

I seemed to quiver, and sway to and fro, high up on this giddy perch, beyond the ken of any human eye—that moment of dizzy terror, of strange whirling thoughts, of instincts to cast myself headlong into the sea, was in sensation as any ordinary week of placid being; and yet it came and went like any other moment, and I stood erect upon the beam, and began my perilous way.

I heard the wind far off, bellowing among the breakers on the bar; I heard it screeching and howling over the flats. I felt a moment's calm, the strange unnatural hush, and then the rush and leap of the storm, as it hurtled by me. Dashing the salt spray into my eyes, it came, seizing all the loose corners of my apparel and cracking them like whip-lashes, carrying away my feeble breath in its wild course, but leaving me—yes, thank God—leaving me still balanced on my plank.

The gust had cleared the mists for a space, and I could now see before me, though indistinctly enough, but I could see that there was only another length of unprotected balk; beyond that was a broad, safe platform of timber, stretched from pier to pier. Oh, to feel that platform safe under my feet! I traversed the balk almost at a run. I must reach safety before there came another gust of that fierce wind.

I heard it coming now, but I was almost home—yes home, for that rough, unsheltered platform, on this rude night, seemed like a home to me. I was stepping firmly and quickly along. Suddenly a chasm seemed to open under my feet—a horrible chasm. The beam on which I stood came suddenly to an end. For some eight feet it had been cut away, and there was nothing to help me over this dreadful gap. Without wings it were impossible to pass.

All hope left me. I knew that to retrace my steps was impossible to me. Even if I reached the end from which I started, I should be no better off than here, and the hopelessness of the position weakened my every nerve. Once more I heard the wind rising, and hurtling along towards me. I would cling to life as long as I could. I knelt down on the wet, slippery balk, clasped it with my arms, sat astride it. The gust came up fierce and strong, passed over me once more—once more spared me.

But I felt I could not survive another such attack; I should be blown away like a leaf. And yet there was no hope of escape—none. It was only a question of moments how long, with stiffening limbs, I could cling to this rough beam; then a plunge into darkness.

Still I had time to think. What were my thoughts! A helpless sense of cruelty, of the horrible unfeelingness and indignity of this hurtling wind, of those raging waters. A sad mortification, too, and sense of injustice, that I should lose my life for nothing; a pleasant ramble turned to such an evil end. Of the past I thought nothing; it was nothing to me now—a tale that was told; that was all. Of the future, nothing either, except a dim and awful wonder. But plainly, vividly before my eyes I saw the figure of my wife, sitting at work by the fire, waiting and watching for me—for me, who never should come. That was the bitterness of it.

And yet withal I was not unconscious of a vague sense of the ludicrous—of scorn of myself, that I should be thus stuck astride a beam, like some lad at play, a sport for the buffetings of the elements. With this, too, an unspeakable rage; a kind of crushed defiance, a revolt against the doom which was imminent, a revolt which felt itself hopeless and useless from its beginning.