

RIGHTED AT LAST.

CHAPTER III.

Still in "the glimpses of the moon" our story demands to be continued. The harvest moon it is that now shines full and clear over Perran Head. A splendour of light covers the calm sea, extending from the horizon on a silver pathway that grows wider and brighter till it breaks in gleams of lambent ripple along the foot of the cliff. The galaxy, like a veil of diamond-dust, winds across the firmament, and all the air is luminous, save where there hangs, as it ever does, a dim shadow between the sea-line and the great source of light above it.

Five years have lapsed since the disappearance of Lord Tregarth, and, so far as the principals in this narrative are concerned, a few sentences will suffice to chronicle them.

Samuel Haddock was committed for trial upon a charge of murder, but the case against him utterly broke down. No proof that his original statement could be considered anything less than true was forthcoming; indeed, a most thorough investigation rather tended to support it. Upon the summit of Folly Tower, where the chief interest first centred, was discovered a spirit-flask (identified without difficulty) and a pool of blood, which the injury to Haddock's forehead sufficiently explained. Not a fragment of any clue to his lordship's position could be gathered, however. The cliffs were scanned, the narrow beaches beneath them searched, and many miles of coast-line examined, but no trace or sign of the vanished lord resulted. Tregarth Court and those within its gates also came in for a considerable share of this universal inquiry, though, with the rest of the neighborhood, it proved quite unable to furnish any solution of the enigma.

Haddock, therefore, was ultimately acquitted, and returned to his own, who by no means regarded him as a hero. Joan also found her position in Perranpol the reverse of pleasant, and her recent actions gave color to a vast collection of unedifying stories, now circulated about the village. But while she laughed to scorn malicious rumour, Samuel found himself unable to face the suspicions, regarding his part in the mystery, none pretended to conceal. He suddenly left Perranpol, until such time as the evil odour of his past actions had dispersed. He declared his intention of earning considerable sums of money in an enterprise now making progress not far distant, and urged Joan strongly to accompany him. This she refused to do, but bound herself, under a solemn promise, to remain his affianced bride, limiting the period, however, with the business instinct of all the Silvers, to five years. Lord Tregarth, having legally ceased to exist, was followed in the title by a younger brother; and, with the advent of this youth, peace, blessed beyond description, as compared to the recent months of turmoil, once again brooded over the land. Past events could not be set aside, but the new master, a lad hardly more than arrived at his majority, was eager to please. Books he loved, cared nothing for power, whilst attaching supreme importance to peace and seeking the readiest way to secure it from the first. A simple action went far towards gaining this desired end. Lord Tregarth reinstated the former bailiff, and bid him at all times act in a manner that should best chime with the wishes of the greater faction.

Up till the present Folly Tower had remained as the workmen left it on the night of the late lord's disappearance; and now arose a question as to whether it should be completed or pulled down. Perranpol was divided upon the point, but seeing that St. Mary's Chapel had gone beyond human power of restoration and that some sort of landmark was desirable to distinguish the headland from other more western promontories, the fishermen prayed that the tower might stand; so, agreeably to their wishes, Lord Tregarth let the work be done. With time the grass grew green where lime and heavy cart-wheels had destroyed it; the rabbits, frightened far inland, returned to the deserted burrows; the gloomy edifice itself became familiar to all eyes. But Perranpol hated it, and the very babies were taught to do the same. A sinister history arose from Folly Tower, a history destined to degenerate into tradition, had no concluding chapter of fact lurked in the near future to complete it. That Samuel Haddock was in reality responsible for the disappearance of their common enemy most of his fellow-villagers believed, as did others with more brains than they. Among the deep holes on the eastern side of Perran Head, where black conger were caught on winter nights, it was generally suspected that the murderer had buried his secret, but proofs to support this opinion were unattainable. That Folly Tower had been the actual theatre of a crime none doubted; and to the vulgar herd it became accordingly haunted by ghostly things innumerable; nor were there wanting those who could swear to personal contact with such apparitions. Perhaps there might be half a dozen people in Perranpol who would have ascended the stair of Folly Tower after dark, certainly not more.

And of these exceptions, two now sit together beneath it, looking out over the silver waters.

Fred Dando would no more have asked Joan to marry him and break her word to her old lover, than

would she have dreamed of doing so; but as year followed year and Samuel Haddock threatened to become but a memory in his old home, a tacit understanding arose between them that their friendship could only have one termination. Fred loved the girl with all his heart, and she did not hide her affection for him. Joan was a woman now, and real regard, blinded by no childish admiration for supreme physical strength or supposed obligations to her bygone giant parent, possessed her heart. Juster ideas of life and its obligations occupied her thoughts; she had passed with good to herself through the furnace of evil opinions, had disarmed her enemies, and was now worthily upholding the reputation of Perranpol Silvers for honest thrift and kindly charity to their poorer neighbors. All loved Joan and all admired and respected Fred Dando. It would be a fine thing to see such a couple man and wife, the old people declared, and the young ones laughed at them for postponing the inevitable until the term of Joan's promise was reached. But, though none had ever heard of or from Haddock since his departure, neither Joan or Fred for one instant ignored the possibility of his return; a thunderbolt at all times threatened from the clear sky of their lives, and they lived prepared for it. While such love as Joan might have once felt for the unfortunate bricklayer had long since departed, her faithful promise to marry him by no means did so. That she regarded as sacred, and to be cancelled by nothing but time. Her simple rules of conduct, however, made it no dishonor or sin to plan the future, supposing her contract with Samuel Haddock should never require fulfilment. Fred was of the same mind, and so the strange, qualified courtship continued, until but a month was wanting to set them free.

And now sitting smoking his pipe by her side in the moonlight, young Dando is of opinion that preliminary steps may at last be undertaken. He has just asked Joan if he may put up the banns next Sunday, and she has shaken her head with a smile.

"Who knows he's not in that very vessel, Fred?" she answered, pointing to the black hull of a steamer hastening across the broad tract of light below.

"Don't fear, Joan. Sam Haddock never means calling Perranpol 'home' again."

But he does not press the point, feeling perhaps ashamed of having raised it, and silence falls upon them once more, this time broken by Joan. Looking up among the stars, she has seen a meteor shoot through the sky.

"Dost reckon, Fred, what Mother Vallack tells about falling stars is true?"

"I know nought about them," answered Mr. Dando.

"She says they are burning brands plucked out from heavenly fires and hurled by the angels against fiends and devils, if they be seen wandering too near the holy angels," explained Joan.

"Like enough. But maybe those who guard them gates would bide a bit and hear even what a poor devil had to say; for the more mercy you wants the more there is to spare for you up there, Joan."

Fred puffed his pipe, and neither spoke until a sudden footfall caused both to look round. It came nearer and nearer; at last, Folly Tower alone separated them from the traveller. Then out from the black shadow of it he staggered into the moonlight and they saw him standing by them.

It was Samuel Haddock, altered somewhat for his years of toil under tropic suns. His broad face was tanned red as the beard beneath it, gold rings glittered in his ears, he wore a sailor's clothing, and his nautical roll seemed at present aggravated, for Samuel was the worse for liquor. He had been paid off that morning, and travelled from Plymouth without waiting for his kit. What caused this detour to Folly Tower, however, was only known to himself.

For a moment none spoke a word. Joan's heart gave a great and terrible throb, her soul froze within her; mingled emotions, like a palpable cloud, blinded her, and then, scarce realizing what she did, she stood between them and held out a trembling hand to each. Fred could not speak, his jaw had fallen and his clenched fists were pressed against his heart. The wanderer, too drunk to appreciate the significance of what he saw, hardly noticed anything but Joan. Then, as he put his great arms round her, did the cloud lift and the future loom out clear and ghastly before the girl; then, as she felt his heavy kisses on her cheek, heard his drunken laugh of delight in her ears, did she shut her eyes and set her teeth to stay the scream of agony bursting from her heart. She had loved this, with this must she live for ever.

Fred Dando came to the rescue.

"Don't kill her, Sam," he said hoarsely, pulling Haddock away. "You've nigh scared her to death; don't kill her."

Haddock did not take this interference in good part.

"I know you," he answered. "You're Dando, what I've laced black and blue afore now, and will again if you rouse me to it. What do fisherboys want along with my Joan? It's me, lass—" turning to her. "It's me: Sam, safe and hearty as can be. Speak to me, Joan. Let me hear your voice or I'll go mad."

"I never thought to see you more, Sam," she said, in tones that sounded like the far away murmur of the sea.

"What—you ain't gone back on your word—you, a Silver?" he asked with an ugly glance at the other man, who now stood by the cliff's edge looking out over the water.

"No, Samuel. Five years—I minded that."

"There, I knew it, I knew it. Fair and true you always was, and will be. Lord love us all, I've a sight of strange things to tell thee."

"We had better go from here," said Dando hnskily, as he turned from the sea.

"Why, you're in the right, lad, answered Mr. Haddock, whose anger had evaporated suddenly, as it often will with those in his condition. "And I'll take it kind in you to give me an arm down the cliff, for I've forgot the road, and not being used to honest home drink these many years, don't feel the thing exactly."

As they turned to go, the wanderer caught sight of an oaken door at the base of Folly Tower, and it sobered him like a charm. He stood stiffly up, dropped his big walking-stick, buried the fingers of both hands in his beard, and glared at the doorway.

"God in heaven, it's him!" he ejaculated. "Round he goes, and round again. There—there—can't you see him? Be you blind?"

But the others saw nothing save the moon's reflection mirrored in the lofty windows of the tower, heard nothing but a squeaking bat, that cut the air with his ubiquitous cry.

"Gone!" declared Haddock, and laughed a defiant roystering laugh, that echoed back sharply upon them from the walls of Folly Tower. Then, muttering something about the cursed drink, he submitted to be led down to Perranpol.

Through the chaos of their shattered hopes, through the terrible sorrow that now burnt silent in the heart of each, a trivial recollection intruded, as such trifling memories will at times intrude, even upon minds brimming with great griefs. Joan and Fred thought of the night, five years ago, when they performed a like office for this man; while Haddock, all ignorant of the two worlds of misery within a yard of him, gabbled drunkenly of past achievements and of wealth untold, which, but for the villainous machinations of his fellow sailors, he should now have at his command. So he returned to his old home, and, next morning, Perranpol was seething with a new nine-days' wonder.

Samuel would never have heard from those most interested of how matters stood between Fred and Joan; but mutual acquaintances speedily put the facts before him. Thereupon he upbraided his future wife bitterly for her flagrant inconstancy, and renewed hostilities with Dando. The parson reasoned with him, the elders of Perranpol expostulated, all without result. Joan Silver, he said, had promised to marry him; she was prepared to keep her word at the present juncture; and he wasn't going to ask her to break it for anybody. Haddock it is to be noted, personally increased the pity for the present position. Sympathy, which would have flowed out for him on every side, was frozen at its source by his own conduct. An air of gloomy ferocity characterised the man; he had done no good for himself or any other during his wanderings; and now returned, little richer than he set out, save in a love for drink, which mastered him at all hours. With Joan he had no solitary thought in common, but did not waver in a dogged resolve to make her his wife against any opposition. There was none, however. The separated pair, with the strength of purpose, faced the altered tenor of their lives, kept their suffering to themselves, and never questioned Samuel Haddock's moral right to adhere to his determination.

The banns were published, and old Libby took it upon himself to forbid them, in a piping treble voice that awakened bass growls of support all round the little church. Decorum was violated and a painful scene ensued, but to no purpose whatever. Haddock decreed an early date for the ceremony, and nothing remained except to wait for it.

Should events now appear to be rushing with undue speed upon each other's heels, it is because they actually did so; and a bald chronicle of the same is sufficient to include the truth of things. Neither will lengthy analysis for the mental suffering endured in certain quarters during these trying weeks be of particular service, for the day was at hand that would see these sorrows banish like an ugly vision. With Folly Tower the dream began, and there it terminated. Sudden, as a flash of lightning, came the end; the fire of heaven, indeed, was a literal cause of it.

Unusually severe gales were raised by the autumnal equinox upon the Cornish coast, and these culminated, at the time we write of, in a terrific hurricane, the like of which few could recollect. No human victims went directly to appease Bucca, the ancient storm fiend of Cornwall, a dangerous and fatal foe to mariners; but against Perran Head he brought the full blast and scope of this nocturnal tempest. Folly Tower was struck by lightning; and on its splintered summit, in the shattered masonry, upon the morning after the gale, did two adventurous boys discover a weird horror that sent them flying back to Perranpol.

Their news travelled faster than the wind, and a babel of men's voices at his cottage door soon afterwards told Haddock that something more than common was afoot. A moment later and words explaining the sudden assembly, words full of frightful significance for the listener, reached his ear. A corpse