

THE  
STONE DRAGON



OTHER TRAGIC AND  
ROMANCES  
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# THE STONE DRAGON

## CHAPTER I

**M**Y father's account of his last visit to Furnivaux Castle, which I found in his journal some years after his death, enlightened me concerning the cause of his disagreement with my great-aunt Barbara. In response to an imperious summons he had travelled hurriedly from the south of France to the remote corner of Westmoreland where her estate lay; no sooner had he reached the portico than the old woman confronted him, and began to discuss a new plan for restoring his shrunken fortunes, by a marriage compact between myself and one of her great nieces, either Rachel or Mary, both of whom were children in the house. I was fifteen years old then, Rachel thirteen, and Mary ten. The ceremony was to take place at once; and I was to travel for some years before claiming my child-wife.

My father refused indignantly : scarce had his decisive words been spoken ere Lady Barbara turned away angrily.

‘Fool, is there no changing you?’ she cried.

He understood her peculiarities, and despite his acknowledgment that she was a gross and materialistic woman, who held no views beyond this world, and whose chief enjoyment was to interfere mischievously with the affairs of other folk, his kinship made him treat her with respect.

‘None,’ he replied. ‘My boy shall not be forced into bondage before he knows what love means. I would rather he begged for his bread than wronged body and soul.’

She swung round and showed a menacing face. ‘You have refused what I had set my heart on!’ Her voice softened: ‘’Tis for the love I bear you, Alston. I want to help you; remember that I am your mother’s sister. Don’t refuse me.’

‘Aunt,’ he said painfully, ‘it may not be. I cannot sin against my son.’

She came still nearer. ‘Well, so be it,’ she muttered in his ear. ‘Others will suffer for your obstinacy. I know what my project meant; but you, with your blind gropings after light, will never see. Nay; you come no further into my house; this is no place for you!’

The door was closed violently, and my father passed along the dark avenues to the village. He

was with me in two days ; but, although I pressed him often (being curious to hear all about Furnivaux, which I had never seen), he refused to disclose either the cause or the result of his visit.

Before two years had passed, however, I found myself, by a curious trick of fortune, in the vicinity of Furnivaux Castle. I had suffered from an acute attack of brain fever, and when convalescent had been ordered by the doctor to taste the air of Marlbrok-over-Sands, a quaint watering-place at the mouth of the Lamber estuary. My father was engaged at the time in preparing for the press his volume of *Philosophical Discussions*, and, although he would willingly have accompanied me, I chose rather to take Jeffreys, a man who had been his valet in former times, but who held now the posts of confidant, secretary and checker of the domestic accounts—a faithful old servant of a type unknown to the present generation.

At first my father was averse to my visiting Marlbrok. He had suggested Nice or Mentone, fancying that the bustle of foreign life would act as a tonic ; but as he heard of the marvellous strengthening virtues which, according to Doctor Pulteney, belonged to the Lamber water, he consented, and after strictly enjoining me not to go within at least a mile of Furnivaux, travelled with me, and left me with Jeffreys at an ancient inn.

On the fourth evening of my stay I strolled with Jeffreys to a large hill whose seaward side is perfectly precipitous, but which is easily climbed landward by a winding sheep-path. When I had reached the summit I threw myself on the grass and rested for a while, gazing at the misty outline of Man; then when my dimmed eyes had cleared I turned and saw high on the side of a far-distant inland hill an enormous building, which at first sight appeared on fire, for the westering sun struck full on the great square windows. A grove of majestic trees gloomed to the left, and a park besprinkled with herds of deer sloped downward to the furthest recess of the estuary.

A shepherd was training a dog near the place where I sat: regardless of Jeffrey's deprecations, I called to him, and inquired the name of the house.

'Furnivaux Castle, young sir. Lady Barbara Verelst's place,' he replied.

'What?' I cried. 'Tell me all about it. Have you ever been there? What is it like?'

Before he could answer Jeffreys interposed. 'Come, Master Ralph, it is growing chill; we shall have Doctor Pulteney here if you take cold.'

But I took no heed of him, and despite his attempted hindrance obtained all the necessary information concerning the way. An evil desire to disobey my father filled me: it seemed as if

the glamour of the house had cast a spell over me, and as I was hurried away by Jeffreys, I resolved to take advantage of him in the early morning, and to visit Lady Barbara.

I slept little that night, but lay watching the dawn creep over the sea, and listening to the plaintive chirping of birds. As the cracked bell of Marlbok-St.-Mary's struck six I sprang from my bed, dressed hurriedly, and after a quiet laugh at the thought of what Jeffreys' consternation would be when he discovered my absence, I slipped from the house, and followed the path the shepherd had described.

It led through a long wood of small trees, matted with bracken and sedge, and crossed by many rivulets that ran down to the sea. There was much honeysuckle—so sweet that life grew absolutely perfect: I gathered a large bunch, wherein lay many bees; and chanting extempore rhymes I hurried onward.

When I reached the terrace of Furnivaux it was nearly breakfast-time. The hall door, half open, revealed a vista of ancient pictures. As I knocked there timidly, an ancient serving-man in fawn livery appeared. Something, perhaps my resemblance to my father, amazed him, and he bade me enter at once.

'I wish to see Lady Barbara Verelst,' I said.

He ushered me into a small, white-panelled

room. 'Her ladyship will be with you very soon,' he replied.

Meanwhile I arranged the honeysuckle in a large china dish. As I was doing this a slight noise disturbed me, and looking up I saw a white-frocked little girl eyeing me very intently. A black Persian cat lay in her arms, rubbing its head on her shoulder.

'*Cousin Mary!*' I cried.

The child dropped the cat and ran forward to bring her tiny mouth to mine. But even as she kissed footsteps came, and she drew back alarmed. I took the honeysuckle and flung it all into her apron, and she, as if fearing to be seen, made for another door and disappeared.

Then Lady Barbara entered. There was nothing of the patrician in her appearance. Clad in a plain brown dress with a narrow collar of lace, she might well have passed for a housekeeper who had no liking for bright colour. Her face was round and russet, with a broad low forehead that was covered with an intricate network of wrinkles. Her eyes were small and sherry-coloured, and her teeth, which (as I heard afterwards) were natural, glistened like regular pieces of ivory. Altogether she struck me as a sharp bargain-driving country-woman, with a good deal of craft, and an underlying vein of sarcastic humour. As she saw me she courtesied very low.

‘So you are Ralph, or Rafe, as I love best to say it,’ she said. ‘Well, you are very welcome here, though your father and I got across at our last meeting. But I suppose he has thought better of my proposal, and sent you now.’ Here she looked at her watch, a massive gold and crystal globe that swung from her girdle. ‘The girl is a long time!’ she exclaimed.

Before I could open my mouth to declare the truth about my father, a rustling of silks came, and a girl swept through the doorway. She was about fifteen years old, but might well have passed for twenty. Tall and slender in figure, and with a face so perfectly, so strangely lovely, it compelled me to make a simile of a flame resolving at the lambent crest into a star. She moved towards me, and with no assumption of modesty, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. I have no idea how she was dressed, but as I write comes a recollection of the flower called ‘crown imperial,’ lying on a web of red golden hair.

Lady Barbara shrieked in affected dismay. ‘My dear Rachel!’ she cried, ‘you are forgetting yourself; Rafe is not a little boy—he’s seventeen—he’s a *man*!’

Rachel Verelst turned to her, uplifting luminous eyes: ‘O aunt,’ she said, with a sigh of relief, ‘it is most delicious to see a *man*. I am



Miranda — he Ferdinand. Cousin (mincingly), you're the first man I've seen for two years, except of course the servants, and they don't count with such people as your lowly handmaid.'

Something about her—perhaps the fact that her manner was so opposed to that with which I had endowed my ideal woman—fascinated me at once. Never before had I seen such radiant beauty: never before had I known a woman lay herself out so coquettishly to attract attention. She was unlike anything I had ever dreamed of, and even as I stood I felt myself become enthralled. There was such admiration, too, in her glance—admiration of the most flattering kind. All suddenly I sprang high in self-esteem.

'A handsome couple,' the old woman said pointedly. 'One fair as day: the other, as Shakespeare says somewhere, black as night. Yes, day and night! Now pray let me see you walk together to the breakfast-room. I will waive etiquette for once, and you shall take precedence. Ah, yes, sir, your arm was given gracefully; I am quite satisfied with your manner. You are a Verelst, though your name is Eyre.'

With many comments upon the picture we made, she followed us to a small parlour hung with red velvet, embossed with earl's coronets in gilt. A light meal was spread. The aroma of

coffee filled the air, and after the footman had brought in the hot dishes, a gust of fresher sweetness came as Mary, shyly bedecked with honeysuckle, entered and sat at my side. Lady Barbara took no heed of her appearance, so bent was she on her own plans.

‘So your father has really conquered his prejudices,’ she remarked. ‘I knew all the time that they meant nothing (poor Alston, he was always feather-brained!), and I did not believe that he would have held out so long. Well, forgive and forget. It does my heart good to see you and Rachel at table together; I am almost inclined to sing *Nunc Dimittis* at once!’

Something in the exultancy of her voice suppressed my avowal that, overpowered by curiosity and attraction, I had come clandestinely. It was not from kindness that my tongue refused its office, but rather of a dread of how she might act.

‘Did he send any message, any writings?’ she inquired sharply.

I shook my head.

‘Ah, the rogue!’ she said. ‘He’s proud of you; he knows that your presence is enough to explain all. Ay, and a very good recommendation to my favour! Alston had ever a little of the diplomatist. Again let me assure you that nobody could be more welcome.’

So the meal passed. Often Rachel turned to

me with proudly sweeping eyes, and brought her face so near mine that I could see my reflection in each apple. For one so young her wit was brilliant and sharp-edged, but the vivid outlines of her colouring prevented me from seeing anything unmaidenly in her demeanour. There was depth mingled with unstableness in her character; and although against my will I was allured, I could not help feeling a sort of oppression, as if the air were becoming too heavily perfumed. Two centuries ago she might have shone as a king's mistress. When I looked at her sister, timid, frail, and shrinking, it was as if a draught of cool air rippled across my temples.

Once the child essayed to speak. 'Cousin Rafe,' she said softly, 'will you tell me after breakfast what the world is like. I don't mean the country or the little market towns, but those places that one reads about. Is Venice like Mrs. Radcliffe paints it in the *Mysteries of Udolpho*?'

Lady Barbara began to laugh rather coarsely. 'What is the girl raving about?' she said, turning contemptuously to Rachel. 'Does she think that at my age I've nothing better to do than to listen to puerile descriptions. My dear Rafe, do not trouble with her. Rachel, I wonder you permit his attention to be distracted.'

Great tears rolled down Mary's cheeks. I was

angered. 'I like to hear her talk,' I said chivalrously.

At this my great-aunt laughed again, but Rachel, with wonderful tact rose and embraced her sister. If she had not done so I believe that I should have hated her. Even Lady Barbara was pleased.

'You are a good girl, Rachel,' she said, patting her shoulder. 'Now, Mary, you must forgive my querulousness.'

She took Rachel's hand and drew her from the table. As she reached the door she paused.

'Rafe,' she said, 'can you amuse yourself till noon? Rachel writes my letters and manages everything for me, so I must take her away. Mary, make your cousin's stay here as pleasant as you can: show him all over the house and gardens—or anywhere so long as he's entertained. If you care to ride order the ponies.'

But Mary, as soon as we were alone, led me to the open window. A flight of stairs descended from here to an old garden where busts and urns surmounted columns of fluted marble. A spring, prattling over many-hued stones, crossed the middle of this and deepened into shallow pools that were edged with irises and flowering rushes.

'Let us sit beside the dragon at the well-head,' she said; 'it is my favourite dreaming-place, and I will ask you all I want to know. I am not

tiresome to you, Cousin Rafe?' she added, with downcast eyes.

Our spirits rose. Ere long I was chasing her up and down the maze, quite forgetful of the gravity of seventeen, and attempting at each corner to grasp her flying skirts, but ever failing intentionally, out of compliment to her lightness of foot. Her paleness had quite disappeared, and as she laughed at me through the legs of the yew peacocks, she looked like a young nymph. She began to sing hurriedly, in a silvery voice, in imitation of some gaffer:—

'When first I went a-waggonin', a-waggonin' did go,  
I filled my pairients' hearts full of sorra', grief, an'  
woe;

And many are the hardships that I ha' since gone thro'.  
So sing wo, my lads, sing wo. Drive on, my lads,  
Yo-ho!

For ye canna drive a waggon when the horses  
wunna go.'

Every word came clear and distinct. Scarcely, however, had she begun the second verse than the sound of an approaching vehicle silenced her. We looked down the avenue, and beheld a trap drawn by a bony white horse.

It drew up near us. A familiar voice accosted me: 'Master Ralph.'

To my surprise it was old Jeffreys, very haggard, and with eyes more sad than reproachful.

‘O Master Ralph,’ he said, ‘come back at once, for God’s sake! There’s just time enough to catch the boat, if you don’t linger a moment. Word came this morning that my poor master was dying.’

His voice broke into sobs. Turning hastily to the child who stood aghast at my side, I gave her one quick kiss, and then sprang up to the seat, forgetful of all save the great catastrophe.

## CHAPTER II

WHEN I reached home it was to find my father dead. Had I arrived an hour sooner I should have had the gratification of holding his hand in mine during the parting moments, and have heard his last words. But my act of disobedience had prevented this, and by my secret visit to Furnivaux I had lost what would have been one of the dearest recollections of my life. He had died thinking of me, and as the last struggle began had stammered out that I was to yield myself entirely to the written instructions contained in the secret drawer of his writing-desk, and intended for my eyes alone.

Therein I found myself directed to spend the years intervening before my coming of age at a tiny estate in northern Italy. He had purchased

it several months before his death, and having such use for it in view, had furnished the house comfortably and revived the faded glories of the library. Bound by a solemn command I was to live retired from the world, and not to present myself at Furnivaux whilst Lady Barbara Verelst lived.

The manuscript concluded mystically: 'I have known that in your youth she will cross your path; an unscrupulous woman who cares for nought so long as her heart's desire is fulfilled. The stars declare it. Perhaps, even as I write, she may be weaving the fatal web that is to destroy life and happiness. But the line of Fate runs on straightway. I cannot tell (for the evil destiny may overpower you) what to advise, but let justice and love ever sway you, and remember that earth's joy is nought in comparison with that which follows. Beware, Ralph, of her I write of, wherever she be.'

Overpowered with grief, my first impulse was a petulant and unreasonable fury against those with whom I had passed that delicious summer morning. So angry was I with the cause of my disobedience that I did not even write to Lady Barbara, and after my father's funeral I started at once for the home he had chosen.

Here I passed seven years of irresolute work. The management of the estate was entirely in my

own hands, and I worked in a desultory fashion amongst my people, earning their affection, and being as happy as any man who has no aim in life. I had always my ideals and my recollections to think of, and I never felt a desire for stronger interests.

At last came a time when all this ceased, and I became terribly depressed. Who can trust presentiments? I have had so many—so many true and so many false, that I have alternately believed and disbelieved in the supernatural powers in which foolish people place such absolute trust. We spend many hours in mourning over catastrophes that never occur, whilst at the time that the greatest possible disasters are affecting our fortunes, we are plunged into the lightest ecstasy.

Yet I must confess that, when I received word from the Verelst's lawyer that on the opening of my great-aunt's will he had discovered a new codicil by which I was compelled to marry either Rachel or Mary, or to suffer the estates to pass entirely from our branch of the family, a long vista of ills opened before me, and I complained bitterly, because of the craftiness and self-will of the old woman, who would not believe that ought but worldly interest was necessary for marriage.

At first I determined not to go, but as the knowledge came that, unless I did so my cousins would be plunged into poverty, I gave instruc-



tions for my trunk to be packed, and left everything in the hands of a steward. It was with considerable trepidation that I pondered over our meeting ; and as I looked farewell on the gardens of my house, on the vineyards and the river, I execrated the memory of the old make-plot.

In four days I was on the platform at Carlrhy station, watching with a sort of amazement the train that had brought me disappearing at the curve, and wondering whether the letter I had written from Dover had forewarned the ladies, when a withered groom advanced and touched his hat in antiquated style.

‘Be ye Mr. Rafe?’ he said. ‘Why, God bless me, what am I sayin’—as if I couldn’t tell him from his likeness to Mr. Alston!’

‘Yes,’ I responded laughingly. ‘I am Rafe Eyre. You are from Furnivaux Castle?’ He wore the old fawn livery with pelicans wrought on the buttons, and a high white crape stock was tied around his neck. ‘You are surely not Stephen, whom my father spoke of so often?’

‘That I be!’ he cried.

I remembered him perfectly now, from my father’s description. In my boyhood, I had been told that he was at least ninety ; yet he was still straight as a staff.

‘Miss Rachel’s waiting outside in the carriage, sir,’ he said. ‘Train’s nigh upon an hour late!’

With this gentle hint that his mistress might be growing impatient, he seized my luggage and led me to the gate, where stood a large green chariot.

A woman's voice accosted me. 'I bid you welcome, cousin.' And before I could speak I felt my hand taken and held. The sunlight was gleaming so fiercely, that I could scarcely distinguish the features that smiled beneath the crown of red-golden hair ; but when I did so it was with a start of astonishment, for Rachel Verelst's beauty had become transcendent.

She leaned back against the soft olive velvet cushions, and after insisting on my sitting at her side, she gave the order, and we were driven through the stretches of woodland and moor, and over the miles of park road that lead to Furnivaux. Half bewildered I continually turned to look at my companion. Strange to say she did not wear mourning, but a gown of yellow tulle, worked in high relief with golden flowers, and the outline of her splendidly proportioned figure was visible through the gauzy folds.

Whether it was that my arrival had excited her, or that it was her ordinary motion, I could not tell, but her heart was beating wildly beneath its coverings, and floods of a rich colour sped to and from her cheeks.

Her bizarre conversation related much to the

object of my visit. The peculiarity of the circumstances she took little heed of, and having at the first moment leaped into the familiarity of an old friend, she tacitly refused to vacate the position.

‘How delightful it is,’ she remarked as we passed through the Headless Cross wood, ‘to meet a man who knows something of the outer world! O the stupidity of our country gentlemen, whose noblest aspiration is to dine well; whose noblest possibility is to hide the mark of the ploughman and the lout! How definitely you refresh me, Rafe! Your presence here has already done me a world of good. If you only knew how stagnant—how wearisome life is! Bah! but you don’t sympathise!’

This last observation was made because I had not replied, but to tell the truth I did not wish my voice to break the musical echo hers had left in my ears. I expressed a hope that she would not regard me as laconic, but rather as overwhelmed by the gladness of reunion.

Whilst I spoke the turrets of Furnivaux, just touched by the purple rays of the setting sun, gleamed above a cluster of gnarled elms. The mists from the sloping woods had ascended to the parapet of the roof and given it the aspect of a terrace in the clouds. A gaily-coloured flag fluttered in the Giant’s Tower, and I could

distinctly see the crest wrought in flagrant contradiction to the laws of blazonry.

‘Twas I who did it,’ Rachel said, ‘in your honour. Mary wanted to embroider the pelican, but it was all my own idea, and I would not let her. However, she prevailed on me concerning the motto—see—you can just catch a glimpse of her *Nourrit par son sang*, in azure letters.’

The carriage stopped in front of the portico, and Stephen opened the door. My cousin laid her hand on my arm, and we entered the great hall together. As I paused to look up at the domed roof, with its pargeting of wyverns and cockleshells, a feeling of chilliness made me shiver.

‘My dear Rafe,’ Rachel said, ‘the change of climate tries you. Had I imagined that the place would be so cold I would have ordered a fire to be lighted. This is the way to the dining-room. I wonder where my sister is ;—ah, you are there, Mary.’

One dressed in the plainest of white muslins stood in an open doorway. She shrank visibly at the sight of my outstretched hand, and it was only by an effort that she placed her own in it ; to lie there for too brief a space. Her figure was slight and insignificant, and she had not a feature worthy of comparison with her brilliant sister’s. Rachel had taken away all the awkwardness of

my involuntary visit; Mary had forced it back again, and I mentally accused her of inhospitality.

Rachel, seeing that I was hurt, turned with the intention of diverting my thoughts.

‘Pray do not change your clothes this evening,’ she said. ‘We are very unconventional here, and it is nearly dinner-time. I will show you the state bedroom—it is at your disposal.’

So saying she led me to an immense upper chamber, with a gilt bedstead hung with watchet blue. Grotesque lacquered cabinets lined the walls, and in each corner stood a dark-green monster from Nankin. Here I made a few hasty alterations in my toilet, and after slipping a spray of honeysuckle from a bowl on the dressing-table into my button-hole I hurried down to the drawing-room. Mary sat within; her knees covered by a long piece of lawn which she was embroidering. It fell to the floor and she turned very pale as I entered.

‘Cousin Mary,’ I said reproachfully, ‘why do you treat me so coldly? Have I offended you?’

Her eyes were slowly lifted to mine, and I beheld in them, despite her timidity, a look of the keenest pleasure. She held out her hand tentatively, and seemed relieved when I grasped it.

‘I am sorry that you should have misunderstood me,’ she murmured. ‘The anticipation of

this meeting has been so painful. I am not as strong as Rachel, and anything disconcerts me.'

Rachel's entrance prevented any further remarks. She had taken advantage of the short time to doff her yellow gown for one of pale green gauze, of the same hue as the sea where the sunlight falls over shallows. A pair of fancifully worked gloves were fastened to her girdle: they were made of a claret-coloured, semi-transparent skin. With a laughing reminder of the ceremony we had used as boy and girl at our first meeting, she accompanied me to the table, where the meal passed in delicious interchange of thought, during which, although Mary neither spoke nor seemed to listen I could well understand that she was appreciative.

When I returned to the drawing-room Rachel's look was mischievous: Mary had evidently been reproving her.

'You shall judge me, Rafe,' she cried, holding up her hands so that I might see what she had done. The gloves she had worn at her belt covered them now. They were awkwardly made, and on the back of each was worked a silk picture of a dagger and a vial.

'They are tragic accompaniments,' she said. 'Mary has been scolding me for wearing them—she declares that they will bring me ill luck. Do you believe in such nonsense?'

She did not wait for my reply, but continued:

‘They were made of the skin of a murderess gibbeted in these parts a hundred and twenty years ago. Old Barnard Verelst insisted on having a piece: he wanted to cover a book with it, but his wife, whom tradition reports as a real she-devil, insisted on having these gloves instead. Between ourselves, the result was that she poisoned her lord, but as he was very old, nobody was much the worse.’

And mirthfully arching her mouth, she passed the gloves into my hand. A strong repugnance to touch them made me immediately drop them on a side table. Rachel’s originality carried her into strange humours. I was not sorry when the lamps were brought. They were of curious Venetian make, with round shades of silver lattice work filled in with cubes of gold-coloured glass. Their soft and pleasant light enhanced Rachel’s personal charm.

She went to the piano soon, and calling me to her side, began to play. Never had I heard such wild and fantastical music as the first three melodies. They were Russian; savage, rough airs, which fretted me to unhealthy excess of inquietude. After the third, by which the soul is wrought to such a pitch that it is hard to refrain from shrieking, she began a plaintive air with a grotesque rhythm.

‘This is the tune the gnomes dance to on the

hillside,' she said. 'Here they emphasise the step; now they float round and round in rings; now the king is performing alone and they are all watching. My favourite is that one with the white slashed doublet and crooked face, with a moustache so long that it pricks the others. Ah, well! (with hands brought down clashingly) they must all creep through the bronze door. *So!*' Then, playing another unfamiliar melody, she began to sing Shelley's 'Love's Philosophy.' I scarcely dare attempt to describe her voice. Poets have dreamed of its likes (heard them I may swear never); it was almost unearthly in its pathos, and tears were streaming from my eyes ere the first verse was ended. How she could sing so purely I cannot tell, but it seemed as if to the accompaniment of music all the dross were purged from her spiritual nature, and an innocence left, unsullied as that of our first mother ere she sinned.

As the song went on a fuller harmony sustained her, and looking around, I saw that Mary's hands swept delicately over the strings of a harp that stood in shadow. I leaned back, delivered to perfect delight, but just as my head pressed the cushion a sob came from Rachel's lips, and rising hastily, she pressed her hands over her face and hurried from the room.

Mary followed her, but returned almost immediately. 'Cousin Rafe,' she said nervously,



‘forget that Rachel has broken down—her singing often overpowers her—she feels everything too acutely. She begs you to pardon her absence for the rest of the evening. Recent events—my aunt’s illness and sudden death amongst them—have unnerved her ; you must remember what great store they set on each other.’

The revulsion was very distressing. I had begun to regard Rachel as a woman of iron will, endowed with an intellect nothing could quail. This sign of weakness, coming so unexpectedly, surprised and pained me. Had I been more closely connected with her, I would have sought her chamber and drawn her head to my breast.

As I sat, the moon began to rise over the further hills. The rays slanted into the Italian garden, where, seven years before, Mary and I had played like young children. She had returned to her harp and was drawing forth soft chords. The night, however, became so beautiful that I felt I must breathe the outer air.

‘Let us walk together,’ I said. ‘Show me the dragon and the maze where we ran, and the lilies and flowing rushes. The heat of the room oppresses me.’

She led me silently down the broad stone stairs. The dragon was unchanged.

‘We will sit here,’ she said ; ‘and you can tell me everything that has happened in the last few

years. I have nothing to give in return, for my life has been placid from the very beginning, and the only great excitement I ever had was when you visited Furnivaux before. Rachel says that I have a small soul; it must be so, for the quiet content of this place suits me well. I suppose that I am one of those weeds that root themselves firmly anywhere. Each thing about here I love as if it were a part of me. Now, forgive me for my tediousness, and tell me everything!

Thus bidden, I began the story of how I had spent the intervening time. There was little worth telling. It was a brief and simple record of dormant faculties and aspirations, when my highest desire had been for undisturbed sleep. Mary listened in silence, and when I had finished, looked up.

‘But the awakening has come now,’ she said very gently. ‘A new future is thrust upon you:—your life will no longer be as it was.’

Somehow as she spoke my head moved nearer hers, and before she could draw back my lips had pressed her cheek. She rose, gasping, then turning on me a look of surprise and wonder, she hurried away. Perhaps some reminiscence of our former racing came to her, for I heard her laugh, light and long and silvery, as her gown glimmered through the yews.

When I retired to my room, it was not to

sleep. A conflict was raging in heart and brain. Rachel was undeniably the more beautiful: indeed she was by far the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and her wit and power of fascination were incomparably superior to Mary's. She evidently believed that I *must* choose her, and so I had fully intended to do until a tone in Mary's voice and a quick responsive beating of my own heart told me that it could not be. Mary had never imagined that I should take her in preference, but I knew now that whatever love lay in my nature must be placed in her keeping. I had discovered that I wanted no mental stronghold to surround me, but a wife, tender, loving, and dependent.

Uncertain whether a declaration would or not be premature, I decided to leave the castle early next morning, and to reflect for at least a month on my decision. Rachel had acquired a strong influence over me, and I dared not venture to free myself from her bonds without tightening my armour. So, rising almost before daybreak, I set out in secret, from the village inn despatching a short note:—

'My dear Rachel,—Do not attempt to fathom the motive which compels me to leave Furnivaux. Impute it, if you will, to flightiness. I was always fond of doing strange things. I shall return in a month—a month to-day.—RALPH EYRE.'

My meditating place was Northen Hall, a small manor-house situated about two hundred miles away. I had inherited it from my mother. It stands in a little park, outside an antiquated market town. I had installed Jeffreys, my father's old friend, and he was living out the remainder of his years in ease and solitude.

He was standing in the walled rose-garden when I reached the place. Half his time since my father's death had been spent with me in Italy; but the climate had proved unsuited to him, and he had been compelled to return to England. The affection he greeted me with was very touching. Although I had always been very tiresome, I have no doubt that he loved me deeply.

A suite of rooms had been kept in readiness for me, and I was soon made comfortable therein. I had much writing to do, and for some days worked hard, so that I might drive away the thought of my dilemma. But after awhile, when I was idle again, the remembrance of Mary's timid loveliness haunted me from morning to night, and I began to long for the time of my return.

The momentous day came at last. Rachel Verelst, like another Fiammetta, clad in a gown of dull dark green, with scarlet lilies at the neck, met me on the terrace. There was a slightly puzzled look in her eyes, when I did not give her the warm greeting she evidently expected; but

she slipped her arm into mine with as much graceful ease as if she were already my wife.

There was no sign of Mary, and when I inquired for her Rachel replied evasively. Not until I went to the drawing-room after dinner did I see her. She was alone, sitting near a window, with a book in her hands.

She gave a sudden start when she saw me. 'O Rafe,' she cried, 'when did you come? I did not know you were here: Rachel would not tell me anything about you, either where you were or why you went, and I have only just come in from riding to watch the sunset.'

Before she had done speaking I had clasped her in my arms and was showering kisses on her lips.

'Mary,' I whispered, 'I have come back for you!'

She began to extricate herself, but before I had released her the door opened, and Rachel herself entered.

### CHAPTER III

SHE gave but little sign that she had seen the embrace. The bunch of white roses she held in her right hand were raised slowly, as if she wished to inhale their perfume, and beneath their shade her lips were convulsed for just one moment.

Then with even more than the old grace she came near. Her skirt caught the gilded legs of a chair and drew it for a short distance, but she took no heed. She began to smile winningly.

‘Has Mary told you of the naughty trick I played?’ she said. ‘I wanted to keep all the gratification to myself: it was so great a pleasure to know something of you that nobody else knew. Of course I was selfish! Now, my cousin, as you gave her a guerdon for waiting so patiently, do not forget that I also waited. Not with patience, for I have chafed terribly—but still, every awakening has been fraught with the knowledge that a day nearer our meeting had come.’

And she held up her mouth, sweet and ruddy as the lilies on her breast. I kissed her. Seeing that I made no motion to encircle her with my arms as I had done to Mary, she clasped her hands at the back of my neck, and again brought her lips to mine.

‘There is nothing wrong in my kissing you?’ she murmured inquiringly. ‘When women kiss it is mere passionless duty and affection; but when I kiss you . . . O Rafe, Rafe, Rafe! I cannot say it!’

I saw Mary’s reflection in a mirror. She was standing wan and wretched-looking by the window. When she knew that I was watching her she moved quietly from the room. Rachel laughed nervously as the door closed.

‘It is well to be alone, Rafe! I never thought that I should feel the presence of a third person such a restraint, but so it is! I cannot breathe freely with you unless I have you entirely to myself. Now, I wish to know what you have been doing away from me, or rather (for, of course, I *do* know all about it), I am dying to hear the words you have to say to me.’

Not divining her meaning, I hesitated. ‘I do not understand you,’ I said.

She laughed again, this time very sadly. Somehow I felt that she was murdering her scruples. She raised her fan and struck me lightly on the shoulder.

‘Dear Rafe,’ she said, ‘I know well that you are overcome with a kind of reluctance to declare yourself. Why then should we temporise? You have not known me for so short a time as not to see that—that—*I love you with my whole heart and soul.*’

The last words came in a hoarse undertone. Then with her flushed face downcast she left me, turning once at the door, to see if I followed. But, being almost petrified with amazement, I did not move. I had never thought sufficiently highly of myself as to believe that Rachel would really love me. I knew that she might marry me to retain the estates, but not for one instant had I imagined that I could stir her passion.

The knowledge filled me with dread. Although she charmed, nay, almost magnetised me, my pulse beat none the quicker because of her presence, and I felt blinded with excess of light. A desire came for the soothing Mary's voice alone could give, and I too left the room.

Old Stephen, stiff as the mailed figures in the hall, was pacing outside the door. His eighty years of service had given him the freedom of the house. He divined my intention. 'Miss Mary is in the garden,' he said.

I went to the Stone Dragon, convinced that I should find her there. I was not deceived: she was sitting on the sward beside the monster; her head resting on his scaly back. At my approach her face lighted up, and she rose to meet me.

'Forgive me for being so weak,' she murmured coyly. 'I could not bear to see you kissing Rachel. I am foolishly jealous and—it followed so quickly after——'

'Dear Mary,' I said, 'let us forget it all. To-night I would leave the precincts of the house. Let us walk together to the moor. There is a British camp somewhere near: it will be just the place for a solemn vowing. Show me the way!'

She led me through the intricate maze to a door in a moss-covered wall, which opened on a barren path. This crossed a mile of park, and then reached a broad and hilly stretch of moorland.



Here the track was sunken between gravelly banks. At some distance rose a mound, on whose top stood three cromlechs.

When we stood against the largest, I took her right hand.

‘I, Ralph Eyre, swear solemnly that all my life shall be devoted to your happiness.’

Mary’s voice, soft and trembling, followed. ‘I, Mary Verelst, swear solemnly that all my life shall be devoted——’

A harsh cry interrupted her. Turning sharply we saw Rachel herself, covered with a long grey cloak, whose hood had fallen back. How she had followed so silently I never knew: it may have been that she had unwittingly chosen this as a night walk, but whether or no, her presence here was the work of some evil genius. She was haggard, and as the moonlight fell on her distorted face I saw that her eyes had contracted so much as to be almost invisible. One hand was tearing the flowers from her throat, the other moved automatically in front.

‘Rafe!’ she muttered, ‘Rafe!’

Mary came closer, and passed her arm around my waist. She was nearly fainting, and required all my strength to support her, but I was impotent as a new-born child, and could only grasp her elbow with nerveless fingers.

‘Is this the end?’ Rachel asked. Her voice

was dull and monotonous. 'Answer me quickly—don't you know what a woman's heart is? Is this the end of all I have prayed for—this refusal of my passion?'

I strove to speak : my teeth chattered.

'I am not an heroic woman, noble enough to wear the willow in peace, and to pass my prime in the doing of good deeds. God forgive me; my nature is small—so small that you have consumed its virtue! If only my love would change to hatred I could endure it better.'

With this she moved rapidly away. Some minutes passed in silence.

'Let us go in at once,' Mary said. 'I am afraid.'

We returned to the castle. As we reached the postern door Rachel's grey figure rose before us again. Her attitude was threatening now, and her voice clear and loud. She thrust out both hands to show that she had donned the skin gloves.

'Am I attired for tragedy?' she cried, 'or is it because of the devilry in my soul that I desire evil things about me? See, they fit better now—my fingers are swollen—with bitterness if you like!'

Nearer she came. Mary flung her arms around me, and despite my endeavours and entreaties that she should move, leaned closely on my breast.

'She shall kill me first,' she said quietly. 'My body is yours.'

Rachel's eyes were flaming sullenly. 'I am denied,' she said. 'Had you died before this moment I should have been a maid all my life; had you vowed celibacy, I would have loved you still, though the world lay between us. As it is——'

With one powerful effort I forced Mary aside and stood facing Rachel. 'How can I control my affection?' I cried. 'I had not the creating of it.'

She shook her head ominously. 'Since you are lost to me as the completion of myself,' she murmured, 'let us remain unwed, and choose poverty for the future. Who knows but we may rise to greater riches and state? I will be content with little—a pressure of the hand, nay to breathe the same air will be enough for me. Only give me your constancy! It is the thought that you will belong to another that hurts so cruelly now!'

Strung to the highest tension, I replied, '*It cannot be.*'

Rachel's hand toyed at her breast for an instant, then making a sudden upward movement, curved in the air and came glittering towards my heart.

A moan of horror was the only sound. Afterwards something bore down at my feet, and a

fountain of hot blood gushed over the grass. Mary had sprung before me and saved my life. Forgetful of all else, I knelt, and lifting her in my arms, carried her to the house. Rachel was no longer in sight. As soon as the blow had fallen she fled.

. . . . .

The bells rang from daybreak. It was a hot autumn morning, and the after-math of honeysuckle was very rich. I had gathered great clusters for my bride, and was in my lightest humour. That morning I was to wed her whom I had watched so long winning her way back to health.

Together we walked to the damp old church: she in her simplest gown, I in my ordinary clothes. Mary had ever a fond belief that her sister would return to forgive her for her guiltless sin; and she would not agree to our leaving Furnivaux for even one day.

So we were married. No wedding party accompanied us: the clerk gave Mary away, and although money had been dispensed amongst the villagers, there was no merry-making. A few girls cast roses on the path,—that was all.

Home we went. Old Stephen was standing at the door. A senile resentment was on his face: he looked as if he hated us.

‘She’s come back,’ he said in a broken voice.  
‘Poor lass! poor lass!’

Mary ran forward, her face glowing with joy. She had never harboured an ill-feeling against her sister.

‘Where is she?’ she asked. ‘Did you tell her, Stephen?’

‘No, Miss Mary, I didn’t. She knew about it, though, I’ll be bound! Perhaps Mr. Eyre had best go alone to find her!’

But my true love clasped my arm. ‘Let me come too,’ she said. ‘Stephen, tell us where she is.’

‘She’s sought you at th’ old stone dragon, where ye were always a-sitting in th’ old time. Ye’ll find her there right enow.’

The man burst out sobbing as we hurried down the staircase. To me there came a terrible fear, but Mary had a bride’s blitheness.

We reached the Italian garden. A travel-stained form lay beside the dragon. The face was buried in the thick wild thyme, but a bright web of red-golden hair was spread over the lichened stone.

Mary knelt and strove to turn her. ‘My darling,’ she said. ‘How much I have missed you. It was tender of you to come to-day. Though I love Rafe so, you were always most dear and wonderful to me!’

After much effort she raised Rachel's head to her lap. The beautiful features had sharpened strangely and the skin was ashen grey.

'O my God! O Rafe!' my wife shrieked.  
'She is cold; *she is dead!*'