b'lieve to say 'Norrnony 'count.' ot t'night," he added, tilting back on his heels, and then dipping forward with a vague smile.

Uncle Issy did as he was required, and the henpecked one played his part of the comedy with elaborate slyness. "I don't like that strange chap," he announced, irrelevantly.

"Nor I nuther," agreed Elias Sweetland, "tho' to be sure, I've a-kept my eye 'pon en, an' the wonders he accomplishes in an old pair o' Tresidder's high-lows must be seen to be believed. But that's no call for Ruby's dancin' wi' he a' most so much as wi' her proper man."

"The gel's takin' her fling afore wedlock. I heard Sarah Ann Nanjulian, just now, sayin' she ought to be clawed."

“A jealous woman is a scourge shaken to an’ fro,” said Old Zeb; “but I’ve a mind, friends, to strike up *Randy, my Dandy*, for that son o’ mine is lookin’ blacker than the horned man, an’ may be ’twill comfort en to dance afore the public eye; for there’s none can take his wind in hornpipe.”

In fact, it was high time that somebody comforted Young Zeb, for his heart was hot. He had brought home the chest of drawers in his cart, and spent an hour fixing on the best position for it in the bedroom, before dressing for the dance. Also he had purchased, in Mr. Pennyway’s shop, an arm chair, in the worst taste, to be a pleasant surprise for Ruby when the happy day came for installing her. Finding he had still twenty minutes to spare after giving the last twitch to his best tie, and the last brush to his anointed locks, he had sat down facing this chair, and had striven to imagine her in it, darning his stockings. Zeb was not, as a rule, imaginative, but love drew this delicious picture for him. He picked up his hat, and set out for Sheba in the best of tempers.

But at Sheba all had gone badly. Ruby’s frock of white muslin and Ruby’s small sandal shoes were bewitching, but Ruby’s mood passed his intelligence. It was true she gave him half the dances, but then she gave the other half to that accursed stranger, and the stranger had all her smiles, which was carrying hospitality too far. Not a word had she uttered to Zeb beyond the merest commonplaces; on the purchase of the chest of drawers she had breathed no question; she hung listlessly on his arm, and spoke only of the music, the other girls’ frocks, the arrangement of the supper-table. And at supper the stranger had not only sat on the other side of her, but had talked all the time, and on books, a subject entirely uninteresting to Zeb. Worst of all, Ruby had listened. No; the worst of all was a remark of Modesty Prowse’s that he chanced to overhear afterward.

So when the fiddle struck up the air of *Randy, my Dandy*, Zeb, knowing that the company would call upon him, at first felt his heart turn sick with loathing. He glanced across the room at Ruby, who, with heightened color, was listening to the stranger, and looking up at his handsome face. Already one or two voices were calling “Zeb!” “Young Zeb for a hornpipe!” “Now then, Young Zeb!”

He had a mind to refuse. For years after he remembered every small detail of the room as he looked down it and then across to Ruby again; the motion of the fiddle-bows; the variegated dresses of the women; the kissing-bush that some tall dancer’s head had set swaying from the low rafter; the light of a sconce gleaming on Tresidder’s bald scalp. Years after, he could recall the exact poise of Ruby’s head as she answered some question of her companion. The stranger left her, and strolled slowly down the room to the fireplace, when he faced round, throwing an arm negligently along the mantel-shelf, and leant with legs crossed, waiting.

Then young Zeb made up his mind, and stepped out to the middle of the floor. The musicians were sawing with might and main at high speed. He crossed his arms, and, fixing his eyes on the stranger’s, began the hornpipe.

When it ceased, he had danced his best. It was only when the applause broke out that he knew he had fastened, from start to finish, on the man by the fireplace a pair of eyes blazing with hate. The other had stared back quietly, as if he noted only the performance. As the music ended sharply with the click of Young Zeb’s two heels, the stranger bent, took up a pair of tongs, and rearranged the fire before liting his head.

“Yes,” he said, slowly, but in tones that were extremely distinct, as the clapping died away, “that was wonderfully danced. In some ways I should almost say you were inspired. A slight want of airiness in the double-shuffle, perhaps—”

“Could you do’t better?” asked Zeb sulkily. “That isn’t the fair way to treat criticism, my friend; but yes—oh, yes, certainly I could do it better—in your shoes.”

“Then try, i’ my shoes.” And Zeb kicked them off.

“I’ve a notion they’ll fit me,” was all the stranger answered, dropping on one knee and beginning to unfasten the cumbrous boots he had borrowed of Farmer Tressider.

Indeed, the curious likeness in build of these two men—a likeness accentuated, rather than slurred, by their contrast in color and face, was now seen to extend even to their feet. When the stranger stood up at length in Zeb’s shoes, they fitted him to a nicety, the broad steel buckles lying comfortably over the instep, the back of the uppers closing round the hollow of his ankle like a skin.

Young Zeb, by this, had crossed shoeless to the fireplace, and now stood in the position lately occupied by his rival; only, whereas the stranger had lolled easily, Zeb stood squarely, with his legs wide apart, and his hands deep in his pockets. He had no eyes for the intent faces around, no ears for their whispering, nor for the preliminary scrape of the instruments; but stood like an image, with the firelight flickering out between his calves, and watched the other man grimly.

“Ready?” asked his father’s voice. “Then one—two—three, an’ let fly!”

The fiddle bows hung for an instant on the first note, and in a twinkling scampered along into *Randy, my dandy*. As the quick air caught at the listeners’ pulses, the stranger crossed his arms, drew his right heel up along the inner side of his left ankle, and with a light nod toward the chimney place began.

To the casual eye there was for a while little to choose between the two dancers, the stranger’s style being accurate, restrained, even a trifle dull. But of all the onlookers, Zeb new best what hornpipe dancing really was; and knew surely, after the first dozen steps, that he was going to be mastered. So far, the performance was academic only. Zeb, unacquainted with the word, recognized the fact, and was quite aware of the inspiration—the personal gift—held in reserve to transfigure this precise art in a minute or so, and give it life. He saw the force gathering in the steady, rhythmical twinkle of the steel buckles, and heard it speak in light recurrent tap with which the stranger’s heels kissed the floor. It was doubly bitter that he and his enemy alone should know what was coming; trebly bitter that his enemy should be aware that he knew.

The crowder slackened speed for a second, to give warning, and dashed into the heel and toe. Zeb caught the light in the dancer’s eyes, and still frowning, drew a long breath.

“Faster,” nodded the stranger to the musicians’ corner.

Then came the moment for which, by this time, Zeb was longing. The stranger rested with heels together while a man might count eight rapidly, and suddenly began a step the like of which none present had ever witnessed. Above the hips his body swayed steadily, softly, to the measure; his eyes never took their pleasant smile off Zeb’s face, but his feet!

The steel buckles had become two sparkling moths, spinning, poising, darting. They no longer belonged to the man, but had taken separate life; and merely the absolute symmetry their loops and circles, and the *click-click-click* on boards, regular as ever, told of the art that informed them.

“Faster!”

They crossed and recrossed now like small flashes of lightning, or as if the boards were flints giving out a score of sparks at every touch the man’s heel.

“Faster!”

They seemed suddenly to catch the light out of every sconce, and knead it into a ball of fire, that spun and yet was motionless, in the very middle of the floor, while all the rest of the room grew suddenly dimmed.

Zeb with a gasp drew his eyes away for a second and glanced around. Fiddlers and guests seemed ghostly after the fierce light he had been gazing on. He looked along the pale faces to the place where Ruby stood. She, too, glanced up, and their eyes met.

What he saw fetched a sob from his throat. Then something on the floor caught his attention: something bright, close by his feet.

Between his outspread legs, as it seemed, a thin streak of silver was creeping along the flooring. He rubbed his eyes, and looked again.

He was straddling across a stream of molten metal.

As Zeb caught sight of this, the stranger twirled, leapt a foot in the air, and came down smartly on the final note, with a click of his heels. The music ceased abruptly.

A storm of clapping broke out, but stopped almost on the instant: for the stranger had flung an arm out toward the hearthstone.

“A mine—a mine!”

The white streak ran hissing from the heart of the fire, where a clod of earth rested among the ashen sticks.

“Witchcraft!” muttered one or two of the guests, peering forward with round eyes.

“Fiddlestick-end! I put the clod there myself. ’Tis *lead!*”

“Lead?”

“Aye, naybors all,” broke in Farmer Tresidder, his bald head bedewed with sweat, I don’t want to abash ’ee, Lord knows; but ’tis trew as doom that I be a passing well-to-do chap. I shu’dn’ wonder now”—and here he embraced the company with a smile, half pompous and half timid—“I shu’dn’ wonder if ye was to see me trottin’ to Parlyment House in a gilded coach afore Michaelmas—I be so tremenjous rich, by all accounts.”

“You’ll excoose my sayin’ it, Farmer,” spoke up Old Zeb out of the awed silence that followed, “for doubtless I may be thick o’ hearin’, but did I, or did I not, catch ’ee alludin’ to a windfall o’ wealth?”

“You did.”

“You’ll excoose me sayin’ it, Farmer; but was it soberly or pleasantly, honest creed or light lips, downright or random, ‘out o’ the heart the mouth speaketh,’ or wantonly and in round figgers, as it might happen to a man filled with meat and wine?”

“’Twas the cold trewth.”

“By what slice o’ fortune?”

“By a mine, as you might put it; or, as between man an’ man, by a mine o’ lead.”

“Farmer, you’re either a born liar or the darlin’ o’ luck.”

“Aye; I feel it. I feel that overpowerin’ly.”

“For my part,” put in Mrs. Jim Lewarne, “I’ve given over follerin’ the freaks o’ Fortune. They be so very undiscernin’.”

And this sentence probably summed up the opinion of the majority.

In the midst of the excitement Young Zeb strode up to the stranger, who stood a little behind the throng.

“Give me back my shoes,” he said.

The other kicked them off and looked at him oddly.

“With pleasure. You’ll find them a bit worn, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll chance that. Man, I’m not all sorry, either.”

“Hey, why?”

“Cause they’ll not be worn agen, arter this night. Gentleman or devil, whichever you may be, I bain’t fit to dance i’ the same parish with ’ee—no, nor to tread the shoe-leather you’ve worn.”

“By the powers!” cried the stranger suddenly, “two minutes ago I’d have agreed with you. But, looking in your eyes, I’m not so sure of it.”

“Of what?”

“That you won’t wear the shoes again.”

Then Zeb went after Ruby.

“I want to speak a word with ’ee,” he said quietly, stepping up to her.

“Where?”

“I’ the hall.”

“But I can’t come, just now.”

“But you must.”

She followed him out.

“Zeb, what’s the matter with you?”

“Look here”—and he faced round sharply—“I loved you passing well.”

“Well?” she asked, like a faint echo. “I saw your eyes, just now. Don’t lie.”

“I won’t.”

“That’s right. And now listen: if you marry me, I’ll treat ’ee like a span’el dog. Fetch you shall, an’ carry for my pleasure. You shall be slave, an’ I your taskmaster; an’ the sweetness o’ your love shall come by crushin’, like trodden thyme. Shall I suit you?”

“I don’t think you will.”

“Then good-night to you.”

“Good-night, Zeb. I don’t fancy you’ll suit me; but I’m not so sure as before you began to speak.”

There was no answer to this but the slamming of the front door.

At half-past seven that morning, Parson Babbage, who had risen early, after his wont, was standing on the Vicarage doorstep to respire the first breath of the pale day, when he heard the garden gate unlatched and saw Young Zeb coming up the path.

The young man still wore his festival dress; but his best stockings and buckled shoes were stained and splashed, as from much walking in miry ways. Also he came unsteadily, and his face was white as ashes. The parson stared and asked:

“Young Zeb, have you been drinking?”

“Then ’tie trouble, my son, an’ I ask your pardon.”

“A man might call it so. I’m come to forbid my banns.”

The elder man cocked his head on one side, much as a thrush contemplates a worm.

“I smell a wise wit, somewhere. Young man, who taught you so capital a notion?”

“Ruby did.”

“Pack o’ stuff! Ruby hadn’t the—stop a minute! ’Twas that clever fellow you fetched ashore, on Monday. Of course—of course! How came it to slip my mind?”

Young Zeb turned away; but the old man was after him, quick as thought, and had laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Is it bitter, my son?”

“It is bitter as death, Pa’son.”

“My poor lad. Step in an’ break your fast with me—poor lad, poor lad! Nay, but you shall. There’s a bitch pup i’ the stables that I want your judgment on. Bitter, eh? I dessay. I dessay. I’m thinking of walking her—lemon spot on the left ear—Rattler strain, of course. Dear me, this makes six generations I can count back that spot—an’ game every one. Step in, poor lad, step in; she’s a picture.”

## CHAPTER VI.

### SIEGE IS LAID TO RUBY.

The sun was higher by some hours—high enough to be streaming brightly over the wall into the courtlage at Sheba—when Ruby awoke from a dreamless sleep. As she lifted her head from the pillow and felt the fatigue of last night yet in her limbs, she was aware also of a rich tenor voice uplifted beneath her window. Air and words were strange to her, and the voice had little in common with the world as she knew it. Its exile on that coast was almost pathetic, and it dwelt on the notes with a feeling of a warmer land.

*“O south be north,  
O sun be shady,  
Until my lady  
Shall issue forth:  
Till her own mouth  
Bid sun uncertain  
To draw his curtain,  
Bid north be south.”*

She stole out of bed and went on tiptoe to the window, where she drew the blind an inch aside. The stranger’s footsteps had ceased to crunch the gravel, and he stood now just beneath her, before the monthly-rose bush. Throughout the winter a blossom or two lingered in that sheltered corner; and he had drawn the nearest down to smell at it.

*“O heart, her rose,  
I cannot ease thee  
Till she release thee  
And bid uncloze.  
So, till day come  
And she be risen,  
Rest, rose, in prison  
And heart be dumb!”*

He snapped the stem and passed on, whistling the air of his ditty, and twirling the rose between finger and thumb.

“Men are all ninnies,” Ruby decided as she dropped the blind; “and I thank the fates that framed me female and priced me high. Heigho! but ’tis a difficult world for women. Either a man thinks you an angel, and then you know him for a fool, or he sees through you and won’t marry you for worlds. If *we* behaved like that, men would fare badly, I reckon. Zeb loved me till the very moment I began to respect him; then he left off. If this one . . . I like his cool way of plucking my roses, though. Zeb would have waited and wanted, till the flower dropped.”

She spent longer than usual over her dressing; so that when she appeared in the parlor the two men were already seated at breakfast. The room still bore traces of last night's frolic. The uncarpeted boards gleamed as the guests' feet had polished them; and upon the very spot where the stranger had danced now stood the breakfast-table, piled with broken meats. This alone of all the pieces of furniture had been restored to its place. As Ruby entered, the stranger broke off an earnest conversation he was holding with the farmer, and stood up to greet her. The rose lay on her plate.

"Who has robbed my rose-bush?" she asked.

"I am guilty," he answered. "I stole it to give it back; and, not being mine, 'twas the harder to part with."

"To my mind," broke in Farmer Tresidder, with his mouth full of ham, "the best part o' the feast be the over-plush. Squab pie, muggetty pie, conger pie, sweet giblet pie—such a whack of pies do try a man, to be sure. Likewise junkets an' heavy cake be a responsibility, for if not eaten quick, they perish. But let it be mine to pass my days with a cheek o' pork like the present instance. Ruby, my dear, the young man here wants to lave us."

"Leave us?" echoed Ruby, pricking her finger deep in the act of pinning the stranger's rose in her bosom.

"You hear, young man. That's the tone o' speech signifyin' 'damn it all!' among women. And so say I, wi' all these vittles cryin' out to be ate."

"These brisk days," began the stranger quietly, "are not to be let slip. I have no wife, no kin, no friends, no fortune—or only the pound or two sewn in my belt. The rest has been lost to me these three days and lies with the *Sentinel*, five fathoms deep in your cove below. It is time for me to begin the world anew."

"But how about that notion o' mine?"

"We beat about the bush, I think," answered the other, pushing back his chair a bit and turning toward Ruby. "My dear young lady, your father has been begging me to stay—chiefly, no doubt, out of good will, but partly also that I may set him in the way to work this newly found wealth of his. I am sorry, but I must refuse."

"Why?" murmured the girl, taking courage to look at him.

"You oblige me to be brutal." His look bent on her. He sat facing the window, and the light, as he leant sidewise, struck into the iris of his eyes and turned them blood-red in their depths. She had seen the same in dogs' eyes, but never before in a man's: and it sent a small shiver through her.

"Briefly," he went on, "I can stay on one condition only—that I marry you."

She rose from her seat and stood, grasping the back rail of the chair.

"Don't be alarmed. I merely state the condition, but of course it's awkward; you're already bound. Your father (who, I must say, honors me with considerable trust, seeing that he knows nothing about me) was good enough to suggest that your affection for this young fish-jowter was a transient fancy—"

"Father—" began the girl, rather for the sake of hearing her own voice than because she knew what to say.

Farmer Tresidder groaned. "Young man, where's your gumption? You'm makin' a mess o't—an' I thought 'ee so very clever."

"Really," pursued the stranger imperturbably, without lifting his eyes from Ruby, "I don't know which to admire most, your father's head or his heart; his head, I think, on the whole. So

much hospitality, paternal solicitude, and commercial prudence was surely never packed into one scheme.”

He broke off for a minute and, still looking at her, began to drum with his finger tips on the cloth. His mouth was pursed up as if silently whistling an air. Ruby could neither move nor speak. The spell upon her was much like that which had lain on young Zeb, the night before, during the hornpipe. She felt weak as a child in the presence of this man, or rather as one recovering from a long illness. He seemed to fill the room, speaking words as if they were living things, as if he were taking the world to bits and re-arranging it before her eyes. She divined the passion behind these words and she longed to get a sight of it, to catch an echo of the voice that had sung beneath her window, an hour before. But when he resumed, it was in the same bloodless and contemptuous tone.

“Your father was very anxious that I should supplant this young jowter—”

“O Lord! I niver said it.”

“Allow me,” said the stranger, without deigning to look round, “to carry on this courtship in my own way. Your father, young woman, desired—it was none of my suggestion—that I should insinuate myself into your good graces. I will not conceal from you my plain opinion of your father’s judgment in these matters. I think him a fool.”

“Name o’ thunder!”

“Farmer, if you interrupt again, I must ask you to get out. Young woman, kindly listen while I make you a formal proposition of marriage. My name, I have told you, is Zebedee Minards. I was born by London docks, but have neither home nor people. I have traveled by land and sea; slept on silk and straw; drunk wine and the salt water; fought, gambled, made love, begged my bread; in all, lost much and found much, in many countries. I am tossed on this coast where I find you, and find also a man in my name having hold over you. I think I want to marry you. Will you give up this other man?”

He pursed up his lips again. With that sense of trifles which is sharpest when the world suddenly becomes too big for a human being, Ruby had a curiosity to know what he was whistling. And this worried her even while, after a minute’s silence, she stammered out:

“I—I gave him up—last night.”

“Very good. Now listen again. In an hour’s time I walk to Porthlooe. There I shall take the van to catch the Plymouth coach. In any case, I must spend till Saturday in Plymouth. It depends on you whether I come back at the end of that time. You are going to cry; keep the tears back till you have answered me. Will you marry me?”

She put out a hand to steady herself, and opened her lips. She felt the room spinning, and wanted to cry out for mercy. But her mouth made no sound.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

As the words came, she sank down in a chair, her head on the table, and burst into a storm of tears.

“The devil’s in it!” shouted her father, and bounced out of the room.

No sooner had the door slammed behind him than the stranger’s face became transfigured. He stood up and laid a hand softly on the girl’s head.

“Ruby!”

She did not look up. Her shoulders were shaken by one great sob after another.

“Ruby!”

He took the two hands gently from her face, and forced her to look at him. His eyes were alight with the most beautiful smile.

“For pity’s sake,” she cried out, “don’t look at me like that. You’ve looked me through and through—you understand me. Don’t lie with your eyes, as you’re lying now.”

“My dear girl, yes—I understand you. But you’re wrong. I lied to get you; I’m not lying now.”

“I think you must be Satan himself.”

The stranger laughed. “*He* needn’t to have taken so much trouble. Smile back at me, Ruby, for I have played a risky stroke to get you, and shall play a risky game for many days yet.”

He balanced himself on the arm of her chair and drew her head toward him,

“Tell me,” he said, speaking low in her ear, “if you doubt I love you. Do you know of any other man who, knowing you exactly as you are, would wish to marry you?”

She shook her head. It was impossible to lie to this man.

“Or of another who would put himself completely into your power, as I am about to do? Listen; there is no lead mine at all on Sheba farm.”

Ruby drew back her face and stared at him.

“I assure you it’s a fact.”

“But the ore you uncovered—”

“Was a hoax. I lied about it.”

“The stuff you melted in this very fire, last night—wasn’t that lead?”

“Of course it was. I stole it myself from the top of the church tower.”

“Why?”

“To gain a footing here.”

“Again, why?”

“For love of you.”

During the silence that followed, the pair looked at each other.

“I am waiting for you to go and tell your father,” said the stranger at length.

Ruby shivered.

“I seem to have grown very old and wise,” she murmured.

He kissed her lightly.

“That’s the natural result of being found out. I’ve felt it myself. Are you going?”

“You know that I cannot.”

“You shall have twenty minutes to choose. At the end of that time I shall pass out at the gate and look up at your window. If the blind remain up, I go to the vicarage to put up our banns before I set off for Plymouth. If it be drawn down, I leave this house forever, taking nothing from it but a suit of old clothes, a few worthless specimens (that I shall turn out of my pockets by the first hedge), and the memory of your face.”

It happened, as he unlatched the gate, twenty minutes later, that the blind remained up. Ruby’s face was not at the window, but he kissed his hand for all that, and smiled, and went his way singing. The air was the very same he had whistled dumbly that morning, the air that Ruby had speculated upon. And the words were:

*“‘Soldier, soldier, will you marry me,  
With the bagginet, fife, and drum?  
‘Oh, no, pretty miss, I cannot marry you,  
For I’ve got no coat to put on.’*

*“So away she ran to the tailor’s shop,  
As fast as she could run,  
And she bought him a coat of the very, very best,  
And the soldier clapped it on.*

*‘Soldier, soldier, will you marry me—’*

His voice died away down the lane.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE “JOLLY PILCHARDS.”

On the following Saturday night (New Year’s eve) an incident worth record occurred in the bar-parlor of the “Jolly Pilchards” at Porthlooe.

You may find the inn to this day on the western side of the Hauen as you go to the Old Quay. A pair of fish-scales faces the entrance, and the jolly pilchards themselves hang over your head, on a signboard that creaks mightily when the wind blows from the south.

The signboard was creaking that night, and a thick drizzle drove in gusts past the door. Behind the red blinds within, the landlady, Prudy Polwarne, stood with her back to the open hearth. Her hands rested on her hips, and the firelight, that covered all the opposite wall and most of the ceiling with her shadow, beat out between her thick ankles in the shape of a fan. She was a widow, with a huge, pale face, and a figure nearly as broad as it was long; and no man thwarted her. Weaknesses, she had none, except an inability to darn her stockings. That the holes at her heels might not be seen, she had a trick of pulling her stockings down under her feet, an inch or two at a time, as they wore out; and when the tops no longer reached to her knee, she gartered—so gossip said—half-way down the leg.

Around her, in as much of the warmth as she spared, sat Old Zeb, Uncle Issy, Jim Lewarne, his brother, and six or seven other notables of the two parishes. They were listening just now, and though the mug of eggy-hot passed from hand to hand as steadily as usual, a certain restrained excitement might have been guessed from the volumes of smoke ascending from their claypipes.

“A man must feel it, boys,” the hostess said, “wi’ a rale four-poster hung wi’ yaller on purpose to suit his wife’s complexion, an’ then to have no wife arter all.”

“Ay,” assented Old Zeb, who puffed in the corner of a settle on her left, with one side of his face illuminated, and the other in deep shadow, “he feels it, I b’lieve. Such a whack o’ clome as he’d a-bought, and a weather-glass wherein the man comes forth as the woman goes innards, an’ a dresser, painted a bright liver color, engaging to the eye.”

“I niver seed a more matterimomial outfit, as you might say,” put in Uncle Issy.

“An’ a warmin’ pan, an’ likewise a lookin’-glass of a high pattern.”

“An’ what do he say?” inquired Calvin Oke, drawing a short pipe from his lips.

“In round numbers, he says nothing, but takes on.”

“A wisht state!”

“Ay, ’tis wisht. Will ’ee be so good as to frisk up the beverage, Prudy, my dear?”

Prudy took up a second large mug that stood warming on the hearthstone, and began to pour the eggy-hot from one vessel to the other until a creamy froth covered the top.

“’T’ other chap’s a handsome chap,” she said, with her eyes on her work.

“Handsome is as handsome does,” squeaked Uncle Issy.

“If you wasn’ such an aged man, Uncle, I’d call ’ee a very tame talker.”

Uncle Issy collapsed.

“I reckon you’ m all afeard o’ this man,” continued Prudy, looking round on the company, “else I’d have heard some mention of a shal-lal afore this.”

The men with one accord drew their pipes out and looked at her.

“I mean it. If Porthlooe was the place it used to be, there’d be tin kettles in plenty to drum en out o’ this nayborhood to the Rogue’s March next time he showed his face here. When’s he comin’ back?”

No one knew.

“The girl’s as bad; but ’twould be punishment enough for her to know her lover was hooted out o’ the parish. Mind you *I’ve* no grudge agen the man. I liked his dare-devil look, the only time I saw en. I’m only sayin’ what I think—that you’ m all afeard.”

“I don’t b’long to the parish,” remarked a Landaviddy man, in the pause that followed, “but ’tis a duty in Lanihale, I’m fain to admit.”

The Lanihale men fired up at this.

“I’ve a tin kettle,” said Calvin Oke, “an’ I’m ready.”

“An’ I for another,” said Elias Sweetland. “An’ I,” “An’ I,” echoed several voices.

“Stiddy there, stiddy, my hearts of oak,” began Old Zeb, reflectively. “A still tongue makes a wise head, and ’twill be time enough to talk o’ shal’lals when the weddin’-day’s fixed. Now I’ve a better notion. It will not be gainsaid by any of ’ee that I’ve the power o’ logic in a high degree—hey?”

“Trew, O king!”

“Surely, surely.”

“The rarity that you be, crowder! Sorely we shall miss ’ee when you’ in gone.”

“Very well, then,” Old Zeb announced. “I’m goin’ to be logical wi’ that chap. The very next time I see en, I’m goin’ to step up to en an’ say, as betwixt man an’ man, ‘Look ’ee here,’ I’ll say, ‘I’ve a lawful son. You’ve a-took his name, an’ you’ve a-stepped into his shoes, an’ therefore I’ve a right to spake’ ” (he puffed at his churchwarden), “ ‘to spake to ’ee’ ” (another puff) “ ‘like a father.’ ” Here followed several puffs in quick succession.

The pipe had gone out. So, still holding the attention of the room, he reached out a hand toward the tongs. Prudy, anticipating his necessity, caught them up, dived them into the blaze, and drawing out a blazing end of stick, held it over the pipe while he sucked away.

During this pause a heavy step was heard in the passage. The door was pushed open, and a tall man, in dripping cloak and muddy boots, stalked into the room.

It was the man they had been discussing.

“A dirty night, friends, and a cold rike from Plymouth.” He shook the water out of his hat over the sanded floor. “I’ll take a pull at something hot, if you please.”

Everyone looked at him. Prudy, forgetting what she was about, waved the hot brand to and fro under Old Zeb’s nose, stinging his eyes with smoke. Between confusion and suffocation, his face was a study.

“You seem astonished, all of you. May I ask why?”

“To tell ’ee the truth, young man,” said Prudy, “’twas a case o’ ‘talk of the devil an’ you’ll see his horns.’”

“Indeed. You were speaking good of me, I hope.”

“Which o’ your ears is burning?”

“Both.”

“Then it shu’d be the left ear only. Old Zeb, here—”

“Hush ’ee now, Prudy!” implored the crowder.

“Old Zeb here,” continued Prudy, relentlessly, “was only a-sayin’, as you walked in, that he’d read you the Riot Act afore you, was many days older. He’s mighty fierce wi’ your goin’s on, I ’sure ’ee.”

“Is that so, Mr. Minards?”

Mr. Minards had, it is probable, never felt so uncomfortable in all his born days, and the experience of standing between two fires was new to him. He looked from the stranger around upon the company and was met on all hands by the same expectant stare.

“Well, you see,” he began, and looked around again. The faces were inexorable. “I declare, friends, the pore chap is drippin’ wet. Sick a tiresome v’yage, too, as it must ha’ been from Plymouth, i’ this weather! I dunno how we came to forget to invite en nigher the hearth. Well, as I was a-sayin’—”

He stopped to search for his hat beneath the settle. Producing a large crimson handkerchief from the crown, he mopped his brow slowly.

“The cur’ous part o’t, naybors, is the sweatiness that comes over a man, this close weather.”

“I’m waiting for your answer,” put in the stranger, knitting his brows.

“Surely, surely, that’s the very thing I was comin’ to. The answer, as you may say, is this—but step a bit nigher, for there’s lashins o’ room—the answer, as far as that goes, is what I make to you, sayin’—that if you wasn’ so passin’ wet, may be I’d blurt out what I had i’ my mind. But, as things go, ’twould seem like takin’ an advantage.”

“Not at all.”

“’Tis very kind o’ you to say so, to be sure.” Old Zeb picked up his pipe again. “An’ now, friends, that this little bit of onpleasantness have a-blown over, doin’ ekal credit to both parties this New Year’s-eve, after the native British fashion o’ fair-play (as why shu’d it not?) I agree we be conformable to the pleasant season an’ let harmony prevail—”

“Why, man,” interrupted Prudy, “you niver gave no answer at all. ‘Far as I could see, you’ve done naught but fidget like an angletwitch and look fifty ways for Sunday.”

“’Twas the roundaboutest, dodge-my-eyedest, hole-an’-cornerdest bit of a chap’s mind as iver I heerd given,” pronounced the traitorous Oke.

“Oke—Oke,” Old Zeb exclaimed, “all you know ’pon the fiddle I taught ’ee!”

Said Prudy—“That’s like what the chap said when the donkey kicked en. ‘Taint the stummick that I do vahly,’ he said, ’tis the cussed ongratefulness o’ the jackass.’ “

“I’m still waiting,” repeated the stranger.

“Well, then”—Old Zeb cast a rancorous look around—“I’ll tell ’ee, since you’m so set ’pon hearin’. Afore you came in, the good folks here present was for drummin’ you out o’ the country. ‘Shockin’ behavioir!’ ‘Aw, very shockin’ indeed!’ was the words I heerd flyin’ about, an’ ‘Who’ll make en sensible o’t?’ an’ ‘We’ll give en what-for.’ ‘A silent tongue makes a wise head,’ said I, an’ o’ this I call Uncles Issy here to witness.”

Uncle Issy corroborated. “You was proverbial, crowder, I can duly vow, an’ to that effect, unless my mem’ry misgives me.”

“So in a mollif yin’ manner, I says, ‘What’s the pore chap done to be treated so bad?’ I says. Says I, ‘better lave me use logic wi’ en’—eh, Uncle Issy?”

“Logic was the word.”

The stranger turned round upon the company, who with one accord began to look extremely foolish as Old Zeb so adroitly turned the tables.

“Is this true?” he asked.

“’Tis the truth, I must admit,” volunteered Uncle Issy, who had not been asked, but was fluttered with delight at having stuck to the right side against appearances.

“I think,” said the stranger, deliberately, “it is as well that you and I, my friends, should understand each other. The turn of events has made it likely that I shall pass my days in this neighborhood, and I wish to clear up all possible misconceptions at the start. In the first place, I am going to marry Miss Ruby Tresidder. Our banns will be asked in church to-morrow; but let us have a rehearsal. Can any man here show cause or just impediment why this marriage should not take place?”

“You’d better ask that o’ Young Zeb, mister,” said Prudy.

“Why?”

“You owe your life to’n, I hear.”

“When next you see him you can put two questions. Ask him in the first place if he saved it at my request.”

“Tut-tut. A man likes to live, whether he axes for it or no,” grunted Elias Sweetland.

“And what the devil do you know about it?” demanded the stranger.

“I reckon I know what a man’s like.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Wait a while, my friend. In the second place,” he went on, returning to Prudy, “ask young Zebedee Minards, if he wants my life back, to come and fetch it. And now attend all. Do you see these?”

He threw back his cloak, and, diving a hand into his coat-pocket, produced a couple of pistols. The butts were rich with brass-work, and the barrels shone as he held them out in the firelight.

“You needn’t dodge your heads about so gingerly. I’m only about to give you an exhibition. How many tall candlesticks have you in the house besides the pair here?” he inquired of Prudy.

“Dree pair.”

“Put candles in the other two pairs and set them on the chimney-shelf.”

“Why?”

“Do as I tell you.”

“Now here’s summat *like a man t,*’ said

Prudy, and went out obediently to fetch them.

Until she returned there was dead silence in the bar-parlor. The men puffed uneasily at their pipes, not one of which was alight, and avoided the stranger’s eye, which rested on each in turn with a sardonic humor.

Prudy lit the candles, one from the other, and after snuffing them with her fingers that they might burn steadily, arranged them in a row on the mantel-shelf. Now above this shelf the chimney-piece was paneled to the height of some two and a half feet, and along the panel certain ballads that Prudy had purchased of the Sherborne messenger were stuck in a row with pins.

“Better take those ballads down, if you value them,” the stranger remarked.

She turned round inquiringly.

“I’m going to shoot.”

“Sakes alive—an’ my panel, an’ my best brass candlesticks!”

“Take them down.”

She gave in, and unpinned the ballads.

“Now stand aside.”

He stepped back to the other side of the room, and set his back to the door.

“Don’t move,” he said to Calvin Oke, whose chair stood immediately under the line of fire, “your head is not the least in the way. And don’t turn it either, but keep your eye on the candle to the right.”

This was spoken in the friendliest manner, but it hardly reassured Oke, who would have preferred to keep his eye on the deadly weapon now being lifted behind his back. Nevertheless he did not disobey, but sat still, with his eyes fixed on the mantel-shelf, and only his shoulders twitching to betray his discomposure.

*Bang!*

The room was suddenly full of sound, then of smoke and the reek of gunpowder. As the noise broke on their ears one of the candles went out quietly. The candlestick did not stir, but a bullet was embedded in the panel behind. Calvin Oke felt his scalp nervously.

“One,” counted the stranger. He walked quietly to the table, set down his smoking pistol, and took up the other, looking round at the same time on the white faces that stared on him behind the thick curls of smoke. Stepping back to his former position, he waited while they could count twenty, lifted the second pistol high, brought it smartly down to the aim, and fired again.

The second candle went out, and a second bullet buried itself in Prudy’s panel.

So he served the six, one after another, without a miss. Twice he reloaded both pistols slowly, and while he did so not a word was spoken. Indeed, the only sound to be heard came from Uncle Issy, who, being a trifle asthmatical with age, felt some inconvenience from the smoke in his throat. By the time the last shot was fired the company could hardly see one another. Prudy, two of whose dishes had been shaken off the dresser, had tumbled upon a settle, and sat there, rocking herself to and fro, with her apron over her head.

The sound of firing had reached the neighboring houses, and by this time the passage was full of men and women, agog for a tragedy. The door burst open. Through the dense atmosphere the stranger decried a crowd of faces in the passage. He was the first to speak.

“Good folk, you alarm yourselves without cause. I have merely been pointing an argument that I and my friends happen to be holding here.”

Then he turned to Calvin Oke, who lay in his chair like a limp sack, slowly recovering from his emotions at hearing the bullets whiz over his head.

“When I assure you that I carry these weapons always about me, you will hardly need to be warned against interfering with me again. The first man that meddles, I’ll shoot like a rabbit—by the Lord Harry, I will! You hear?”

He slipped the pistols into his pocket, pulled out two crown pieces, and tossed them to Prudy.

“That’ll pay for the damage, I dare say.”

So, turning on his heel, he marched out, leaving them in the firelight. The crowd in the passage fell back to right and left, and in a moment more he had disappeared into the black drizzle outside.

But the tradition of his feat survives, and the six holes in Prudy’s panel still bear witness to its truth.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### YOUNG ZEB SELLS HIS SOUL.

These things were reported to Young Zeb as he in his cottage, up the coombe, and nursed his pain. He was a simple youth, and took life in being very slow to catch fire, but burning consumedly when once ignited. Also he was sincere as the day, and had been treacherously used. So he raged at heart, and (for pride made him shun the public eye) he sat at home and raged—the worst possible cure for love, which goes out only by open-air treatment. From time to time his father, Uncle Issy, and Elias Sweetland, sat around him and administered comfort after the manner of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

“Your cheeks be pale, my son—lily-white, my son. Rise, my son, an’ eat, as the wise king recommended, sayin’, ‘Stay me wi’ flagons, comfort me wi’ yapples, for I be sick o’ love.’ A wise word that.”

“Shall a man be poured out like water,” inquired Uncle Issy, “an’ turn from his vittles, an’ pass his prime i’ blowin’ his nose, an’ all for a woman?”

“I wasn’ blowin’ my nose,” objected Zeb, shortly.

“Well, in black an’ white you wasn’, but ye gave me that idee.”

Young Zeb stared out of the window. Far down the coombe a slice of blue sea closed the prospect, and the tan sails of a small higger were visible there, rounding the point to the westward. He watched her moodily until she passed out of sight, and turned to his father.

“To-morrow, did ’ee say?”

“Iss, to-morrow, at eleven i’ the forenoon. Jim Lewarne brought me word.”

“Terrible times they be for Jim, I reckon,” said Elias Sweetland. “All yestiddy he was goin’ back’ards an’ forrards like a lost dog in a fair, movin’ his chattels. There’s a hole in the roof of that new cottage of his that a man may put his Sunday hat dro’; and as for his old woman, she’ll do nought but sit ’pon the lime-ash floor wi’ her tout-serve over her head, an’ call en ivery name but what he was chris’ened.”

“Nothin’ but neck-an’-crop would do for Tresidder, I’m told,” said Old Zeb. “ ‘I’ve a-sarved ’ee faithful,’ said Jim, ‘an’ now you turns me out wi’ a week’s warnin’.’ ‘You’ve a-crossed my will,’ says Tresidder, ‘an’ I’ve engaged a more pushin’ hind in your place.’ ’Tis a new fashion o’ speech wi’ Tresidder nowadays.”

“Ay, modern words be drivin’ out the old forms. But ’twas only to get Jim’s cottage for that strong-will’d supplantin’ furriner, because Ruby said ’twas low manners for bride an’ groom to go to church from the same house. So no sooner was the Lawarnes out than he was in, like shufflin’ cards, wi’ his marriage garment an’ his brush an’ comb in a hand-bag. Tresidder sent down a mattress for en, an’ he slept there last night.”

“Eh, but that’s a trifle for a campaigner.”

“Let this be a warnin’ to ’ee, my son, niver to save no more lives from drownin’.”

“I won’t,” promised Young Zeb.

“We’ve found ’ee a great missment,” Elias observed to him, after a pause. “The Psa’ms, these three Sundays, bain’t what they was for lack o’ your enlivenin’ flute—I can’t say they be. An’ to hear your very own name called forth in the banns wi’ Ruby’s, an’ you wi’out part nor lot therein—”

“Elias, you mean it well, no doubt; but I’d take it kindly if you sheered off.”

“’Twas a wisht Psa’m too,” went on Elias, “las’ Sunday mornin’; an’ I cudn’ help my thoughts dwellin’ ’pon the dismal as I blowed, nor countin’ how that by this time tomorrow—”

But Young Zeb had caught up his cap and rushed from the cottage.

He took, not the highway to Porthlooe, but a footpath that slanted up the western slope of the coombe, over the brow of the hill, and led in time to the coast and a broader path above the cliffs. The air was warm, and he climbed in such hurry that the sweat soon began to drop from his forehead. By the time he reached the cliffs he was forced to pull a handkerchief out and mop himself; but without a pause, he took the turning westward toward Troy harbor, and tramped along sturdily. For his mind was made up.

Ship’s-chandler Webber, of Troy, was fitting out a brand-new privateer, he had heard, and she was to sail that very week. He would go and offer himself as a seaman, and if Webber made any bones about it, he would engage to put a part of his legacy into the adventure. In fact, he was ready for anything that would take him out of Porthlooe. To live there and run the risk of meeting Ruby on the other man’s arm was more than flesh and blood could stand. So he went along with his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes fastened straight ahead, his heart smoking, and the sweat stinging his eyelids. And as he went he cursed the day of his birth.

From Porthlooe to Troy Ferry is a good six miles by the cliffs, and when he had accomplished about half the distance, he was hailed by name.

Between the path at this point and the cliff’s edge lay a small patch cleared for potatoes, and here an oldish man was leaning on his shovel and looking up at Zeb.

“Good-mornin’, my son!”

“Mornin’, hollibubber!”

The old man had once worked inland at St. Teath slate quarries, and made his living as a “hollibubber,” or one who carts away the refuse slates. On returning to his native parish he had brought back and retained the name of his profession, the parish register alone preserving his true name of Matthew Spry. He was a fervent Methodist—a circuit preacher, in fact—and was held in some admiration by “the people” for his lustiness in prayer-meeting. A certain intensity in his large gray eyes gave character to a face that was otherwise quite insignificant. You could see he was a good man.

“Did ’ee see that dainty frigate go cruisin’ by, two hour ago?”

“Then ye missed a sweet, pretty sight. Thirty guns, I do b’lieve, an’ all sail set. I cou’ d a’ most count her guns, she stood so close.”

“Hey?”

“She tacked just here an’ went round close under Bradden Point; so she’s for Troy, that’s certain. Be you bound that way, too?”

“Iss, I’ll see her, if she’s there.”

“Best not go too close, my son; for I know the looks o’ those customers. By all accounts you’m a man of too much substance to risk yourself near a press-gang.”

Young Zeb gazed over the old man’s head at the horizon line, and answered, as if reading the sentence there, “I might fare worse, hollibubber.”

The hollibubber seemed, for a second, about to speak; for, of course, he knew Zeb’s trouble. But after a while he took his shovel out of the ground slowly.

“Ay, ye might,” he said; “pray the Lord ye don’t.”

Zeb went on faster than ever. He passed Bradden Point and Widdy Cove at the rate of five miles an hour, or thereabouts; then he turned aside over a stile, and crossed a couple of

meadows; and after these he was on the highroad, on the very top of the hill overlooking Troy Harbor.

He gazed down. The frigate was there, as the hollibubber had guessed, anchored at the harbor's mouth. Two men in a small boat were pulling from her to the farther shore. A thin haze of blue smoke lay over the town at his feet, and the noise of mallets in the shipbuilding yards came across to him through the clear afternoon. Zeb hardly noticed all this, for his mind was busy with a problem. He halted by a milestone on the brow of the hill, to consider.

And then suddenly he sat down on the stone and shivered. The sweat was still trickling down his face and down his back; but it had turned cold as ice. A new idea had taken him, an idea of which, at first, he felt fairly afraid. He passed a hand over his eyes, and looked down again at the frigate. But he stared at her stupidly, and his mind was busy with another picture.

It occurred to him that he must go on, if he meant to arrange with Webber that afternoon.

So he got up from the stone and went down the steep hill toward the ferry, stumbling over the rough stones in the road and hardly looking at his steps, but moving now rapidly, now slowly, like a drunken man.

The street that led down to the ferry dated back to an age before carts had superseded pack-horses, and the makers had cut it in stairs and paved it with cobbles. It plunged so steeply, and the houses on either side wedged it in so tightly, that to look down from the top was like, peering into a well. A patch of blue water shone at the foot, framing a small dark square—the signboard of the “Four Lords” Inn. Just now there were two or three men gathered under the signboard.

As Young Zeb drew near he saw that they wore pig-tails and round shiny hats: and, as he noticed this, his face, which had been pale for the last five minutes, grew ashen-white. He halted for a moment, and then went on again, meaning to pass the signboard and wait on the quay for the ferry.

There were half a dozen sailors in front of the “Four Lords.” Three sat on a bench beside the door, and three more, with mugs of beer in their hands, were skylarking in the middle of the roadway.

“Hi!” called out one of those on the bench, as Zeb passed. And Zeb turned round and came to a halt again.

“What is it?”

“Where’re ye bound, mate?”

“For the ferry.”

“Then stop an’ drink, for the boat left two minutes since an’ won’t be back for another twenty.”

Zeb hung on his heel for a couple of seconds. The sailor held out his mug with the friendliest air, his head thrown back and the left corner of his mouth screwed up into a smile.

“Thank ’ee,” said Zeb, “I will; an’ may the Lord judge ’atween us.”

“There’s many a way o’ takin’ a drink,” the sailor said, staring at him; “but split me if yours aint the rummiest *I’ve* run across.”

“Oh, man, man,” Zeb answered, “I wasn’ thminkin’ o’ *you!*”

\* \* \*

Back by the cliff’s edge the hollibubber had finished his day’s work and was shouldering his shovel to start for home, when he spied a dark figure coming eastward along the track; and,

putting up a hand to ward off the level rays of the sun, saw that it was the young man who had passed him at noonday. So he set down the shovel again, and waited.

Young Zeb came along with his head down. When he noticed the hollibubber standing in the path he started like a man caught in a theft.

“My son, ye’ve come to lift a weight off my heart. God forgi’e me that, i’ my shyness, I let ’ee go wi’out a word for your trouble.”

“All the country seems to know my affairs,” Zeb answered, with a scowl.

The hollibubber’s gray eyes rested on him tenderly. He was desperately shy, as he had confessed: but compassion overcame his shyness.

“Surely,” said he, “all we be children o’ one Father: an’ surely we may know each other’s burdens; else not knowin’, how shall we bear ’em?”

“You’m too late, hollibubber.”

Zeb stood still, looking out over the purple sea. The old man touched his arm gently.

“How so?”

“I’ve a-sold my soul to hell.”

“I don’t care. You’m alive an’ standin’ here, an’ I can save ’ee.”

“Can ’ee so?” Zeb asked ironically.

“Man, I feel sure o’ it.” His ugly, earnest face became almost grand in the flame of the sunset. “Turn aside, here, an’ kneel down. I will wrestle wi’ the Lord for thee till comfort comes, if it take the long night.”

“You’m a strange chap. Can such things happen i’ these days?”

“Kneel and try.”

“No, no, no,” Zeb flung out his hands. “It’s too late, I tell ’ee. No man’s words will I hear but the words of Lamech: ‘I ha’ slain a man to my wounding, an’ a young man to my hurt.’ Let me go—’tis too late. Let me go, I say—”

As the hollibubber still clung to his arm, he gave a push and broke loose. The old man tumbled beside the path, with his head against the potato fence. Zeb, with a curse, took to his heels and ran; nor for a hundred yards did he glance behind.

When at last he flung a look over his shoulder, the hollibubber had picked himself up and was kneeling in the pathway. His hands were clasped and lifted.

“Too late!” shouted Zeb again, and dashed on without a second look.

## CHAPTER IX.

### YOUNG ZEB WINS HIS SOUL BACK.

At half-past nine, next morning, the stranger sat in the front room of the cottage vacated by the Lewarnes. On a rough table, pushed into a corner, lay the remains of his breakfast. A plum-colored coat, with silver buttons, hung over the back of a chair by his side, and a waistcoat and silver-laced hat to match rested on the seat. For the wedding was to take place in an hour and a half.

He sat in frilled shirt, knee-breeches and stockings, and the sunlight streamed in upon his dark head as he stooped to put on a shoe. The sound of his whistling filled the room, and the tune was, “Soldier, soldier, will you marry me?”

His foot was thrust into the first shoe, and his forefinger inserted at the heel, shoe-horn fashion, to slip it on, when the noise of light wheels sounded on the road outside, and stopped aside the

gate. Looking up, he saw through the window the head and shoulders of Young Zeb's gray mare, and broke off his whistling sharply.

*Rat-a-tat!*

"Come in!" he called, and smiled softly to himself.

The door was pushed open, and Young Zeb stood on the threshold, looking down on the stranger, who wheeled round quietly to face him. Zeb's clothes were disordered, and looked as if he had spent the night in them; his face was yellow and drawn, dark semicircles underneath the eyes; and he put a hand up against the door-post for support.

"To what do I owe this honor?" asked the stranger, gazing back at him.

Zeb pulled out a great turnip-watch from his fob, and said:

"You'm dressin'?"

"Ay, for the wedding."

"Then look sharp. You've got a bare five-an'-twenty minnits."

"Excuse me; I'm not to be married till eleven."

"Iss, iss, but *they're* comin' at ten, sharp."

"And who in the world may 'they' be?"

"The press-gang."

The stranger sprang up to his feet, and seemed for a moment about to fly at Zeb's throat.

"You treacherous hound!"

"Stand off," said Zeb wearily, without taking his hand from the door-post. "I reckon it don't matter what I may be, or may not be, so long as you'm dressed i' ten minnits."

The other dropped his hands, with a short laugh.

"I beg your pardon. For aught I know you may have nothing to do with this infernal plot except to warn me against it."

"Don't make any mistake. 'Twas I that set the press-gang upon 'ee," answered Zeb, in the same dull tones.

There was silence between them for half a minute, and then the stranger spoke, as if to himself.

"My God! Love has made this oaf a man!" He stood for a while, sucking at his under-lip, and regarding Zeb gloomily. "May I ask why you have deliberately blown up this pretty mine at the eleventh hour?"

"I cudn' do it," Zeb groaned; "Lord knows 'twas not for love of you, but I cudn'."

"Upon my word, you fascinate me. People say that evil is easily learnt; but that's great nonsense. The footsteps of the average beginner are equally weak in both pursuits. Would you mind telling me why you chose this particular form of treachery, in preference (let us say) to poison or shooting from behind a hedge? Was it simply because you risked less? Pardon the question, but I have a particular reason for knowing."

"We're wastin' time," said Zeb, pulling out his watch again.

"It's extraordinary how a fool will stumble on good luck. Why, sir, but for one little accident, the existence of which you could not possibly have known, I might easily have waited for the press-gang, stated the case to them, and had you lugged off to sea in my place. Has it occurred to you, in the course of your negotiations, that the wicked occasionally stumble into pits of their own digging? You, who take part in the psalm-singing every Sunday, might surely have remembered this. As it is, I suppose I must hurry on my clothes, and get to church by some roundabout way."

"I'm afeard you can't, without my help."

"Indeed! Why?"

“Cause the gang is posted all round ’ee. I met the lot half an hour back, an’ promised to call ‘pon you and bring word you was here.”

“Come, come; I retract my sneers. You begin to excite my admiration. I shall undoubtedly shoot you before I’m taken, but it shall be your comfort to die amid expressions of esteem.”

“You’m mistaken. I came to save ’ee, if you’ll be quick.”

“How?”

“I’ve a load of ore-weed outside, in the cart. By the lie o’ the cottage none can spy ye while you slip underneath it; but I’ll fetch a glance round, to make sure. Underneath it you’ll be safe, and I’ll drive ’ee past the sailors, and send ’em on here to search.”

“You develop apace. But perhaps you’ll admit a flaw in your scheme. What on earth induced you to imagine I should trust you?”

“Man, I reckoned all that. My word’s naught. But ‘tis your one chance—and I would kneel to ’ee, if by kneehin’ I could persuade ’ee. We’ll fight it out after; bring your pistols. Only come!”

The stranger shipped on his other shoe, then his waistcoat and jacket, whistling softly. Then he stepped to the chimney-piece, took down his pistols, and stowed them in his coat-pockets.

“I’m quite ready.”

Zeb heaved a great sigh like a sob; but only said:

“Wait a second, while I see that the coast’s clear.”

In less than three minutes the stranger was packed under the evil-smelling weed, drawing breath with difficulty, and listening, when the jolting allowed, to Zeb’s voice, as he encouraged the mare. Jowters’ carts travel fast as a rule, for their load perishes soon, and the distance from the coast to the market is often considerable. In this case Jessamy went at a round gallop, the loose stones flying from under her hoofs. Now and then one struck up against the bottom of the cart. It was hardly pleasant to be rattled at this rate, Heaven knew whither. But the stranger had chosen his course, and was not the man to change his mind.

After about five minutes of this the cart was pulled up with a scramble, and he heard a voice call out, as it seemed, from the hedge:

“Well?”

“Right you are,” answered Young Zeb; “He’s in the front room, puliln’ on his boots. You’d best look slippy.”

“Where’s the coin?”

“There!” The stranger heard the click of money, as of a purse being caught. “You’ll find it all right.”

“H’m; best let me count it, though. One—two—three—four. I feels, it my dooty to tell ye, young man, that it be a dirty trick. If this didn’t chime in wi my good will toward his Majesty’s service, be dauged if I’d touch the job with a pair o’ tongs!”

“Ah—but I reckon you’ll do’t, all the same, for t’ other half that’s to come when you’ve got en safe an’ sound. Dirty hands make clean money.”

“Well, well; ye’ve been dirtily sarved. I’ll see ’ee this arternoon at the ‘Four Lords.’ We’ve orders to sail at five, sharp; so there’s no time to waste.”

“Then I won’t detain ’ee. Clk, Jessamy!”

The jolting began again, more furiously than ever, as the stranger drew a long breath. He waited till he judged they must be out of sight, and then began to stir beneath his load of weed.

“Keep quiet,” said Zeb; “you shall get out as soon as we’re up the hill.”

The cart began to move more slowly, and tilted back with a slant that sent the stranger’s heels against the tail-board. Zeb jumped down and trudged at the side. The hill was long, and steep

from foot to brow; and when at length the slope lessened, the wheels turned off at a sharp angle and began to roll softly over turf.

The weight and smell of the weed was beginning to suffocate the man beneath it, when Zeb called out “Woa-a!” and the mare stopped.

“Now you can come out.”

The other rose on his knees, shook some of his burden off, and blinked in the strong sunlight.

The cart stood on the fringe of a desolate tract of downs, high above the coast. Over the hedge to the right appeared a long, narrow strip of sea. On the three remaining sides nothing was visible but undulating stretches of brown turf, except where, to northward, the summits of two hills in the heart of the county just topped the rising ground that hid twenty intervening miles of broken plain.

“We can leave the mare to crop. There’s a hollow, not thirty yards off, that’ll do for us.”

Zeb led the way to the spot. It was indeed the fosse of a half-obliterated Roman camp, and ran at varying depth around a cluster of grassy mounds, the most salient of which—time pratorian—still served as a landmark for the Porthlooe fishing boats. But down in the fosse the pair were secure from all eyes. Not a word was spoken until they stood together at the bottom.

Here Zeb pulled out his watch once more.

“We’d best be sharp,” he said; “you must start in twenty minnits to get to the church in time.”

“It would be interesting to know what you propose doing.” The stranger sat down on the slope, picked a strip of sea-weed off his breeches, and looked up with a smile.

“I reckon you’ll think it odd.”

“Of that I haven’t a doubt.”

“Well, you’ve a pair o’ pistols i’ your pockets, an’ they’re loaded, no doubt.”

“They are.”

“I’d a notion of askin’ ’ee, as a favor, to give and take a shot with me,”

The stranger paused a minute before giving his answer.

“Can you fire a pistol?”

“I’ve let off a blunderbust, afore now, an’ I suppose ’tis the same trick.”

“And has it struck you that your body may be hard to dispose of? Or that, if found, it may cause me some inconvenience?”

“There’s a quag on t’other side o’ the Castle<sup>1</sup> here. I haint time to go round an’ point it out; but ’tis to be known by bein’ greener than the rest o’ the turf. What’s thrown in there niver comes up, an’ no man can dig for it. The folks’ll give the press-gang the credit when I’m missin’—”

“You forget the mare and cart.”

“Lead her back to the road, face to home, an’ fetch her a cut across th’ ears. She always bolts if you touch her ears.”

“And you really wish to die?”

“Oh, my God!” Zeb broke out; “would I be standin’ here if I didn’t?”

The stranger rose to his feet, and drew out his pistols slowly.

“It’s a thousand pities,” he said; “for I never saw a man develop character so fast.”

He cocked the triggers, and handed the pistols to Zeb, to take his choice.

“Stand where you are, while I step out fifteen paces.” He walked slowly along the fosse, and, at the end of that distance, faced about. “Shall I give the word?”

Zeb nodded, watching him sullenly.

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<sup>1</sup> Camp.

“Very well. I shall count three slowly, and after that we can fire as we please. Are you ready?—stand a bit sideways. Your chest is a pretty broad target—that’s right; I’m going to count. *One—two—three—*”

The word was hardly spoken before one of the pistols rang out. It was Zeb’s; and Heaven knows whither his bullet flew. The smoke cleared away in a blue, filmy streak, and revealed his enemy standing where he stood before, with his pistol up, and a quiet smile on his face.

Still holding the pistol up, the stranger now advanced deliberately until he came to a halt about two paces from Zeb, who, with white face and set jaw, waited for the end. The eyes of the two men met, and neither flinched.

“Strip,” commanded the stranger. “Strip—take off that jersey.”

“Why not kill me without ado? Man, isn’t this cruel?”

“Strip! I say.”

Zeb stared at him for half a minute, like a man in a trance, and began to pull the jersey off.

“Now your shirt. Strip—till you are naked as a babe.”

Zeb obeyed. The other laid his pistol down on the turf, and also proceeded to undress, until the two men stood face to face, stark naked.

“We were thus, or nearly thus, a month ago, when you gave me my life. Does it strike you that, barring our faces, we might be twin brothers? Now, get into my clothes, and toss me over your own!”

“What’s the meanin’ o’t?” stammered Zeb, hoarsely.

“I am about to cry quits with you. Hurry; for the bride must be at the church by this.”

“What’s the meanin’ o’t?” Zeb repeated.

“Why, that you shall marry the girl. Steady—don’t tremble. The banns are up in your name, and you shall walk into church and the woman shall be married to Zebedee Minards. Stop, don’t say a word, or I’ll repent and blow your brains out. You want to know who I am, and what’s to become of me. Suppose I’m the Devil; suppose I’m your twin soul, and in exchange for my life have given you the half of manhood that you lacked and I possessed; suppose I’m just a deserter from his Majesty’s fleet, a poor devil of a marine, with gifts above his station, who ran away and took to privateering, and was wrecked at your doors. Suppose that I am really Zebedee Minards; or suppose that I heard your name spoken in Sheba kitchen, and took a fancy to wear it myself. Suppose that I shall vanish to-day in a smell of brimstone; or that I shall leave in irons in the hold of the frigate now in Troy harbor. What’s her name?”

He was dressed by this time in Zeb’s old clothes.

“The *Recruit*.”

“Whither bound?”

“Back to Plymouth to-night, an then to the West Indies wi’ a convoy.”

“Hurry, then; don’t fumble, or Ruby’ll tired of waiting. You’ll find a pencil and a scrap of paper in my breast. Hand them over.”

Zeb did so, and the stranger, seating himself again on the slope, tore the paper in half, and began to scribble a few lines on each piece. By the time he had finished and folded them up, Zeb stood before him, dressed in the plum-colored suit.

“Ay,” said the stranger, looking him up and down, and sucking the pencil contemplatively; “she’ll marry you out of hand.”

“I doubt it.”

“These notes will make sure. Give one to the farmer, and one to Ruby, as they stand by the chancel rails. But mainly it rests with you. Take no denial, Say you’ve come to make her your

wife, and won't leave the church till you've done it. She's still the woman, as when she threw you over. Ah, sir, we men change our natures; but woman is always Eve. I suppose you know a short cut to the church? Very well. I shall take your cart and mare, and drive to meet the press-gang, who won't be in the sweetest of tempers just now. Come, what are you waiting for? You're ten minutes late as it is, and you can't be married after noon."

"Sir," said Zeb, with a white face; "it's a liberty, but will 'ee let me shake your hand?"

"I'll be cursed if I do. But I'll wish you good luck and a hard heart, and maybe ye'll thank me some day."

So Zeb, with a sob, turned and ran from him out of the fosse and toward a gap in the hedge, where lay a short cut through the fields. In the gap he turned and looked back. The stranger stood on the lip of the fosse, and waved a hand to him to hurry.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE THIRD SHIP.

We return to Ruan church, whence this history started. The parson was there in his surplice, by the altar; the bride was there in her white frock, by the chancel-rails; her father, by her side, was looking at his watch; and the parishioners thronged the nave, shuffling their feet and loudly speculating. For the bridegroom had not appeared.

Ruby's face was white as her frock. Parson Babbage kept picking up the heavy Prayer-book, opening it, and laying it down nervously. Occasionally, as one of the congregation scraped an impatient foot, a metallic sound made itself heard, and the buzz of conversation would sink for a moment, as if by magic.

For beneath the seats, and behind the women's gowns, the whole pavement of the church was covered with a fairly representative collection of cast-off kitchen utensils—old kettles, broken cake-tins, frying-pans, saucepans—all calculated to emit dismal sounds under percussion. Scattered among these were ox-bells, rook-rattles, a fog-horn or two, and a tin trumpet from Liskeard fair. Explanation is simple: the outraged feelings of the parish were to be avenged by a shal-lal as bride and bridegroom left the church. Ruby knew nothing of the storm brewing for her, but Mary Jane, whose ears had been twice boxed that morning, had heard a whisper of it on her way down to the church, and was confirmed in her fears by observing the few members of the congregation who entered after her. Men and women alike suffered from an unwonted corpulence and tightness of raiment that morning, and each and all seemed to have cast the affliction off as they arose from their knees. It was too late to interfere, so she sat still and trembled.

Still the bridegroom did not come.

"A more onpresidented feat I don't recall," remarked Uncle Issy to a group that stood at west end under the gallery, "not since 'Melia Spry's buryin', when the devil, i' the shape of a black pig, followed us all the way to the porch."

"That was a brave while ago, Uncle."

"Iss, iss; but I mind to this hour how we bearers perspired—an' she such a light-weight corpse. But plague seize my old emotions!—we' m come to marry, not to bury."

"By the look o' t 'tis neither marry nor bury, Nim nor Doll," observed Old Zeb, who had sacrificed his paternal feelings and come to church in order to keep abreast with the age; "'tis more like Boscastle Fair, begin at twelve o'clock an' end at noon. Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?"

“’Tis possible Young Zeb an’ he have a-met ’pon the road hither,” hazarded Calvin Oke, by a wonderful imaginative effort; “an’ ’tis possible that feelings have broke loose an’ one o’ the twain be sweltherin’ in his own bloodshed, or vicey-versey.”

“I heard tell of a man once,” said Uncle Issy, “that committed murder upon another for love; but, save my life, I can’t think ’pon his name, nor where ‘t befell.”

“What an old storehouse ’tis!” ejaculated Elias Sweetland, bending a contemplative gaze on Uncle Issy.

“Mark her pale face, naybors,” put in a woman; “an’ Tresidder, he looks like a man that’s neither got nor lost.”

“Trew, trew.”

“Quarter past the hour, I make it,” said Old Zeb, pulling out his timepiece.

Still the bridegroom tarried.

Higher up the church, in the front pew but one, Modesty Prowse said aloud to Sarah Ann Nanjulian:

“If he doesn’ look sharp we’ll be married before she after all.”

Ruby heard the sneer, and answered it with a look of concentrated spite. Probably she would have risked her dignity to retort, had not Parson Babbage advanced down the chancel at this juncture.

“Has anyone seen the bridegroom to-day?” he inquired of Tresidder. “Or will you send someone to hurry him?”

“Be danged if I know,” the farmer began testily, mopping his bald head, and then he broke off, catching sound of a stir among the folk behind.

“Here he be—here he be at last!” cried somebody. And with that a hush of bewilderment fell on the congregation.

In the doorway, flushed with running and glorious in bridal attire, stood Young Zeb.

It took everybody’s breath away, and he walked up the nave between silent men and women. His eyes were fastened on Ruby, and she in turn stared at him as a rabbit at a snake, shrinking slightly on her father’s arm. Tresidder’s jaw dropped, and his eyes began to protrude.

“What’s the meanin’ o’ this?” he stammered.

“I’ve come to marry your daughter,” answered Zeb, very slow and distinct. “She was to wed Zebedee Minards to-day, an’ I’m Zebedee Minards.”

“But—”

“I’ve a note to hand to each of ’ee. Better save your breath till you’ve read ’em.”

He delivered the two notes, and stood, tapping a toe on the tiles, in the bridegroom’s place on the right of the chancel-rails.

“Damnation!”

“Mr. Tresidder,” interrupted the parson, “I like a man to swear off his rage if he’s upset, but I can’t allow it in the church.”

“I don’t care if you do or you don’t.”

“Then do it, and I’ll kick you out with this very boot.”

The farmer’s face was purple, and big veins stood out by his temples.

“I’ve been cheated,” he growled. Zeb, who had kept his eyes on Ruby, stepped quickly toward her. First picking up the paper that had drifted to the pavement, he crushed it into his pocket. He then took her hand. It was cold and damp.

“Parson, will ’ee marry us up, please?”

“You haven’t asked if she’ll have you.”

“No, an’ I don’t mean to. I didn’t come to ax questions—that’s your business—but to answer.”

“Will you marry this man?” demanded the parson, turning to Ruby.

Zeb’s hand still inclosed hers, and she felt she was caught and held for life. Her eyes fluttered up to her lover’s face, and found it inexorable.

“Yes,” she gasped out, as if the word had been suffocating her. And with the word came a rush of tears—helpless, but not altogether unhappy.

“Dry your eyes,” said Parson Babbage, after waiting a minute, “we must be quick about it.”

So it happened that the threatened shal-lal came to nothing. Susan Jago, the old woman who swept the church, discovered its forgotten apparatus scattered beneath the pews on the following Saturday, and cleared it out, to the amount, she averred, of two cartloads. She tossed it, bit by bit, over the west wall of the churchyard, where in time it became a mound, covered high with stinging nettles. If you poke among these nettles with your walking-stick, the odds are that you turn up a scrap of rusty iron. But there exists more explicit testimony to Zeb’s wedding within the church—and within the churchyard, too, where he and Ruby have rested this many a year.

Though the bubble of Farmer Tresidder’s dreams was pricked that day, there was feasting at Sheba until late in the evening. Nor until eleven did the bride and bridegroom start off, arm in arm, to walk to their new home. Before them, at a considerable distance, went the players and singers—a black blur on the moonlit road; and very crisply their music rang out beneath a sky scattered with cloud and stars. All their songs were simple carols of the country, and the burden of them was but the joy of man at Christ’s nativity; but the young man and maid who walked behind were well pleased.

“Now then,” cried the voice of Old Zeb, “lads an’ lasses all together an’ wi’ a will—”

*“ ‘All under the leaves, an’ the leaves o’ life,  
I met wi’ virgins seven,  
An’ one’ o’ them was Mary mild,  
Our Lord’s mother of Heaven.*

*“ ‘O what are ’ee seekin,’ you seven fair maids,  
All under the leaves o’ life;  
Come tell, come tell, what seek ye  
All under the leaves o’ life?’”*

*“ ‘We’re seekin’ for no leaves, Thomas,  
But for a friend o’ thine,  
We’re seekin’ for sweet Jesus Christ  
To be our guide an’ thine.’*

*“ ‘Go down, go down, to yonder town  
An’ sit in the gallery,  
An’ there you’ll see sweet Jesus Christ  
Nailed to a big yew-tree.’*

*“So down they went to yonder town  
As fast as foot could fall,  
An’ many a grievous bitter tear  
From the Virgin’s eye did fall.*

*“ ‘O peace, Mother—O peace, Mother,  
Your weepin’ doth me grieve;*

*I must suffer this,' he said,  
'For Adam an' for Eve.*

*" 'O Mother, take John Evangelist  
All for to be your son,  
An' he will comfort you sometimes  
Mother, as I've a-done.'*

*" 'O come, thou John Evangelist,  
Thou'rt welcome unto me,  
But more welcome my own dear Son  
Whom I nursed on my knee.'*

*"Then he laid his head 'pon his right shoulder  
Seein' death it struck him nigh;  
'The holy Mother be with your soul—  
I die, Mother, I die.'*

*"O the rose, the gentle rose,  
An' the fennel that grows so green!  
God gi'e us grace in every place  
To pray for our king an' queen.*

*"Furthermore, for our enemies all  
Our prayers they should be strong;  
Amen, good Lord; your charity  
Is the endin' of my song!"*

In the midst of this carol Ruby, with a light pull on Zeb's arm, brought him to a halt.

"How lovely it all is, Zeb!" She looked upward at the flying moon, then dropped her gaze over the frosty sea, and sighed gently. "Just now I feel as if I'd been tossin' out yonder through many fierce days an' nights an' were bein' taken at last to a safe haven. You'll have to make a good wife of me, Zeb. I wonder if you'll do't."

Zeb followed the direction of her eyes, and seemed to discern off Bradden Point a dot of white, as of a ship in sail. He pressed her arm to his side, and said nothing.

"Clear your throats, friends," shouted his father, up the road, "an' let fly:

*"As I sat on a sunny bank,  
A sunny bank, a sunny bank,  
As I sat on a sunny bank,  
On Chris'mas day i' the mornin'.*

*"I saw dree ships come sailin' by,  
A-sailin' by, a-sailin' by,  
I saw dree ships come sailin' by,  
On Chris' mas day i' the mornin'.*

*"Now who shud be i' these dree ships—"*

And to this measure Zeb and Ruby stepped home.

At the cottage door Zeb thanked the singers, who went their way and flung back shouts and joyful wishes as they went. Before making all fast for the night, he stood a minute or so, listening to their voices as they died away down the road. As he barred the door, he turned and saw that

Ruby had lit the lamp, and was already engaged in setting the kitchen to rights; for, of course, no such home-coming had been dreamt of in the morning, and all was in disorder. He stood and watched her for a while, then turned to the window.

After a minute or two, finding that he did not speak, she too came to the window. He bent and kissed her.

For he had seen, on the patch of sea beyond the haven, a white frigate steal up Channel like a ghost. She had passed out of his sight by this time, but he was still thinking of one man that she bore.