

## THE ISLE OF LOVE

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN.

In the days that are no more,  
In a boat without an oar,  
On a sea without a breath,  
Without a breeze to blow me,  
I was drifting sick to death.

Though the sea was glassy fair,  
Not a breath of heaven was there;  
Idly, idly flapped the sail;  
In the silent depths below me,  
I was looking snowy pale.

It was tranquil, it was still,  
Yet I drifted with no will,  
And the sea was as the sky—  
I, a cloud upon the azure,  
Drifting melancholy by.

But the summer night came soon,  
And I sank into a swoon;  
But I heard the waters beat,  
With a faint and rhythmic measure,  
Round the cold moon's silvery feet.

Then I wakened! and, behold,  
Dawn upheld her cup of gold  
In the east, and brimming o'er,  
The ruby wine, so precious,  
Tinged that sea without a shore;

And, within the ruddy glow,  
I upsprang from sleep; and, lo!  
I beheld an island fair,  
Where the fronded palms stood gracious,  
With God's glory on their hair.

And even as I gazed,  
On the sands my boat's keel grazed,  
And I saw thee smiling stand,  
With a rose upon thy bosom,  
And a lily in thy hand.

And I knew thee, and the place  
Was familiar as the face—  
I had seen them far away,  
Ere my soul began to blossom  
Into form and flesh of clay.

At the waving of thy hand,  
I had lightly sprung to land,  
And I took thy hand in mine,  
And I kissed thee, and we entered  
Groves delicious and divine.

How still it was! How calm,  
In those glades of pine and palm,  
Paven blue and bright with flowers;  
And the isle was golden-centred,  
And its golden centre ours.

There we sat like marble things,  
And the boughs were moved like wings  
Round the silence of our throne;  
In the shadow deep and dewy,  
Hand in hand, we sat alone.

Save the nightingale's soft thrill,  
All was peaceful, all was still;  
But our hearts throbbed as we dreamed,  
And the heaven's open blue eye  
Through the boughs above us gleamed.

Oh, fool! why did I rest  
My dark chin upon my breast,  
And drop to dream again?  
When I wakened I was drifting  
On the melancholy main.

And I saw the isle afar,  
Like the glimmer of a star;  
But my boat had ne'er an oar,  
And the sunset shades were shifting  
On that sea without a shore.

Then I raised my hands and cried,  
As the glory gleamed and died  
On the dark horizon line;  
And the sunset, like a lion,  
Crouched down tawny by the brine.

And never since that day  
Have I drifted down that way,  
Where thy spirit beckoned me;  
Oh, to look on—oh, to die on  
That green island in the sea!

Oh, to look into thy face,  
'Mid the glory of the place!  
Oh, to reach that island fair,  
And to see the palm-trees blowing,  
With God's glory on their hair!

In the scented summer sheen,  
Sits the island, shadowed green,  
In a sea as smooth as glass;  
There the morning dew is glowing  
Evermore upon the grass.

From the garish glare of day,  
Sheltered sweet, the soul may stray  
But whoever there doth sleep,  
Must for ever and for ever  
Drift alone upon the deep.

Oh, the island lost of yore!  
Oh, the days that are no more!  
I am drifting on in pain,  
And the morning dew will never  
Wet my sandalled feet again.

## FACE TO FACE WITH----

My friend—a friend—Richard Bentick died upon the tenth day of December, 1870.

We had been flung together upon the world, had fought a heavy fight against desperate odds; fought it boldly and well.

He succumbed to brain fever. Although we had been estranged for some time, I attended him with an aching heart, heard his low, quivering valedictory sigh, and received the last look he was ever destined to cast upon this side of his untimely grave, ere he started for that mysterious journey which we must all, high and low, gentle and simple, travel alone.

Unnerved, unfit for work, and with a sense of utter desolation hanging darkly around me like the mourning cloak which I had worn at his funeral, I rejected all offers of sympathy, all overtures of companionship; I was indeed alone.

Christmas was at hand; right merrily the standard of holly and ivy was unfurled to the crisp wintry breeze, and the Christian world, aglow with preparation, was revelling in visions of home mirth, and of home happiness.

How to avoid Christmas was my abiding thought.

Remain in London? No. Accept the invitation of the Chesneys of Chesney Wold, to a party as joyous as that which assembled at Dingley Dell? No.

Upon the twentieth of December Hubert Reeve, a man with whom I was intimate, called to my chambers on a matter connected with a case in which I held a brief.

I was in the act of stepping into the street when I encountered him; a paltry half minute would have saved me the interview. If Hubert Reeve had been stopped by a friend, delayed at a crossing, attracted to a shop window, the current of my life might have run smoothly on; but it was not to be. It was written otherwise.

He was in deep mourning for his young wife.

"I have shut up the old rookery in Single-shire," he said; "the word Christmas is hateful to me."

The tears rushed to his eyes, and a choking sob bestoke the grief welling up from his heart.

"Rookery!" I observed, wishing to divert his thoughts into another channel.

"Yes, rookery. It was built in the reign of Queen Anne; and, with the exception of a new wing to replace a portion of the building burnt down, it remains, furniture and all, a musty, fusty, tumble-down old place; but I haven't the heart to touch stick or stone in it."

"And you have hermetically sealed it?"

"Yes, and dismissed the servants, with the exception of one old crone, about as antique as Wyvern Hall itself. I go to Egypt, anywhere from Christmas in 'merrile England.'"

I instantly resolved upon spending the holidays at Wyvern Hall. My dead friend had passed many a happy hour beneath its hospitable roof-tree.

"I should like to stop at the Hall, during the forthcoming so-called festive season, if you wouldn't mind it."

"Mind it, that's your look out, not mine. You'll have a dull time of it."

"I shall take my chance for that, and *courage* de *rose* would not suit me just at present."

A few words, and the details were arranged. A few words, and the seal was affixed to a resolution binding me, whilst memory lasts, to one ghastly—let the narrative speak for itself.

I started upon the afternoon of the twenty-third, by the four o'clock train, from King's Cross Station. The compartment was filled by a rollicking effervescent party en route for a visit to some relatives in the North. I hated them for their light-heartedness, and curiously refused to lower the window next to me, or to accord permission to one of the party to smoke a cigar.

A dull, dead, heavy, drenching rain was suddenly falling as I alighted at Bycroft Station.

"I require a fly to take me to Wyvern Hall."

"There be no fly here, and there be nobody there," was the laconic reply of the official whom I addressed.

"How am I to reach the Hall?"

"It be only a matter of six miles."

This meant that it would be necessary for me to walk.

I resolved upon walking. There was nothing else for it.

My luggage consisted of an old-fashioned carpet bag, into which I had stowed a change of dress, and a packet of private papers belonging to Richard Bentick. I brought them with me in order to peruse them at leisure, and to place myself face to face with the past by the sad, solemn link of the handwriting of the dead man. Slinging the bag across my shoulder and lighting my pipe, I set out into the darkness.

The silence of that night was unnatural—appalling; not a dog barked. The splash of a rat into an ink pool alone broke the monotonous echo of my own tramp, tramp.

The darkness was intense, and when the road became overshadowed with trees, I was compelled to probe my way with my umbrella, like one smitten with a sudden blindness. Twice I struck a fusée, once not a moment too soon; another step and I had fallen into a disused quarry hole, the depths of which my feeble, flickering light failed to fathom.

I reached the lodge at Wyvern Hall. My instructions were so complete that I was enabled to open the wicket gate and pass through as though it had been my hourly practice from childhood.

The avenue leading to the Hall lay before me cavernous as a railway tunnel.

I plunged into it. Was there no hand to warn me back? No semaphore to denote caution? No red light to warn me of danger?

I had walked, possibly, about four hundred yards in a darkness so intense, that had I been blindfolded and placed in an apartment from which every ray of light had been excluded, my vision could not have been more securely sealed. I held my bag in my left hand, and groped my way with my umbrella in my right. My fuseses had become damp, and were rendered useless. I stopped irresolutely, without exactly knowing why or wherefore.

A strange sickening sensation crept over me, as though some foul and filthy animal were crawling upon and covering me with his noisome saliva.

One awful second. One rush of thought, and I knew I was not alone.

I have not been brought face to face with death at the cannon's mouth. I have not been upon the verge of eternity on the deck of the sinking ship. I have not been placed in any of these perilous positions, where the men are taxed to the utmost limits of their endurance, and therefore I cannot determine whether I am what is termed a brave man or a cowardly one; but that shock such as startled my soul, was fraught with so much mysterious horror that no nature, however bold—no human mind, however evenly balanced by philosophy, or fortified by the sublimities of religion, could have experienced it without recoiling in swoon of indefinable terror.

There was something beside me in that cavernous gloom, and that thing was not of this earth! I called upon my reasoning power to strike one blow in my behalf and crush the maddening thought by the sheer weight of common sense. I endeavored to speak, but my mouth was dry and parched, and my tongue refused its office. A cold perspiration bathed me from head to foot, and I shook in a palsy of terror.

I would have given thousands, had I possessed them, for the company of the filthiest plague-stricken wretch ever vomited from prison or hospital—thousands for a glint of God's sunshine. Every instant I expected to be touched by it. Every instant that it would reveal its presence in some awful and ghastly manner.

Suddenly there came upon me the impulse to fly, and I obeyed it.

I rushed through the darkness with a swiftness that must have destroyed me, had I come into contact with any intervening obstacle. A moment before and I had been treading with the caution of feebleness and age. Now I was dashing onward as though traversing some grassy slope in a race in which the victory lay to the fleetest.

The spurt passed away, and I slackened my pace, but the same terror clung to me, for the same presence evolved it.

At length, when nearly spent, for my heart was in my throat, a dim but friendly star told me that the avenue had been passed, and that the Hall had been reached. I staggered to the door and, clutching wildly at the knocker, thundered with the rapidity of a steam hammer, and with a din that would have awakened the dead. My appeal was responded to, the last bolt had been drawn back, and the door was about to swing open, when great Heaven! a clammy, icy hand was laid upon mine, and two soulless, lifeless, ghastly eyes imbedded in a green ooze—

Ugh! my flesh creeps as I recall the unmitigated horror of that unearthly gaze.

The old crone, who was both deaf and blind, led me, quivering like an aspen, along a series of gloomy passages by the aid of a solitary candle, which rather seemed to make darkness visible than to afford the necessary adjunct of light. Her shadow upon the wall, as we silently traversed the corridors, seemed weird, and witch-like, and singularly *en rapport* with the fever of my thoughts.

A bright fire crackled in the huge grate of the oaken wainscoted room into which she ushered me, and upon a small table drawn cosily to the hearth, stood a decanter labelled Brandy, from which I poured into a tumbler about half a pint and drained it at a gulp. I still retained the bag in my grasp, and I cast a hurried glance at the back of my hand to ascertain if any mark had been made by that awful touch. No; my hand, usually white, now blanched with rain and cold, seemed whiter than usual.

Why I did not cast the bag from me is still a mystery, and can only be accounted for by the instinctive desire to retain that which contained the papers of my deceased friend.

With something like a shiver, I perceived that the table was laid for two persons.

Surely the wretched old hag, who was busy-ing herself with the fire, did not intend to plague me with her presence.

Reeve informed me distinctly that he had shut up the house, leaving this solitary person in charge of it.

He knew I was in no mood for company. What could it mean?

"You have laid the table for two!" I shouted into the old woman's ear.

"Yes, I have; that's right," was the croaking response.

"Who is to take supper here to-night?"

"You, and Mr. Richard Bentick."

I reeled as though stricken by a well-directed blow. The mention of my dead friend at such a moment! The mention of my dead friend in such a manner!

"Mr. Richard Bentick is dead," I cried hoarsely.

The old woman shook her head slowly from side to side, and, with a leer which meant to convey that she was too wary to be deceived by so weak an invention, chuckled.

"No, no, sir, he is not dead; I seen him this evening," and, lowering her voice to a whining whisper, she added, "and I seen her."

"Her—who do you mean?" I cried.

This was the woman's reply:

"She was standing on the steps when I let you in."

I sank into a chair. Those soulless eyes! I was feebly struggling in an ocean of mystery, and being submerged by every wave.

I dared not question the hag any further, at least, not yet. "She's very tipsy," I reasoned; "evidently fond of the bottle. Yes, tipsy." And filling up a glass full of brandy I offered it to her.

"Here, old lady, this will cheer you."

"I never take it—I'm thankful to you, sir."

The woman was sober.

"Remove these," I shouted, pointing to the extra knife and fork and plate.

"Here's sure to be here," she muttered, as she carried out my orders. "Dead, indeed! There's many alive that's thought to be dead, and many dead that's thought to be alive; and there be many out of their shrouds that ought to be in them, and there be some in them that ought to be hale and hearty this awful night."

As she spoke, a peal of thunder shook the house to its very foundation.

"Ay, ay, a bad night to be out of doors—a bad night to be lying in the bottom of the pool, amongst the rotten weeds, with horse leeches twisting your dark brown hair."

The woman was thinking aloud. Then, as if recalling time and place, "Will you take your supper now, sir?"

I nodded assent; the idea of eating being furthest from my thoughts.

"That's your bed-room. The sheets is well aired; they was at the fire all day yesterday, and all day to-day."

She pointed to a door at the extremity of the apartment, a massive oaken door, black as ebony, and overlaid with grotesque carving. It resembled the entrance to a vault. The room which I occupied was low-ceilinged, but very spacious, with an oaken floor, and wainscoted in oak; the furniture was of the same material. Over the gaping fireplace a small mirror in an elaborately-carved oaken frame, stretching its ornamentation all over the panel, reflected the sepulchral light of the moderate lamp.

A few portraits in ebony frames adorned the walls, and a well-worn Turkey carpet covered the greater portion of the floor. There were two doors to the apartment, one by which I had entered, the other leading to my bed-room.

Upon opening my carpet bag for the purpose of taking out my slippers, I discovered that it was saturated with rain. The wet had penetrated, and such articles as happened to lie close to the outer portions of it were considerably damped. Amongst them the packet of papers belonging to my dead friend. I hastened to dry the packet, and for this purpose placed it tenderly inside of the fender, without loosening the binding string.

At this crisis the old woman entered with a tray laden with the supper.

"I shall not require you any more to-night," I said, glancing at my watch, which indicated the hour of half-past ten.

"Won't you try if the meat's done to your liking?" she croaked.

"It's all right: good night," and I pushed her from the room, closing and locking the door.

I returned to the fireplace, and found that the ends of the packet which I had deposited in the fender had coiled up under exposure to the heat. One paper would seem to have forced itself from out the bundle, and as I endeavored to push it back into its place, the following words, written in Bentick's unmistakable hand, met my startled gaze:—

"To be read by John Fordyce only, and to be destroyed by him the moment he has finished the perusal."

I plucked it from the packet. This paper was to be read by me, John Fordyce, and destroyed instantly. I resolved upon reading it there and then. Oh! why did I break that seal? Oh! why did not that icy, clammy oozy hand intervene between me and that paper, and bear it beyond mortal reach? A strange foreboding of evil smote me as I broke the seal—I was treading upon the verge of a precipice.

"To you, John Fordyce, I reveal the ghastly triumph of an unprincipled man over a weak, loving, and defenceless woman."

These were the words with which the document commenced—these were the words which seared themselves upon my brain.

I had proceeded thus far, and was about to continue the perusal, when a shadow as of some person endeavoring to read over my shoulder fell upon the paper. The same awful delirium of fear seized me. It was in the room! It was standing behind my back! The clammy, oozy, icy hand stretching forth to grasp me. The soulless, ghastly eyes fixed on me. Oh! for power to shriek! Gracious Heaven!

I became unconscious. When I recovered my senses, I was lying upon the hearth-rug; the fire had burned itself out, but luckily the lamp seemed still full of vitality. With a fearful, shuddering gaze I slowly peered round the room expecting to encounter I knew not what of horror.

The portraits frowned grimly from the walls, the dark wainscot looked darker, but it was not to be seen. The shadow was from out the room.