

"For your boudoir, Gertrude, because you admired it," rejoined the old gentleman. "And if Mr. Vane will allow me, I'll also purchase this one, for a companion picture."

"Oh! was there ever such a good, generous stepfather!" ejaculated the girl, clasping her hands fondly round his arm.

"Stay, stay, Miss Impulsive! It may be already commissioned."

"Were it so, I fear I should break the contract," smiled the artist, wishing that he could dare to present the sketch as a gift. "Fortunately, however, it is not, and I shall have infinite pleasure in completing this for—"

"Miss Belliston, my stepdaughter," put in the gentleman. "You were abroad, sir, when I purchased your picture, and the affair was transacted through an agent; but there is my card, and I trust the future will improve our acquaintance."

Halbert, taking the card, read, "Mr. Samuel Marner, Cumber Priory, to which was added, in pencil, "Valley of Rocks Hotel."

"No doubt," proceeded Mr. Marner, "we shall have the pleasure of meeting again during our stay. Now, Gertrude, we must hasten, or Lady Hannah will be waiting. Good morning, Mr. Vane."

The gentlemen raised their hats. Miss Belliston inclined her head gracefully, and in a moment the trees were hiding them from view.

Halbert Vane stood for a while looking along the path. The echo of Gertrude Belliston's musical laugh aroused him. He gazed around. What had come over the place! How changed it looked! Darker, as if clouds had swept over the sun.

"Have I found the, or my, original beauty so soon?" he murmured. "Has love already risen above art? Certainly I can't go on with the sketch. How old Wain will laugh! I'll stroll down to the shore and see how he is getting on."

Packing up his easel and shouldering his white canvas umbrella, Halbert Vane wandered down the path to Lynmouth as desperately in love as it was possible to be at first sight.

III.

A PERILOUS RESCUE.

"Prithce, why so pale, fond lover! Prithce why so pale!"

"Don't laugh at me, Wain. Be merciful to the fallen, I confess it; I am as hard hit as a man can be."

And Halbert Vane gazed moodily from the window of their lodgings at the sea creeping over the stretch of low dark rocks.

"The only original beauty has appeared," laughed the elder artist, putting great volumes of smoke from his pipe as he leaned back on one chair, his feet supported on another.

"In my eyes, yes. I should not mind had there been but the faintest hope of winning her," proceeded Vane; "but there isn't. Imagine a stepfather, who has made so much out of malt that he would find it difficult to say how rich he is, and a mother a Lady Hannah; while I—"

"While you—"

"Am a poor artist, with a name and a fortune yet to make, if I can."

"A sensible rider that, Hal," remarked Wain. "As your master in art, you have once or twice taken my advice: do so now in a more serious matter. Let us pack up our traps and make tracks for Clovelly. The girl has cast a glamour over you. No wonder, for she is perfectly charming; but you must have courage, and fly temptation."

"You are right, Wain; I feel it," replied Vane, after a pause. "Always my friend, you are more than ever so now. I will fly. Art shall be my mistress still, and when I dethrone her it shall be for a substance, not a shadow. So 'off' shall be the word. We'll book our places on the coach to-night, then hey for Clovelly and Barnstaple, to-morrow."

"Bravo! An hour or two will complete what I have to do here of my landscape," exclaimed Wain, rising. "Then, Hal, I'm with you."

"And I'll go to the coach-office; then avoid all chance of an encounter by taking a last look at the Valley of Rocks. The Marner's dine at five, consequently will not be in that direction, especially all along the North Walk, for the wind blows rather roughly in shore."

"Good! At six I'll be in to tea."

"Yes; better go," reflected Maurice Wain, when Halbert had gone. "He's a fine-natured, handsome young fellow, with a bright future before him. I wouldn't have his life ruined by a woman. I don't say there's harm in the girl; but she'd laugh, flirt, look pretty, as is the way with all of them, never caring how serious a matter it might prove for poor Hal."

Vane having proceeded to the booking-office of the Barnstaple coach and taken two seats for the morrow, directed his steps to the North Walk.

The hour was one at which the Walk was generally deserted; while to-day, as the artist had remarked, a stiff wind blew inland.

Hark! What was that? The cry of a sea-bird? No; the shriek of a woman!

The artist had come to an abrupt halt as the cry had cleft the air. Where did it come from?

From the shore! Yes; it rose again! What could be the matter? Halbert grasped the heather, and crawled in awful proximity to the edge of the cliff.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed a youth, who, with his sister, had run up. "You can't get down there, sir."

"I am going to see what is the matter," was the response.

"Oh, George!—George!" cried the girl; "he'll be dashed to pieces!"

But quietly, resolutely Vane proceeded until he could catch a glimpse of the shore beneath. A cold shiver ran through him. He had not been deceived in that voice. It was Gertrude Belliston's!

There she stood alone in the tiny cove, the sea lashing each headland and every wave cutting off her escape, the cruel rocks catching her voice and flinging its echoes out to the deserted waters.

A second was enough for Vane to realize the poor girl's dangerous position. He closely inspected the shore and the rocks; then he glanced back at the two on the Walk.

"You look," he said to them, "too good-hearted and sensible to be scared. I am sure you will render assistance. A lady has been surrounded by the tide. I shall endeavour to reach her. Run to Lynmouth; send boats round by the sea; bid men bring ropes to lower here. Go—go! Recollect a life may depend upon your speed!"

"You wait here, Mary," said the young fellow; and almost before Halbert Vane had finished speaking he was off.

Nearly as speedily the artist recommenced his descent, and the girl, crouching on the Walk, breathlessly saw him disappear from view.

It was a fearful descent. If the strong-rooted heather had yielded, death would have been certain.

But, steady of eye and foot, Vane continued to proceed slowly. Once looking down, alarmed at the cessation of Gertrude Belliston's cries, he became aware that she had perceived him, and, seeing his peril, for the moment had forgotten her own.

Fortunately the rocks at the spot which Halbert was struggling to reach did not slant inward, but were almost flat, only small projections here and there, with large spaces of smooth surface.

But Vane's hands and feet—he had managed to rid himself of his boots—appeared to have acquired a limpet tenacity of grasp. From rock to rock he succeeded in going till he had reached within twenty feet of the shore. Lowering himself then, he sprang, reeled, and fell upon the beach.

With a cry, Gertrude Belliston ran towards him; but he had quickly risen to his feet, a smile on his features.

"Oh, Mr. Vane," she cried, "there are two now to perish! Oh, why are you here?"

"To support and to encourage you, Miss Belliston. Fear nothing, and pray don't talk of perishing! They have gone for ropes up there, and should they not arrive in time, I must ask you to trust yourself to me, and we will have a swim for it."

"Trust myself!" exclaimed Gertrude, extending her hand. "Mr. Vane you have risked—perhaps sacrificed—your life for me!"

She raised her eyes to his, then quickly lowered them again, for his secret was confessed.

"The sea is coming in rapidly," he said. "Let us seek the best place to await the help that is coming to us."

She followed him in silence. There was a large mass of fallen rock, flat-surfaced, in the bay. Halbert Vane assisted Gertrude on to it, and together they waited, he now and then giving a shout to inform any help, had it yet come, on the North Walk of their position.

But no answering response greeted his call. Nothing broke the silence but the dash of the sea that was stealing up and surrounding the rock, and very soon was breaking over it.

A few more moments, and the water did not retreat, but remained about their feet. Vane looked at his companion. She was very pale, but calm. He glanced round for some more advantageous standing. There was none.

"Do not fear," he remarked, cheerfully, "if I have to swim for it."

"Oh, Mr. Vane," she said, "how greatly I regret that I should have tempted you to this danger!"

"I am happy to be here," he said. "Would not be elsewhere for worlds."

"I knew the tide was coming in, and hastened all I could when I found that I had gone too far along the beach; but hardly had I succeeded in struggling round yonder headland than I found the other impassable and that I could neither go back nor forward."

"Surely help should have arrived above by this time?" Halbert said; and shouted again.

No answer came, and the waves washed up to their knees. The artist had to support Gertrude to keep her on the rock.

Higher, higher it came, and Gertrude was forced to cling to the artist, to keep her footing and to avoid being carried away by the rush of waters.

Once more Halbert shouted, and this time he was answered—help had arrived at last.

Yes, there were strong arms and willing hearts above. Besides, there also was Mr. Marner, to offer heavy rewards.

Rapidly the rope, flung well out, rushed down to where they stood, directed by the boy, perched on a jutting piece of land.

Seizing it, Vane made in it a firm loop—twisting round the latter his coat, so as to make a kind of seat or cradle in which Miss Belliston could sit. Then with his handkerchief he se-

cured her to the rope by the waist, telling her to hold tightly with one hand while she guided herself with the other.

"Can you?" he asked, anxiously. "Do not look down—do not lose nerve."

"No," she smiled, "I will not be so ungrateful as to lose the life you have risked yours to save. And you?"

"I shall take to the sea. Now!"

He gave the signal, and slowly Gertrude Belliston was carried up.

He watched the ascent until the waves beat too high, then plunging in, swam for the headland.

Halfway, he turned to look back. The young girl had just reached the top. He saw the ready hands extended, saw her move forward to her stepfather, and fall, evidently fainting, in his arms.

The insensibility would not hurt her. She was safe. He, Halbert, had saved her. Another shout, this time from seaward; turning, the swimmer beheld a boat shoot round the headland, and in one of the rowers he recognized Maurice Wain.

A few minutes later he had been pulled in, and the boat's head was set towards Lynmouth.

IV.

NOT GRATITUDE BUT LOVE.

"Gertrude, my own sweet Gertrude, can it indeed be that the love I give meets return?"

The speaker was Halbert Vane. Springtime had come, and under the budding woods near Cumber Priory the young artist stood, gazing with fervent passion, yet as one who could hardly realize some great happiness that had come to him, into the blushing, half-averted face of Gertrude Belliston.

The gratitude of Lady Hannah and Mr. Marner to Halbert Vane for the daring rescue of their daughter had been difficult to express, especially on the part of the latter, whose love for his step-child could not have been greater had she been his own daughter.

"Words can never repay," he had remarked, grasping the artist's hand, "only deeds; and should a time arrive when deeds may, rely on me. But for you, Gertrude must have perished. She could never have resisted the break of the waves. Help would have come too late."

Vane hardly comprehended his own feelings as he listened. Gladness, joy, hope, fear. Gertrude certainly owed her life to him; but could he make an unbecoming use of such a claim upon her gratitude? Assuredly not.

Better still go to Clovelly; so Maurice Wain advised; only this time his friend would not listen. How could he go when Gertrude was ill? Not seriously; but who could tell what would be the result of such a shock to her nervous system?

The elder artist shrugged his shoulders.

"My poor Hal, your feet are already in the outer meshes of the web," he said. "I fear you are past rescue."

"It is true, Wain. Fate, you perceive, was against me. I would not—I cannot, old fellow, go, until I have seen her once more!"

And he did; only, however, as she passed, pale and weak, to the carriage, with its four horses, that was to take the Marner party to Barnstaple. Their departure had been hastened, for the sight of the sea, the rocks—the scene where she had stood so near the verge of death—had so nervous an effect on the young girl, that the doctor had advised Mr. Marner to take her home.

"I want so much to thank you, Mr. Vane," she said, with a smile, as she extended her little hand; "but yet I can't—I am so foolish; tears come instead of words." But Mr. Marner tells me he has invited you to Cumber. Then I will be stronger, and have rare opportunities."

Vane, bowing over the small white hand, murmured a response about the pleasure his being able to assist her had been, and his earnest hope for her speedy recovery.

"We shall see you at Cumber, shall we not?"

How could he say no with her dark eyes upon him, with that lingering pressure of her slender fingers, on his palm! Vane promised, with a fluttering heart, and kept his word.

For a month now he had been at the Priory, partly as a guest, partly professionally,—Mr. Marner commissioning several sketches of different views on his estate, and the artist had no longer the strength to refuse.

"Let me enjoy her presence while I can," he reflected. "Surely I can keep a lock on my lips? One day I shall hear she is engaged, that she is about to be married. Let me accustom myself to this fact, and know I am here on sufferance for a season."

But what lover yet found lock strong enough to silence his tongue, especially while in his lady's eyes he reads encouragement rather than reproof?

Coming home from a sketching expedition this bright spring day, he had met Gertrude in the woods. And as they talked, suddenly, how he could never rightly remember, his confession had not only been made, but he had learned also that he had been beloved.

"I might say, Halbert," she answered him, glancing up in her old, shy, arch way, "how could it be otherwise? Who better has a right to the life that you have saved? But for you, love or hate would be alike to me now."

"Truly; but," and his countenance changed—"but if gratitude alone urges you to give me

the affection I crave—if, but for the service I rendered, another might have found greater favour in your eyes—"

"You would forego my hand in that one's favour?" she smiled.

"Yes; for your sake, dearest."

"Since," with a pretty, disdainful pout, "my hand is held so lightly, I regret that there is not another."

"Lightly!" exclaimed Vane. "Gertrude, were you to tell me that another existed more fortunate in your love than I, I would wish you every happiness, and go—outwardly with a smile, inwardly with a broken heart!"

Her voice shook; tears started to the girl's eyes.

"Halbert," she exclaimed, as she held her hands to him, "do you think I could bear that! Do you think there could be another! Do not insult the pure love I feel by considering it the mere outcome of gratitude!" She paused. Her eyes fell; the colour rose; than she added, almost in a whisper, "Do you remember that afternoon at Watersmeet? I think I loved you then!"

"My angel!" And he folded her in rapture to his breast.

So, under the pleasant spring woods they wandered, forgetful of time, until the Priory clock, striking, warned them of the passing hours, and they prepared to part.

"And you prefer, dearest," said Vane, looking wistfully at her, "to make our love known to Lady Hannah and Mr. Marner yourself?"

"I do, indeed, Halbert!" she rejoined. "Trust me, though it is not the conventional course, in this case it will be wiser. I can say that which you could not speak."

"They will never consent, Gertrude. What am I? What have I to offer you?" he remarked, despondingly.

"You are the man," she smiled, as she moved from him, "who has saved my life, and given me a true, honest love. If mamma will not consent, why, then, we must consider."

Laughing, she tripped from him, and Vane sauntered back into the woods.

Meanwhile, Gertrude, when out of sight, slackened her pace. Despite her cheerfulness, she knew very well the scene she would have to go through with Lady Hannah. My lady's rage and indignation would be very great at the mere idea of such a misalliance for her daughter.

Yet surely an artist was in social rank the equal of a merchant or a brewer. As to money—well, it was that to which the girl referred when she remarked, "I can say that which you couldn't say." If Lord Belliston's widow married again, the bulk of his wealth was to go to his two children, to be under their whole and sole control on their coming of age. And Lord Belliston's widow had married again. "How rich I am!" thought Gertrude. "But Halbert shall not know if I can help it until after we are married."

Reaching the terrace, she proceeded to the morning-room, where she was certain at that hour to find her ladyship. She was rather pleased than otherwise to discover papa also there.

Lady Hannah, a tall, rather thin, cold-expressed, high-featured, handsome woman, was leaning on a couch, reading; Mr. Marner was making calculations in his note-book—puzzling calculations, for every now and then he thoughtfully rubbed his right eyebrow with the top of his gold pencil-case.

"How peaceful they look!" thought Gertrude, unable to repress a smile. "How little they guess the bombshell about to burst in their midst! The calm before the storm! Let me think of Halbert, and take courage!"

So saying, turning the handle of the glass doors, she entered. Both glanced up, then were about resuming their occupations, when Gertrude, advancing, said, quietly, "I am sorry to disturb you, mamma, but that has just occurred which I think will surprise you. I trust it will not pain; but I have felt that not any time should be lost before I let you know."

"Know!" ejaculated her ladyship, in her cold, high-pitched tones. "Surprise—pain—me! Whatever do you mean, child?"

"That just now, mamma, Mr. Vane has proposed to me; he has asked me to be his wife!"

"What?" In her amazement at such audacity her ladyship could say no more for a space; then, "He—he has dared—he has had the impertinence to ask you to be his wife!—you, Lord Belliston's daughter! Was ever the like heard of? This comes of treating such people as equals!"

"Such a person, mamma, saved my life!" put in Gertrude.

"True; and has received our thanks! Propose to you! Of course, my darling, you gave him a proper reply!"

"Don't be angry, mamma, but—I love Mr. Vane, and have accepted him."

The words were calmly but firmly spoken.

(To be continued.)

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