

-THREE-PENCE-

# The LUDGATE MONTHLY



Contributions  
BY  
HELEN MATHERS,  
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COLONEL MITCHELL,  
etc., etc.,  
and Song by  
CLEMENTINE WARD.

70 ILLUSTRATIONS



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# THE LUDGATE MONTHLY.

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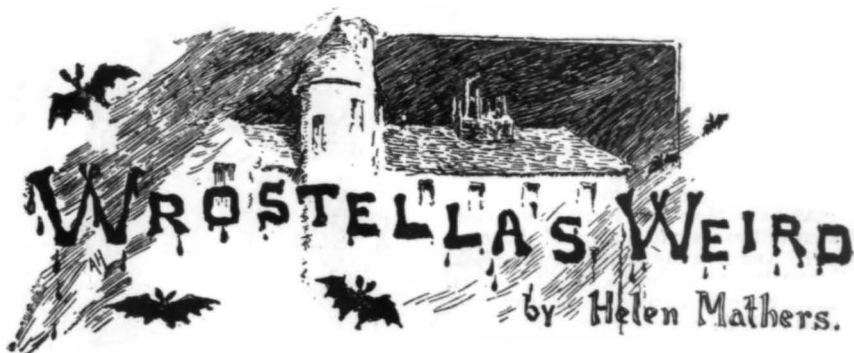
## LUDGATE WEEKLY MAGAZINE.

THIS Weekly Magazine will be published every Wednesday, price One Penny. It will contain 32 pages of stories, articles, and contributions by some of the best authors of the day. Arrangements have already been made for tales and articles by

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# WROSTELLA'S WEIRD

by Helen Mathers.

## INTRODUCTION.



THE many wax-lights on the broad toilette-table shed their soft brightness upon the silver-framed mirror and the shining racks of brushes, pin-holders, and jewel cases, on the unguents, essences, powders and pomades, in gold and silver boxes, and the whole paraphernalia, in short, of an old beauty, instead of the young fresh one, who sat in a big elbow-chair and talked to her own

reflection in the glass for company. Behind her stretched a vast, gloomy room with catafalque-like bedstead, heavy furniture, and walls so darkly panelled that they appeared almost black when the fitful gleam of the fire (sunk deep in the wall) touched them; while, in strictest harmony with their melancholy, sounded, afar off, the sullen dirge of the surf as it washed unendingly on the sea shore. Scarcely the tripping measure of dance music, the triumphant gladness of song, would have been more suitable to the girl than this sorrowful beat of the heart of the Atlantic Ocean, but she did not seem to heed it, and when presently she sighed, it was more with the impatience of youth, and life, and hope, than for sadness' sake, or because she had anything real to trouble her.

"He will be home soon," she said, nodding at her reflection, "and I will tell him I am sorry—sorry I told him 'I wished him and his Wrostella at the bottom of the sea.' How it howls! It is like the ghosts of the dead, who cry and cry, and no one will let them in. And we were both angry—that is the way with people who love—one is kindest always to the persons to whom one is indifferent. And I have found out something. It is not wickedness, it is not absence, it is not temper, nor ugliness that kills love



"ONLY ONE MONTH MORE, AND THEN FAREWELL," SAID NOËMIS.

—it is *ennui*. He was jealous, and I provoking. We are both hot tempered and said lots of things we did not mean. And that is what that wicked old man intended when he condemned his heir to live here for three whole months in the year; but we will be happy yet, Terry and I, in spite of him!"

She dug her dimpled elbows into the toilette-table, then, resting her little face in both palms, laughed mischievously.

"Ah-ha! Monsieur Terry," she said, "what will you say to finding M. Laurent here? And is it my fault that the bleak place chilled him, and he fell ill, and so, while he came but for a day, he has remained a week? And I am not sorry. I am afraid of these people; they would do me a mischief if they could—and if I had not learned to shoot, yes, just like a man, I should not dare to lie down in my bed."

She shifted her face a little to glance down at something lying among the litter of gold and silver toys, something plain and workmanlike, with steel barrels that shone brightly.

"Suzette will have it that we shall be robbed and murdered one night," she went on musingly; "she says 'there are secret passages in the house, known to the peasants, and any one can get in who likes.'"

"Alphonso locks his door—  
the poor fat fellow  
is a coward;  
and, per-



SHE POINTED THE MUZZLE OVER HER SHOULDER, AND FIRED.



HER PALM WAS RED WITH BLOOD.

haps M. Laurent does the same. Heigho! I shall be glad when Terry comes back. There will be only one month more and then Paris—and love—not the *ennui* of pretending to love when one is tired."

She laughed, the rings of silky black hair on her forehead shading her dark eyes as she leaned forward; and, in the same moment, she saw something move in the darkness and shadow of the great room, and straining her sight as into a well of darkness, made out the figure of a man, and knew that it was moving slowly towards her.

Terror seized her—a mad, unreasoning panic dizzied her brain. Here was a murderer, one of those brutish creatures who hated her, and against whom she had been warned even while she mocked them, and it must be his life or hers. In a breath she snatched the pistol from the table, pointed the muzzle over her shoulder, and with wild eyes fixed upon the glass—fired.

A strangled cry, a groan, and all was still. She could not see at first for the mist as of blood before her eyes. When it cleared, the vision had faded like a breath that, but for the moment, had

dimmed the mirror, which now gave back the semi-darkness of the vast and dreary room.

She wanted to turn, to look, to see the fruits of her handiwork, but she had no power to do anything but sit stupidly staring into the mirror, first at nothing, then at herself, who, in one moment of time, had become a criminal, perhaps a murderess.

The pistol had fallen from her hand. Mechanically she began presently to rub her little hands one against the other, looking at them furtively, as if expecting to see blood-stains upon them. What was going on in the darkness behind her? Had the wounded man dragged himself away by the secret way that he had come, or was he bleeding silently to death, or already dead?

The stupor of horror had slowly passed, and presently she got up, and groped her way backwards, a young slight shape, nearly lost in its white draperies, back and back till she came at last to the wall, against which she leaned with outstretched arms, and all the soft skin of her face dulled to a sick pallor, out of which her eyes looked blank and expressionless as a week-old babe's. The sad-coloured carpet stretched unbroken by any strange object before her.

The door was shut, the room empty of any save herself, and silent as the grave.

Her glance travelled vacantly over the panelled walls, then downwards again in search to the floor. Presently, moving like a wavering, unsteady light that is blown hither and thither by the wind, she traversed the room, and, taking a candle from the table, kneeled down with it, and pressed her hand to and fro restlessly, seeking for that which she feared to find.

From knee to knee she groped, sweeping

each inch of carpet with her palm, until she had advanced to almost the centre of the apartment, and still there was nothing—nothing—and the trembling hope was beginning to stir in her that perchance a too lively imagination had conjured up the eyes in the glass, when suddenly she felt her palm wet and sticky, and, holding it up, saw that it was red with blood.

A groan broke from her lips. It was true then—and she had slain a man; but who, *who?* If he could come and go unseen,

might he not be somewhere near her now?

"Terry," she said in a whisper, "why did you go away from me? Why did you bring me here? But learning to shoot was my fault, and if I had not learned, I should not—have—done—this. Perhaps they will hang me, and then you will be sorry that you got tired of me, and went away angry—and stayed away so long. And I will confess to no one but you what I have done—not to Suzette, who would scream and faint; not to M. de Laurent, who thinks a woman's hand should bear nothing but a rose; nor to my father, who hated my marriage, and Wrostella . . . and so if no one comes to take me away, Terry, I will



"THE POOR FAT FELLOW IS A COWARD."

bear it alone until you come."

She looked no more than a child as she kneeled there, gazing at the stain on her hand; but she had a woman's courage, too, for presently she rose, fetched cloths from a press, and set to work on the tiny pool of blood until all traces were removed and the dark, heavy pile looked as before.

Daylight found her kneeling still, but asleep, with arms outstretched as if to clasp the feet of the ivory Christ that hung on the wall by her bed.

## CHAPTER I.

"O! better ye'd stay at hame, Helen,  
And sew your silken seam;  
For my house is in the far Hiellands,  
And ye'll hae pair welcome hame."



WROSTELLA Castle, turning its sullen shoulders on the black bog-land that stretches in a broad slope from the sea shore to the range of mountains that go by the name of the Irish highlands, had been built, apparently, by some madman or misanthrope who intended to be well housed when he selected this dreariest, most God-forsaken spot in the whole island upon which to dwell.

Looking out from its windows, heavily and strongly built, as if to defy time, you could see nothing but the broad Atlantic, and the so-called settlements, many of them not more than eight to ten feet wide, that lie thickly scattered by the shore and on the promontories that jut out into the sea. All have been reclaimed from the wild bog-land by generations of toilers, but toil as they may, the peasants are always poor, nearly always hungry, and life to them means but one long tenacious struggle with death. So hopelessly barren is the ground, so few are the resources that, in this instance, nature in stepmotherly mood has provided them with.

They do not complain, theirs is the apathy of despair, that expects and hopes nothing; you cannot withdraw light from the lens in which no light has come, and not being used to help of any kind, or to do other than starve when their miserable crops of potatoes and oats failed, they did not murmur when from the fortress-like dwelling erected in their midst came neither money, nor food, nor kindness, nor any one of those little favours that it is surely the rich man's highest luxury to afford to the poor man at his gates.

One wild winter's day, Stephen Fitzgerald, travelling over a hundred miles from the nearest railway station in a jolting

open car, had alighted, and standing in the midst of the desolate waste, decided that here, indeed, was a place where neither friend nor enemy would care to follow him, and partly out of the bogwood, partly with materials brought from a great distance, Wrostella was reared and furnished, and with some old servants, as sour of visage as himself, its master entered in, and dwelled there until he died.

Even if the castle had wished to buy, the starving peasants had nothing to sell, and for such things as might not be stored the bog-land was traversed once or twice a week by the cross old man who ruled the kitchen, and was in turn ruled by Mr. Fitzgerald, who lived entirely among his books, save when he took long walks by the sea shore, or for distraction visited the shooting gallery, which was the only unusual feature in the otherwise commonplace house. Here, with every modern appliance around him to test his skill, he would practice for hours, but what pleasure he found in his great proficiency it would be hard to say, unless, indeed, he expected an opportunity for testing it that never came.

What was the secret of his life? What had soured and driven him out from his kind to a solitary existence from which all the sweet uses of life had been extracted?

Even his own family did not know; but one of them, having successfully tracked him to the desert, retired shuddering, and Stephen Fitzgerald was troubled by visitors no more.

With all his callousness to his fellow creatures, he was a just man, and his relations believed themselves secure of the very considerable fortune he had it in his power to leave; but when he died—of an accident in his shooting-gallery—it was charitably said, though others gave it a harsher name—it was found that he had affixed a curious condition to the inheritance of the property, viz.: that his heir should live for four consecutive months out of each year at Wrostella. If he refused to do this (or his frivolous wife for him, which was highly probable) the next heir should inherit, and if he, too, refused the condition attached, then the next, until all Stephen's desirable kin had been gone through till only the very poorest remained.

His heir *did* refuse. He was a rich man and able to throw up two thousand a year rather than cross his wife.

The next in succession being extravagant,

and therefore needy, came over to Wrostell, shuddered, groaned, but decided that with the aid of a few choice spirits, French novels, French brandy, and a good cook, he might survive the ordeal, and accepted the heirship; but, before entering upon it, he went to Paris. Here, in his anxiety to take a good fill of pleasure before his enforced fast, he overdid the pleasure—and died.

Terence came next on the list—Terry, who had only a capful of sunny curls, a pair of Irish blue eyes, and Irish wit, an Irishman's warm heart, and a voice and way that made all the women love him almost before they had looked at him! Money he had none, or, perhaps, five and twenty would not have found him unmarried still; but he did not happen to be wanting to marry anyone very particularly when, after attending his cousin's funeral at Paris, he found himself the next heir, and immediately after—met Noémie.

A creole, born in the South and reared in the lap of Paris, with a father rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Noémie was lovely, spoiled, petulant, and the most charming little person possible, and far too dangerous to the peace of any man who saw her to be the very least in danger herself.

The father found her lovers a constant embarrassment, and at last, following the French fashion, selected a husband, whom he in every way considered suitable to her, and duly presented him to the young lady's inspection.

He was a Frenchman, young, rich, handsome and romantic; moreover, he had the reputation of being extreming successful with the fair sex, and Noémie's heart throbbed a little—not much—at

his impassioned and practised love-making, and was indeed weighing him in the balance, when her father brought young Terence Fitzgerald home to dinner, and M. Laurent's chance was lost.

Noémie's father cursed himself for a fool, when into the girl's

"Where the <sup>dark eyes splendour,</sup>  
warm light loves to dwell,"

came a light that only the young Irishman had known how to bring there—an Irishman with nothing to offer, but a miserable castle in the middle of a bog, and a paltry two thousand a year, on which to keep a young woman steeped to the very lips in the luxuries and refinements of Paris!

It was not Terry who ventured to make any such outrageous proposal to her father, but Noémie herself who calmly informed M. Richepin that she loved Terry, that Terry loved her, and that if she were not allowed to marry him she would die.

Noémie's father laughed, and told her to begin at once, which she promptly did by refusing to eat; and meanwhile, Terry was forbidden the house, and M. Laurent was invited every day in his stead.

M. Laurent came with alacrity, for he passionately loved the girl, quite apart from her money, and did not believe in her having more than an ephemeral fancy for Terry.

When he kissed her hand, she promptly boxed his ears; when he tried his well-known, and usually effective style of love-making she laughed in his face, and, indeed, bid fair to extinguish any very real passion by making him look ridiculous.

A Frenchman's vanity is even a



MR. FITZGERALD LIVED ENTIRELY AMONG HIS BOOKS.



more delicate plant than an Englishman's, and when wounded, bleeds much longer than his heart; and M. Laurent, for all his love, never forgave Noémie, and might even pay her out some day if he ever got the chance. And meanwhile, she dwindled, faded, stifling the pangs of hunger with strenuous determination, and defying her father's mingled comments and entreaties, until, when from pure exhaustion, she could no longer leave her bed, M. Richepin gave up the unequal contest, and furiously told her to send for her Terry to take her away to his Irish bog, when she would die in real earnest of *ennui* in a week.

She did send for him. He, too, had suffered considerably, seeing no prospect of overcoming her father's opposition; but love lit such warm fires in their eyes, and the shelter of each other's arms was so sweet, that the prospect of four months alone together in the wilderness sent Noémie into ecstasies; and if he shook his head, and said she would find him but a dull fellow for sole company, she did not believe him, and so the formal betrothal took place. Four months' exile out of each year in the wilderness, and an extremely limited income all the year round, did not, in the least, cool their transports, and in due course the formal betrothal took place.

M. Laurent swallowed his disappointment and attended it, looking indeed so handsome and manly, that had Noémie not been blinded by love, she must have seen that he made even Terry compare unfavourably with him, while M. Richepin

angrily shrugged his shoulders, feeling quite convinced that before three months were over she would be bitterly repenting her bargain. He knew his daughter's tastes better than she knew them herself, as fathers indeed often do know the characters of the children whom they have reared with the utmost devotion, only to be forsaken for the first wandering fancy that crosses their paths.

And his heart was full of bitterness when a month later he saw the untried girl set out with such blithe gladness for the distant town that he had never seen, with a man of whom he knew nothing save that he bore an honourable name, and had a charming appearance and manner—and very little else besides—or so thought M. Richepin.

Perhaps Noémie realized then what all his years of care and devotion had done for her, and all as it were for the reaping of a stranger, for she clung round his neck long and closely, and promised to come back soon, "for," said she, "these four

months will pass like a day, father, both to you and to me!"

He sighed as he gave her back to her husband, pitying her for her youthful haste and ignorance, but it was something more than a fancy that she took with her to Wrostella, packed in among her *bibelots* and laces, her jewels, and girlish vanities; it was a very true and tender heart that did not change easily, and that was, moreover, good to the very core.

Even the hundred and thirty miles jolt across country, all traces of civilization



TERRY CONQUERED, AND M. LAURENT'S CHANCE WAS LOST.



rapidly disappearing, and pleasant green fields but a memory, save for an occasional patch by some lonely lake, could not daunt their happiness, nor when they descended from the lofty mountains to ugly, squat, Wrostella, did their spirits sink, though the gloomy darkness of the house, and the forbidding looks of the old servants might have chilled less love-warm hearts than theirs.

They brought into the place a burst of life and sunshine, and the French cook and maid who followed them, being in the initial stages of courtship, also contributed their own gaiety with them, refusing to be influenced by the funereal surroundings, or the scowls of the "images," as they irreverently termed the custodians of the castle. They even approved of the wild Atlantic, and went to walk on its shores, picking their steps delicately over the miserable cabins, that could scarcely be distinguished from the huge boulders that cumbered the ground, and, in French fashion, shrugging their shoulders at the squalor, which seemed as natural to these poor people as did all the comforts of life to them.

But Alphonse, though in love, had no idea of supporting the tender passion without sublime cooking of every description, and one of the most intelligent of the peasants spent the major part of his existence in fetching from Londonderry the necessary ingredients for those dinners which were served up as faultlessly as if for a dinner party in the Champs Elysées.

M. Richepin had lent the man, with a year's princely wages, to the young people for the time they would be at Wrostella, "because," said he, "only the most excellent cooking will enable you two young folks to support existence entirely alone for four whole months, and when the usual monotony of love sets in, you will always be able to find distraction in Alphonse's inspirations, for lovers always say the same thing, but cooks are sometimes different."

He had also asked leave to provide the young people's establishment with all they required during the period they resided at Wrostella, and he had given Alphonse *carte blanche* for all expenses.

"It was all that he could do for his daughter's happiness," he said to himself cynically, and he had done it. If anything on earth could prolong the season of love for two young people, shut up for a month in a desert, it would be the genius of an inspired cook, and they had got him.

He would not have gone, this chevalier of the stew-pans, had not beauty drawn him "with a single hair," and that hair growing on the dark head of Noémie's delightfully pretty maid, Suzette.

He had fallen in love with her at first sight, but his opportunities of seeing her in the Champs Elysées mansion were few, so that when M. Richepin, fully expecting a refusal, laid his commands on the *chef* to accompany the young pair, he was amazed at the celerity of the man's consent.

M. Alphonse, having a very good idea of what Wrostella would be, felt that, out of sheer *ennui*, Suzette would be obliged to smile upon him; and Suzette did.

The grim old servants, scandalized at the French sprightliness, airs, and ways of the smart pair below stairs, glowered, hovered awhile in the darkness, and fled.

They were replaced by cheerful, buxom young maids and stalwart serving-men from Londonderry, who bore the appalling dullness for a longer or shorter period that varied with the charms of the women-folk; still, in one way or the other, the service of the house was suitably conducted, and, in addition to the French servants, Tim, an old adherent of Terry, remained from first to last through the many changes in the servants' hall. And outside, the peasants, who had received and expected nothing from



THE CHEF AND THE MAID APPROVED OF THE ATLANTIC.

the former Fitzgerald, looked for as little from the new comers, of whose doings, indeed, they knew nothing, and cared less, being ignorant, even beyond the comprehension of what luxury meant, for to rightly appreciate anything, one must be cognizant of its true value, and these people had never learned the value of anything, not even money, which they never touch, save when, by the sale of stock, fed on the rough mountain pastures, they scrape together sufficient for the rent of their lands and pay it over to their landlord.

The sea was alive with fish and they had but one boat between them. If their scanty crops of potatoes and oats failed, then so much the worse for them. The Atlantic was before, the bog behind, and the pitiless sky above them. Help from man! there was none. They were not to know that in the future a noble-hearted English-woman was to come to their assistance, giving her time, brains, and money, to help them to bring light into their heathenish ignorance of all domestic arts and slowly and painfully teach them such industries as enabled them to earn money enough to live in comfort and self-respect, and, in a word, to raise them from all-fours to upstanding, intelligent men and women who, happy in their honourable toil, this day verily rise up and call her blessed.

But, as yet, no such gracious figure had loomed on the horizon of these poor people from whom Terry rigorously kept his wife apart, having no wish to see her young brightness dimmed and her spirit saddened by their hopeless poverty—so hopeless, indeed, that only a rich man might successfully cope with it, and only then by devoting his whole time, as well as a fortune, to the task. And Terry had but one life

to live, and in those days he was selfish in his new found happiness, and so long as he kept her happy, considered the first duty of his life performed.

And Noémie was ignorant, too—ignorant of the harsher side of life, as but few French, and no English women are; and these strange people who never begged, never by word or sign acknowledged her presence when she passed them, appealed to her sympathy no more than if they had been cabbages, and it is almost a rule with selfish youth never to offer what is neither directly or indirectly asked for.

So Noémie never saw the inside of those miserable hovels, and indeed, would have been afraid to venture into one of them alone, for Terry (and this was wrong of him) encouraged her to think that every peasant was a Fenian in disguise, and their apathy seemed to her sullenness, and the fact that they possessed no fire-arms, did not deter her from drawing living mental pictures of them as masked assassins appearing at her bedside, in the dead of night, intent either upon her life or the jewels, that would enable them to launch a whole fleet of fishing boats upon the unfished sea.

Suzette shared in her mistress's feeling, so lowering were the glances cast upon her frivolous self and Alphonse in their walks abroad, glances that were not even appeased by the gracious permission he afforded the peasants to come up to the castle for such food as over-flowed its inmates' needs. Alas! their wants were too colossal to be satisfied by broken bread, and all along the sea-board, covering an area of nearly one thousand square miles, the same utter destitution prevailed. Indeed, it was just as well that Noémie did not know, and that



IN THE SHOOTING GALLERY.

they made her afraid instead of miserable, so afraid, indeed, that she took to studying ardently the art of self-defence, and passed long days in the shooting gallery, with Terry, and the story of which she also did not know, or probably nothing would have induced her to set foot inside it.

Every modern device that could encourage skill in a marksman was there, as well as every arm or instrument of warfare now used in any part of the globe. But it was in pistol-shot practice that Noémie delighted, and in which she at last became even more proficient than her husband. And he, only too eager to invent or discover new methods of passing time, was perfectly happy to attend and applaud her, so that soon the one quaintly rich apartment in the hideous house became the one they habitually occupied. And Suzette rubbed her little plump hands, and told Alphonse that *now* Madam's jewels would be safe, if by chance Mr. Fitzgerald should be called away—as husbands occasionally are—from their wives, especially when, *mon Dieu!* they were buried alive in such a place as Wrostella. She was well able to defend herself, and Terry, watching his wife as she shattered to atoms a swaying glass ball, at which, with the aid of a mirror, she aimed over her shoulder, thought so, too, and confessed himself fairly beaten out of the field.

## CHAPTER II.

"O denia see yon castle, Helen,  
That shines sac fair to see?  
There is a lady in it, Helen,  
Will sinder you and me."



LOVE and kisses (apt to become monotonous if extended over too long a period and always with the same person) carried the young people over the first month's enforced sojourn in the wilderness; shooting, and M. Alphonse

over the next; but with the third came, to three of the party, that intense *nostalgia* known only to true Parisians who have been born, as it were, on the Boulevards, have lived on them, and, as nearly as pos-

sible, die on them, for no other place seems so good to them under Heaven.

And Noémie, looking out at the wild wintry weather and the storm-lashed sea, longed for the life, the beauty, the movement of the great city, for the flowers, the cheerful voices, the *gaieté de cœur* with which Paris infects all its inhabitants; for the drives in the Bois that she had once valued so highly; for the new fashions that would make her present attire positively *démodé*; for the evening papers that she had taken as a matter of course, but now so sorely missed; for all the shifting, brilliant panorama, in short, of the life to which she had been accustomed. And, last, but by no means least, she missed very greatly the father whom she had loved better than anything in the world before Terry came—Terry who had possessed all the charms of the unknown, and who now stood confessed in all the faults of an intimate friend. For if Stephen Fitzgerald's hatred of his kind could have suggested one method of vengeance upon it more fiendish than another, it would have been the throwing of a young man and woman, almost entire strangers to each other, absolutely on one another's society, without a single extraneous source of enjoyment for months, and if his spirit walked, as it was popularly supposed to do, it must have been thoroughly happy in observing the signs of *ennui* that gradually crept over the pair.

A man can't change his nature because he has accidentally got married, and Terry loved an outdoor life, and excelled in hunting, shooting, fishing, and other many exercises usually affected by persons whose muscles are in an inverse ratio to the quantity and quality of their brains.

He adored Noémie, but it is one thing to want a morsel of bread, and another to see loaves ranged in endless perspective on shelves, all waiting to be eaten; and the very kindest thing a friend could have done would be to separate this young pair for a considerable time, until a real hunger for the sight of each other's faces should overtake them.

They had plenty of books, papers, and music, and the immortal Alphonse took good care that a considerable part of their time should be devoted to the consideration of those masterpieces into which he threw his whole soul.

For he and Suzette, too, though having the immense advantage over their master

and mistress that they were not married, had reached the point of almost yawning in each other's faces; and the *soubrette*, after the fashion of maids of all nationalities, contrived in various ways to make Noémie uncomfortable, and more and more dissatisfied with her dismal surroundings.

It would have been the height of folly to transport French furniture and French surroundings across a hundred or more miles of bog, but Suzette groaned over their absence all the same, and looked and felt as thoroughly out of her element as a dainty drawing room cat, who is suddenly lodged in an empty barn.

She found time to discover several grey hairs in Alphonse's head, and some serious defects in his temper, and if there had been a man in the place worthy of a glance from her soft, black eyes he would have got it. Her mistress was better off than she, for there was the shooting gallery, but, alas!

Noémie had learned all there was to learn in it, and the two young people sought in vain to hide from each other the weariness that threatened to consume their love, and the restiveness which daily and hourly enforced companionship must inevitably develop in even the most loving souls.

Perhaps the fault lay most with Noémie, for a woman never forgets that marriage is a chain with herself at one end and a man at the other, and when she places the man she loves under a microscope (as a man, indeed, very seldom puts a woman), it is seldom to his advantage, or her own peace of mind that she does so.

And Noémie expected too much, and was disappointed to find that her idol was not made of pure gold at all, but ordinary clay, though, as he had never pretended to be anything else, this was unreasonable on her part—and womanly. Gradually, in her mind, he took colour from her surroundings, which were hard, gray, and full of a great weariness to this true child of the South, who had been steeped to the lips in the luxury of the French capital and whose life had been full of warmth, and colour, and movement until now.

Possibly her father had understood this spoiled product of civilization better than she had understood herself, or rather, he knew very little of the depths of her heart, and a great deal of the power that the mere force of habit had over her, and bleak Wrostella, with its moaning seaboard, had seemed to him the very last place in which

to face the disillusioning process of the first months of married life.

Gradually it became borne in upon Terry's mind—and, like most men of the better sort, he was naturally unsuspecting—that she was aware of having made a huge mistake, that she regretted it, and that after all M. Laurent would have been a much more suitable husband for her than himself.

And once that idea got firmly lodged in Terry's hot head—and he was not an Irishman for nothing—it was very hard to get out again, and being by no means disillusioned of Noémie, but only a little tired, after the fashion of men, he became passionately jealous, and, in due proportion, disagreeable, so that soon the "ruder words rushed in" compared with which their passing discontent had been as Paradise.

Noémie's bloom had begun to fade, the place was telling on her physically, and her temper—as passionate a one as Terry's own—suffered in consequence, so that both were in the mood when the merest spark would cause an explosion, and that spark came, when one day Terry received at breakfast a letter in the handwriting of a lady that disturbed him mightily, and the contents of which he did not communicate to his wife.

"I must leave you," he said abruptly, as they rose from table, then rang, and gave orders that the car should be prepared at once, and a small portmanteau put ready.

"Where are you going?" said Noémie coldly.

"I am going on business, and may be three days absent—or more. My uncle's will only insists on my making a residence of this place for four months, it does not forbid my leaving it for a short time on an emergency."

"If that is so, why could you not have broken the monotony by taking me away for a few days?" she said wearily.

"Have you found it so terrible?" he said, turning to look at her keenly, and Terry's blue eyes could be very keen sometimes, and even hard.

"I have found it dull," she said, with a glance that cut him to the quick.

"And you would not have been dull with Laurent?" he said calmly.

"No."

"And Wrostella is not Paris?"

"No, alas!"

"And you wish you had never come?"

"Yes; and I wish—I wish that you and your Wrostella were at the bottom of the sea before I had ever seen either of you!"

cried Noémie, beside herself at his abrupt departure, his silence as to why he went, and the strangeness of his manner towards her.

"Do you mean that?" he said, turning upon her a face so strangely altered that she scarcely knew it.

Her heart cried out "No! No!" In that moment all her weariness of his company had vanished and she loved him as passionately as ever; but she was spoiled, and proud southern blood burned hot in her, and she said deliberately, "Yes."

He came nearer and looked at her—at the young, alluring beauty that had made him her slave, and said, roughly—

"You wish that you had married M. Laurent?"

"I do," she said, clenching her hands hard that she might not break down and fall upon his neck with tears and kisses.

"You may be able to do so yet," he said, then went swiftly away, and in another minute had left the house.

But it was surely a misfortune that the very next day M. Laurent should come jolting across the bog from Londonderry, laden with gifts and messages from M. Richepin, who had taken advantage of the young Frenchman's visit to

Ireland to obtain some positive news of his young daughter's well-being, of which he had had some serious doubts of late.

Did the experienced man, indeed, think that a little company might be good for these two poor, young people thrown so absolutely on each other, nay, that even a little jealousy might not be amiss in the deadly dulness of the Wrostella ménage? Any way, it was M. Richepin who suggested this journey across the bog, and as the Frenchman was still more or less in love, and decidedly curious as to how the marriage

had turned out, he duly undertook the jaunt, repenting himself bitterly of his folly when, after many hours' exposure, in very insufficient clothing, to the most inclement weather, and without having had the chance of breaking his fast on the road, he arrived at Wrostella, only to be caught, instantly, in the grips of pneumonia, and cast helplessly on a sick bed.

Noémie, startled, had welcomed him coldly enough, but his real illness became so quickly apparent, that she had soon no thought but how his life might be saved, and

when by extraordinary efforts a doctor had been obtained, and everything possible done, and when after three days of great danger the young Frenchman had turned the corner, the girl sat down to think of Terry, and Terry's extraordinary conduct. She had received a line from him, and the extent of the hurt inflicted upon him by her passionate words was shown by the resentment he evidently felt towards her.

And what would he say when he returned home, to find M. Laurent installed here? A stranger looking in one evening at the cosy interior made by a bright fire and lights, and flowers,

by the beauty of the two young people, who sat and chatted together, might well have been excused for thinking that these were bride and bridegroom, who had brought their own sunshine into the dismal house of Wrostella.

And it was on that very night, when some of the old brightness had come back to the girl's voice and heart, that the sinister incident occurred of which mention has been made in the introduction to this story.

(To be concluded.)



"I WISH YOU WERE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA."

-THREE-PENCE-

# The LUDGATE MONTHLY



*Contributions*

BY

Florence Marryat,  
A. Wilson Barrett,  
Helen Mathers,  
ETC., ETC..

*and Song by*  
Gwyllym Crowe.

70 ILLUSTRATIONS



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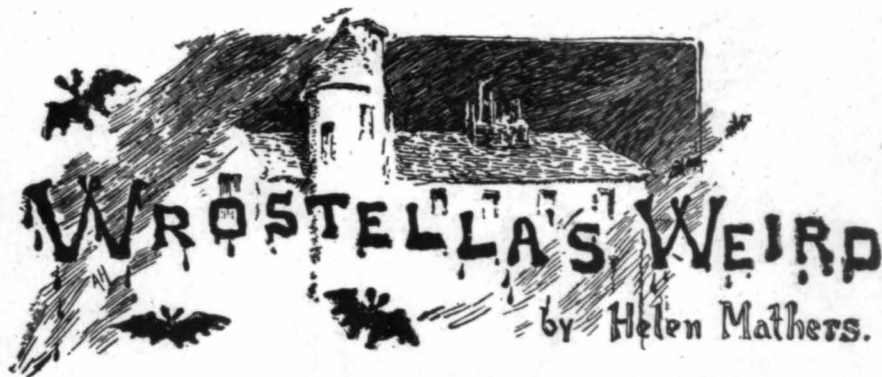
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THIS Weekly Magazine is published every Wednesday, price One Penny. It contains 32 pages of stories, articles, and contributions by some of the best authors of the day. Arrangements have already been made for tales and articles by

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PRICE ONE PENNY.



# WROSTELLA'S WEIRD

by Helen Mathers.

## PART II.

### CHAPTER I.

"O, dinna ye mind, love Gregory,  
When we sate at the wine;  
How we changed the napkins from our necks,  
It's no sae lang, suisyne?"



**A** DOOR at the end of the corridor opened suddenly, and the face of Tim, pale, menacing, and strange, appeared in the aperture.

He was looking at his mistress as she descended the stairs to breakfast, her French heels tapping smartly on the boards; her French morning gown, a miracle of freshness and frivolity, trailing behind her; her little sleek head dressed with consummate skill, and the first roses in her cheeks that her hand had ever planted there.

As if all these outward and visible signs of health and prosperity were not sufficient, she was humming an air—and quite loud enough, too, to display the quality of a most charming voice—which seemed, however, to have no charm for Tim, who shook his fist frowningly at her vanishing back.

Breakfast was laid for two in the dining room, a French *déjeuner à la fourchette*, probably the daintiest, most delicious meal to which a human being can sit down, and when served by a *cordons bleus*, not to be matched by the finest dinner or supper

ever invented by a culinary genius. M. Laurent was already there, and two menservants were busying themselves about the table, and in a quick whisper Noémie said to herself,

"Three."

"You slept well, monsieur?" she said, calmly, when they were seated at table with the delicious fragrance of Alphonse's coffee diffusing itself in the air.

"Oh yes, madam," he replied in French. "And you?"

He was helping himself from a silver dish as he spoke, preoccupied for the moment with the supreme happiness of a *gourmet*, who enjoys at once the pleasures of hope, and the certainty of their immediate gratification.

"Well enough," she replied; then, with the same curiously intent eyes, looked at the serving-men, who blundered about as usual, and remained perfectly vacuous under her scrutiny.

"I must somehow manage to see every man who slept in this house last night," she said to herself, as she pretended to eat; and it did not seem strange to her that yesterday she had been an unthinking child, and to-day she was a resolute woman, who, having committed a crime in a moment of madness, was able to calculate every risk, and hold herself ready to meet all emergencies.

"M. Fitzgerald returns to-day?" said M. Laurent, presently, whose epicurean enjoyment of his breakfast had been touched with but just one note of regret, that the charming figure opposite him was not to make the permanent adornment of his own morning meal through life.



SHE POINTED HER HAND TO HIS BREAST AND SAID, "THAT IS BLOOD."

"M. Fitzgerald is detained," said Noémie gravely; "he is grieved to appear inhospitable towards you."

M. Laurent shot a quick glance at her. She was looking down, playing with a teaspoon; and her young mouth was curved in proud, firm lines. He saw at once the nameless change that had swept over her since yesterday, and his pulses throbbed, for was she not even more lovely and desirable to him now than then?

Never had she seemed so truly adorable to him as this morning, and the *aplomb*, with which all through she had accepted an embarrassing situation, enchanted him still more—not that it embarrassed *him* at all, indeed, it was a perfectly natural thing—and so French—that a married couple should quarrel and part, and accept consolation elsewhere.

Nearly all women made mistakes in their husbands (M. Laurent shrewdly opined that his own wife, when he got her, would make as big a mistake as any), and

they all got over it, and were polite and cold and friendly to each other afterwards, that is to say, if they had any breeding about them.

And there was plenty of breeding, and pluck too, about this young wife who bore her husband's absence with such *nonchalant* grace, but had yet grown so pale under neglect, that pride had called to her aid a little rouge—which vastly became her.

But when their eyes met, he saw how very far from her thoughts he was, nay, to what pin-point insignificance he had dwindled in her mind, and his colour rose as he said,

"I am desolated, madam, to leave you; but I must intrude on your charming hospitality no longer, and will return to Londonderry to-day."

"But why should you go?" she said, the enormous spiritual stride she had made in the past few hours seeming to have altered the very shape of her eyes, and the sound of her voice, so that she

seemed miles away from him, and no longer a woman but a sphinx. Clearly, he thought, the change in her was not attributable to *him*.

"Because I am trespassing on your kindness," he said in a flat voice.

"On the contrary," she said, as the men arranged the fruit on the table, and prepared to leave, "I want you most particularly this morning—"

She broke off suddenly to tell one of the servants that Tim was to be sent to her at once.

"Tim," she said, as the door closed, "is my husband's henchman, his body slave—who has been with him all his life, and thinks that, like the king, he can do no wrong; except, perhaps, in marrying me," she went on with a laugh that had little mirth in it. "On that point, I am convinced he thinks his master made a great mistake."

A violent rap on the door came at this juncture, followed by the abrupt entry of a typical young Irishman, tall and well-grown, and of that turn of feature which is positively agreeable on some occasions and downright ferocious on others.

He stood just inside the door, looking scowlingly at the little charming and cosy interior, at the dainty table, and the two handsome young people sitting opposite each other, and his expression was positively malignant as he said,

"You sent for me, ma'am?"

Noémie had looked at him with the same curious intentness that had distinguished her glance at every man she had seen that morning; still, it was not the strangeness of his face that fixed her attention, but something on his white blouse that drew her away from the breakfast table and close up to him, when she pointed her hand at his breast and said:—

"That is blood."

Her voice was so strange, that M. Laurent started up and came to look, and there, surely enough, making a wide stain on the white blouse the man wore, was the mark of blood.

"You have had an accident?" she said.

The man nodded.

"It is nothing," he said, "an accident when I was cleaning fire-

arms in the gallery; but no harm was done."

"Then why didn't you change your blouse before coming in here to frighten madam?" said M. Laurent angrily, in his halting English.

"I was told to come at once. And I don't think Madam is easily frightened."

But Noémie at that moment belied his character of her, for she staggered and fell into the arms of M. Laurent, whereupon Tim, with a malevolent look at the pair, promptly opened the door, and disappeared, leaving Noémie, for the first time in her life, unconscious. The night's events had changed her to a criminal—just one moment of mad panic, of unreasoning, cowardly fear, and the transformation was complete—and her first impulse had been to cover up her deed, until she could confess it to her husband, or until she was denounced by the man who had stolen in like a thief in the night, and got a thief's welcome.

She had pictured him dead or dying; and the revulsion of feeling with which she realised that it was *Tim* she had shot, without, apparently, his being much the worse for it, altogether overcame her; and her senses fairly forsook her, and did not seem in any hurry to return.

Suzette was summoned, and went through many graceful exercises in recovering her mistress, using her wits smartly all the while, and marvelling what hand M. Laurent had in the business, and thinking that life was certainly getting livelier at Wrostella. And glancing at the handsome Frenchman, so assiduous in his attentions, she thought Noémie must have been mad to jilt him for a poor Irishman, who neglected her, leaving her in a dungeon while he went off to amuse himself elsewhere.

The three French figures, the luxurious table, and a bit of the wainscoted wall beyond, formed one of those pictures that a clear hand would have converted into a masterpiece of *genre* painting; and M. Laurent, being a man of taste, felt the picturesqueness of the situation, and enjoyed it.

"She has long ago ceased to find me ridiculous," he muttered, when she showed some signs of recovery; and when Suzette's eyes met his expressively, he smiled and withdrew.



## CHAPTER II.

"O fause are the vows of womankind,  
But fair is their fause bodie;  
I ne'er wad hae trodden on Irish ground,  
Had it no been for love o' thee."



M LAURENT had appeared at a moment when Noémie was smarting severely under the affront her husband had put upon her, and when, like many another spoiled child, she longed with all her heart to give back slap

for slap, and scorn for scorn, to the bitter end.

She entirely forgot the great provocation she had given him, and was only intensely alive to the humiliating position in which he had placed her; and when M. Laurent dropped apparently from the clouds, the devil whispered that here indeed was an instrument for the punishment of her lord, that she would be a fool indeed not to use skilfully.

But how to keep him here till Terry returned? One night perforce he must remain, and all aghast as he was at the cage which held Noémie, and perplexed at finding the master of the house absent, in spite moreover of the serious illness already creeping over him, M. Laurent spent a delightful evening in the young wife's company, and retired to bed deploring his loss of her more than ever.

M. Alphonse, overjoyed at having a well-known *gourmet* for whom to provide, exhausted the resources of his skill in sending up a dinner worthy of the occasion, and afterwards confided to Suzette that when gentlemen left their young wives in a huff, it was just as well that young wives should amuse themselves, instead of sitting down to cry.

And Noémie was amused, and if her gaiety were a little wild, it passed unnoticed, even by Tim, who assisted to wait on them, and whose glowering looks ought to have spoilt the flavour of every dish that passed through his hands.

It was life to Noémie to be in touch once more with her beloved Paris, to hear of her father, of the theatres, of fashions and *bibélots*, of the frivollings of her friends,

and the little *faux pas* of her enemies; and as he talked to her, she seemed to breathe the very atmosphere of the city, to smell its flowers, the intangible aroma of its streets, and her heart throbbed with longing for the time when she would once more be in the midst of it all.

"She is sick of him already, and beginning to wish she had married me," said M. Laurent, as he went to bed that night. "Heavens! to drive her to such a place as this, and to leave her alone here, with that eternal dirge, as for universal death, wailing on the shore!"

He shivered at the sound, but soon began to shiver in real earnest, and by morning was so seriously ill, that the extremely difficult task of getting a doctor had to be undertaken, Tim volunteering for the purpose, as he wished at the same time to execute a little commission for himself that he had no mind to entrust to anybody else.

The doctor came. He had been summoned once before to Wrostell, but on a different errand, and he glanced curiously at the shooting gallery, as he passed it, remembering what had lain there when last he had crossed its threshold.

"Does he walk still?" he said curiously to Tim, who was conducting him.

"Who says so, sir?" enquired the young Irishman quickly.

"Oh! then it doesn't," said the doctor drily, and said no more.

He did his best for M. Laurent, wondering not a little at his presence there, and at the absence of the husband of the most lovely little creature he had ever beheld even in a country famous for its fair women, and went away at last with an odd feeling that he had stepped out of his own prosaic life into a bit of romance, in which all the figures were French and uncommon.

For Suzette and Alphonse between them nursed the sick man devotedly, the latter preparing all sorts of delicacies that the invalid could not touch; and Noémie, left alone, had ample leisure in which to reflect on Terry's misdemeanours, now more deeply aggravated by the fact that he had not written a line to her since his departure, so that she knew neither where he was, nor when to expect his return.

True, she had behaved outrageously at his departure, but his hot Irish temper had flamed out just as violently as hers, and he had treated her discourteously; and

pride arose, forbidding her heart to ache for the loss of his love, and actually suggesting the impossible feat of henceforth living her life without it.

Some women might do so, indeed many do—but Noémie was not one of them. As the days went by, a feeling of almost physical cold and wretchedness oppressed her, for it was a new and extraordinary sensation to her to be treated like a naughty child, and, as it were, put in a corner, and left to mind and care for herself, not knowing how. Her heart went out then to her father—the father whose lifelong devotion she had slighted for this charming stranger, who had ceased so quickly to be charming, and who had seized the very first opportunity to leave her.

But all these phases of feelings, and many others, passed, and the girl, thrown at last entirely on her own resources, found them much greater than she had supposed. She was full of character, if capable of folly; and the sharp experience through which she was passing had a bracing instead of a depressing effect upon her, while the presence of M. Laurent at Wrostella gave a strong spice of excitement to the whole situation.

Mischief danced in her eyes at the thought of Terry's face, when he returned; and she rehearsed with much *diablerie* the scene when, as hostess to the convalescent, and right under Terry's nose, she should lavish upon him those attentions that his condition made perfectly excusable. For, of course, her husband might be back at any moment, and in her heart—which was of gold—Noémie knew that she would be very glad to see him, and was equally

sure that he would be rejoiced to see her.

All the same, she meant to lead him a dance; but as the days passed, and M. Laurent was sufficiently recovered to lie on the sofa in the drawing room, and sit at table with her, she grew impatient; and the play bored her, now that the central figure was left out.

It had been in such a mood that she had retired to rest on the night when one moment of mad, unreasoning panic had caused her rash act—an act that in less than twelve hours she had reason to believe was attended with no fatal results, and under the joy of which discovery

her senses had forsaken her, as has been already told. A feeling of intense joy succeeded the moment of coming to herself; then she seized Suzette's arm, and cried,

"Fetch him—bring him back—this moment!"

"M. Laurent, madam?" said Suzette.

"No; Tim. Be quick!"

Suzette looked with amazement at her mistress, but departed to do her bidding.

Tim entered, clean and with a fresh blouse, but with his expression as sullen as before.

"Shut the door," she said, "and come here."

He did so; then, as their eyes met, something in his eyes—she could not at the moment tell what—frightened her, and she trembled.

"Tim," she said, bravely, "you came into my room last night, and I shot you. I thought you were a thief. I was terrified and did not stop to think."

He answered not a word, and her courage rose.



"DOES HE WALK STILL?" THE DOCTOR SAID.



"You hear me," she said, "answer."  
"I know nothing at all about it," he answered gruffly.

"How did you get into the room?" she said, looking at him with eyes that glowed like fires in her small, pale face. "What business had you there?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Tim, his obstinate upper lips looking longer than ever.

"But there is the wound," she cried, "you can't deny that!"

"I did it myself, ma'am. It was just a graze—no more. You've been dreaming, and didn't shoot anybody."

She shook her head.

"I could show you the revolver," she said, "and there were—other things. Tim, do you walk in your sleep?"

Tim meditated.

"I may," he said cautiously, "but don't you always lock your door, ma'am?"

"Yes. But there is some secret way into my room—I'm sure of it—"

Tim's eyes flickered.

"And you know it," went on the girl, rapidly. "Why won't you tell the truth?"

"You just dreamed it all, ma'am," he said stubbornly.

"Does one dream blood?" she demanded.

"Blood?" exclaimed Tim, as if in astonishment.

Noémie lost patience.

"When your master comes home, he shall get the truth out of you," she said angrily, "and, after all, you only had your deserts. Now go!"

But Tim lingered.

"If you'll take my advice, ma'am," he said very earnestly, "you won't say a word to master about it—not one word. It'll breed mischief. He's got trouble enough just now—"

"What trouble?" said Noémie swiftly. Tim kept his eyes down so that she could not see the baleful light in them.

"Tim," she said, with a proud dignity that sat well on her young face, "you have been many years with Mr. Fitzgerald, indeed all his life, and I have only known him a very few months. He—he did not want to worry me, and so he did not tell

me why he went away in such a hurry. Was—was his errand a dangerous one?"

Tim's sharp wits seemed to be taking a long journey, and Noémie had to repeat her question.

"What I know, ma'am," he said at last, "is more guesswork than anything else. But I think,"—he paused as if again seeking for spiritual direction—"I think he went to fight a duel."

Noémie turned white as snow, and all the light in her beautiful eyes went out suddenly.

"About a woman?"

The question rushed out without her own volition.

"Yes, ma'am."

Noémie turned her back on the man, that he might not see the furious scarlet that rushed up over brow and

cheek, stinging her with a sense of shame. She threw out her hand with a gesture of dismissal, she could not have asked him another question to save her soul alive.

The door closed behind her. She had forgotten the catastrophe of the night before in the knowledge that her husband had loved some woman—loved her still sufficiently to fight a duel for her.



M. LAURENT.

## CHAPTER III.

"Yet God hath given to me a mind,  
The which to thee shall prove as kind,  
As any one that thou shalt find,  
Of high and low degree."



**M** LAURENT left on the following morning, profoundly puzzled and irritated by Noémie's sudden change from a delightful châtelaine, eager to please and be pleased, and by no means insensible to his many charms, to a mere dummy, who spoke, answered, and ate mechan-

cally, moreover, without appearing to include him in her range of vision as a man at all.

"We shall meet in Paris," he had said at parting, and she had looked at him vacantly and without response.

He said to himself as he jolted away, that she would even lose her beauty if she stayed much longer in this God-forsaken place, watching always for a churl who never came; and he wondered how much or how little he should tell M. Richepin when he saw him. And then the Frenchman smiled to himself courtly, triumphantly, for he knew women well, and the prospects of the future pleased him.

Immediately following his departure, indeed as if it had waited for it, with a politeness that is not common with ghosts, "Wrostella's Weird," for so, with a fine mingling of a man, his house, and his fate, the ghost had been designated who was supposed to haunt the castle, walked in a way that was "painful and free," frightening Suzette into fits, and greatly strengthening Alphonse's desire to return to his beloved Paris.

Only two persons in the castle seemed unaffected by the apparitions, and these were Noémie and Tim; the first because her whole attention just then was concentrated on herself, and Tim because as he averred "he was used to 'em," and thought no more of a ghost's little ways than he did of a cook's tantrums.

The shooting gallery was the place

most affected by the ghostly visitant, and as Tim had no duties to speak of during his master's absence, and spent a good deal of his time there cleaning and arranging the various arms it contained, it might reasonably be supposed that he would be able to give the servants "jim-jams" in the servants' hall, with accounts of what he saw there; but he related nothing, and, indeed, laughed to scorn the idea that the suicide's ghost was anywhere about.

And Noémie walked too—abroad among the peasants' miserable shanties, and for miles and miles along the sea-coast, until the people got used to seeing her come and go, and marking the change in her, how she had altered from a mere frivolous French fashion-plate into a woman who suffered in spirit even as they did in body, came to look at her with pity, and even say a word of greeting to her as she passed.

And she answered them at first timidly, then with pleasure, for the mere human kindness of their voices; and when she came to know them better, she saw how outrageous and wicked had been her fears of them; and the semi-famine in which they lived and which was now revealed to her, filled the girl with shame when she thought of Alphonse and his prodigal waste.

Very soon the meals were curtailed at the castle, but food and money found its way into the hovels on the shore; and in the joy of ministering to others—the greatest, the purest, surely, in the whole world—Noémie in part was freed from the anguish of apprehension, jealousy and anger, that Terry's continued absence caused her. Well, she had been a spoiled child, selfish and too happy, and wanted a good rousing lesson; and now she had got it—a lesson that would last all her life, aye, and perhaps ennoble it, did she but know it.

She envied these poor toilers who had no sins upon their consciences, who had not been, like herself, within an ace of taking a human life, and even Terry's faults grew pale beside the thing that she had done; and so, between suffering and jealous pain, she dwindled day by day, and alarmed Suzette to the point of making her write secretly to M. Richepin with alarming reports of her mistress's health.

Alphonse wrote by the same post to say that he was *désolé* to make such a com-

munication, but he found no scope whatever at Wrostella for his talents, and would M. Richepin graciously recall him? His cooking lately had been mainly confined to baking bread for the peasants, and the kitchenmaid was even better able to do such work than he.

M. Richepin read Alphonse's communication first, sighed, and shrugged his shoulders. If the cook could not do anything for these young people, then no one else could—he, himself, least of all.

But when he had read Suzette's letter, he was greatly disturbed, and would have started for Wrostella at once, had not prudence mercilessly pointed out that if these two persons could not settle things happily by themselves, the interference of a third person was not likely to have the effect of bringing them together.

But he wrote at once to Noémie, asking for news of her, and saying with what pleasure he was looking forward to her approaching return to Paris. And he mentioned Terry as usual, though his heart was hot with rage within him, and he meant that there should be a heavy day of reckoning between them.

And it was as well that M. Richepin sent a letter instead of conveying himself thither, for on the very day it arrived, Terry himself walked into Wrostella.

#### CHAPTER IV.

"And she behaved herself that day,  
As if she had never walk't the way;  
She had forgot her gown of gray."



"HERE is your mistress?" he enquired of the man who stood in the doorway, staring at his master as at some perfectly unfamiliar person.

"She is visiting the poor people, monsieur—sir, I mean," stumbled the man.

"Why do you call me Monsieur?" said Terry, with a pale look that still further confused the man.

"I—I have got used to addressing M. Laurent, sir," said the man, still with that

odd look of doubt and wavering recognition.

"He is *here*?" said Terry sharply.

"He has left, sir."

And the man, now convinced of his master's identity, hurried out to take the portmanteau from the car.

Unutterably cold and dreary looked the whole place, Terry thought, as he entered, and glanced up the staircase down which he and Noémie had so often romped together, and he turned abruptly and went out towards the sea-shore.

"Visiting the poor! What hypocrisy would she not practise next?" he asked himself savagely, as he picked his way among the huge boulders that cumbered the ground.

Terry's temper had altered considerably for the worse since his departure from Wrostella, so had his looks as well, and indeed it was difficult to recognise in this pale, thwarted, weary man, the bright-faced young fellow who had wooed and won difficult Noémie with such extraordinary completeness and despatch.

He had been away barely a month, and already—he saw it in a gasp of astonishment and rage—his own wife did not know him.

She came quickly out of one of the cabins, laughing, with a little child clinging to her skirts, and half-looking at him, looked away again as from a stranger, and turned to detach the little thin hands that would have held her back.

It was more than Terry could bear. He had loved her passionately, jealously, after the fashion of an Irishman, not an Englishman; and when she seemed to deny him thus openly, his blood took fire, and he sprang forward and seized her arm.

"Come home, madam!" he said. "Is the house so dull without your lover that you cannot bear to stay alone in it?"

She turned upon him a look of terror, thinking some madman had overtaken her, then turned pale as she recognised him, and gasped out,

"Terry!"

"At your service," he said, dragging her away, and Noémie all at once felt herself turning very cold and calm, and the contempt in her voice was merciless as she said,

"You are bruising my arm. I can walk alone."

A bitter east wind was blowing up from the sea, loosening her dark curls, and flapping the capes of his ulster about his ears, and driving his hat over his brows. He

loosed her and put up both hands, but he was too late, the wind had carried away his hat, and with it—as Noémie, in one lightning moment of horror believed—his head.

She stood still aghast, watching him as he sprang after the two objects, now overtaking, now being eluded by them, until he finally captured both, and disappeared, as if shot from a catapult, into Wrostella.

Well, Noémie was young, was healthy, she had not suffered long enough to become fundamentally changed, and finally, when she grasped the situation, she sat down on a boulder, and laughed—laughed till she nearly cried. In every possible character under the sun had she imagined Terry on his return, from Judas Iscariot down to Don Juan, but Terry in the character of a man who wore a wig had never occurred to her, and the discovery was even more ludicrous than startling.

Presently she wiped her eyes, which were as warm, as full of Southern glow as ever; and indeed, at the bottom of her heart was the vivifying, all-sustaining fact that Terry was alive, that she had got him back again, and whether he wore a wig, or had become in his manners perfectly brutal, Terry was here, and—joy broke out in every dimple and curve of her young face—more in love with her than ever.

No matter what duels he might have fought, or in what flagitious circumstances he might have entangled himself, Terry was jealous—jealous to the extent of forgetting that he was a gentleman—and that must mean very tremendous jealousy indeed.

So that it was in high spirits, and with all high tragedy knocked out of her head (indeed, she had quite forgotten all the

high-falutin speeches with which she had intended to denounce and upbraid him), that she entered Wrostella, and sent at once to Alphonse to say that Mr. Fitzgerald had returned, and would he send in something very nice for luncheon?

That is a woman's way. Her own heart, her husband's comfort, these are the things that occupy her mind most.

Alphonse swallowed the insult magnanimously. When, indeed, had he ever failed to send in good things—even though he had been degraded to the post of baker in ordinary to the village?

Then she ran upstairs singing. But half-an-hour may make all the difference in one's mood, and when

Terry and she met at luncheon—approaching the table from

opposite ends of the house—there was not a whit to choose between the cold politeness with which they greeted each other, and passed the usual compliments of the table.

Tim, stationed once more behind his master's chair, was divided between radiant delight and alert curiosity as to what had passed between the pair; and if, under his smart serving-jacket some uncomfortable qualms threatened to arise, he choked them down, thinking, as Noémie had done, that nothing mattered much so long as Terry was there in the flesh before him.

Once in the midst of that thin formal talk, conducted without looking at each other, Noémie stole a glance at the sunny curls that still clustered thickly above Terry's white, thin face, and she thought that but for the uncourteous wind, she might never have discovered the fraud; and yet, in some subtle way, it produced a harsh note of dissonance in his whole appearance, that, together with his worn look, had made his own servant and his wife fail to recognise him.

And while she pondered as to what strange accident could have brought him to such sad necessity, he, on his part, was covertly watching her, and finding a great alteration in her looks and ways.



NOÉMIE LAUGHED.

He had left a girl, he found a woman. The girl who had fallen out of love with him as passionately and quickly as she had fallen into it, was gone; and the woman who looked her mistake fully and resolutely in the face, and accepted it, was here.

She spoke casually of M. Laurent, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he should stay there in Terry's absence, and made no allusion whatever to the illness that had occasioned it.

Of Paris, and their approaching return to it, she spoke airily, and with keen pleasure; and as she sat there facing him, as politely charming as if he were an utter stranger, he told himself that this was marriage *à la mode* with a vengeance, but that he would be hanged if he played the rôle for which she had evidently cast him.

Anyway, Noémie most consistently maintained hers. From the moment that she had seen Tim arranging his master's effects in a room as far as possible from hers, she had abandoned all idea of attempting any understanding with her husband, and the longing she had felt to creep into his arms and tell him all the truth about that awful night, left her. Tim could tell him if he pleased, and Terry could think what he pleased, and indeed a strange look that she surprised sometimes on the face of the latter gave her reason to think that he *did* know, and regarded her with a kind of horror, as if her mad impulse of the moment had been a crime committed in cold blood, and rigorously to be expiated as one.

Noémie needed all her courage to carry her through that period of her life, and it did not fail her. Save at meal times, the husband and wife never met; but often, quite unsuspected by her, he watched her on her merciful errands among the poor; and while he scoffed at the idea of any real good being done (as well try to

put the Atlantic through a sieve, he thought, as to materially improve the position of these people), he could not but see how such work ennobled and beautified her, for it is the universal and not the selfish love that raises man and woman.

He went to meet her one afternoon as she was coming homeward, and said, abruptly:

"Don't you think that you are rather a contradiction?—that you can be so tender-hearted, yet try to kill a man?"

She drew a sharp breath,

then looked at him with glorious brown eyes, full of scorn.

"My sin," she said, "was unpremeditated—committed in a paroxysm of blind terror, but what of yours? I ask no questions—not of the woman for whom you went to fight a duel, not the reasons for the grotesque tricks you have played with your appearance, or why I have been tried, found guilty, and judged unfit to be your wife, without being allowed to say one single word in self-defence. You deserted me in sight of my household, you have returned to shame me openly in their presence, and I look to you no longer for the comfort, support, and help that you



"NOÉMIE NEEDED ALL HER COURAGE."

swore to me but a very few months ago, and now, you are no more to me than any stranger I may meet. Perhaps my heart might have broken, had I not found the one, the *only* alleviation to suffering, which is to do good unto others. And *that* joy," added the girl triumphantly, "even *you* cannot take from me."

They were at the doors of Wrostella by now, and passed in together.

Noémie moved towards the staircase, but he asked if she would mind coming for a moment into the study.

She came and stood in the bare, ugly room, with the cold wintry sunlight shining on her, waiting for him to speak.

The rose of her skin showed vividly against the blackness of her furs, she was absolutely lovely, but cold, unapproachable as ice, and as utterly indifferent to his authority as his love, and the thought of how entirely she had put him outside her life, stung him to madness, and he said:—

"Why did you not do your work more thoroughly while you were about it?"

Her lips curled, she turned to leave him, but he stood in her path.

"You looked me straight in the eyes," he said, quietly, "before you fired; it was *not* a moment's madness, but a deliberate aim—and you meant to kill me. You were tired of me, and wished to replace me with M. Laurent."

Noémie had fallen back before him, her arms outstretched as if to beat him off, her face a mere grey mask of quivering horror, half out of her senses with the shock of his words.

She tried to speak but could not, tried again, and gasped out in an unearthly whisper, "It was Tim!"

Quite unconsciously she had seized his arm and was shaking it with all her force.

He did not answer, and her dazed eyes wandered up to his head.

"Take it off," she said suddenly, but he drew himself up to his full height and refused.

"Better not," he said. "Wait till the wound has healed. It was only a scalp one, but—" he paused, and his haggard, white face filled up the pause.

"Oh! my God!" cried Noémie, beating her breast, "and you thought I did it on purpose—I! Could I have become a murderer in the little time since you left me? Oh! there must be some means to rid the world of such a monster!" and

she was rushing from the room when Terry caught her in his arms.

"Noémie! Little one!" he cried. "You did not want to pat me out of the way, after all. It was me you loved, not Laurent?"

Eyes, voice, passionate embrace, all told the same story, and a faint colour came into Noémie's face, that seemed to have "wilted" suddenly during the violent emotions of the past moments. But she put both hands on his shoulders, holding him back, and said,

"How came you there, and by what secret way—to *spy* on me?"

Terry looked thoroughly ashamed, but the elixir of happiness had already made him himself again. Thin and pale he might be, and a country-made wig he might wear, but he was *Terry*, and the frost about Noémie's heart was melting fast.

"We parted in anger," he said, "and I would not tell you that my best friend had been killed in a duel—or rather murdered, for there was foul play—and his widow, not knowing that I was married, wrote imploring me to revenge his death. I found the man, and we fought on the French frontier, and he was severely wounded. I had left an address with Tim to which he could write, and on my return to town found a letter awaiting me. He said that my nest was being kept warm by a stranger, and I had better return at once—unobserved. He added that he would be on the watch at Wrostella from midnight till morning for me, and the second midnight after receiving his letter I arrived."

Noémie drew herself out of his arms, and looked at him with proud enquiry and indignation.

"I don't know what he meant. He opened to me before I could knock, and led me upstairs. He showed me a secret door in the panelled wall of your room, explained to me how it opened from inside, and bade me go in, '*for that someone was expected.*' I entered. I approached the mirror before which you sat, caught your words, and then—you looked me straight in the eyes, and fired from over your shoulder. . . . The shot took effect on my head. I fell for the moment, then dragged myself up, and noiselessly escaped as I had entered. It was all clear to me—that you recognised and meant to kill me, afterwards saying



that you fired in self-defence, supposing me to be a stranger; and M. Laurent's presence in the house supplied the reason."

I fainted outside from loss of blood; Tim carried me into the shooting gallery, tended me, and dressed the wound. Then he put me to bed in a small room beyond the gallery; and there, keeping every one away with stories of the ghost, nursed me till I was convalescent. The wound was not serious, but all my hair at the top came off, and when I was able to travel, I went by night to Londonderry and got fitted out—and very badly fitted—as you see. M. Laurent departed—I returned. At first I resolved on having the matter out with you, and I was violent, as you know, and natural. Then you were so cold that you

froze me, and I thought, 'This is a duel—we will see whose pride lasts out longest.' But to-day—seeing you so sweet, so womanly to all the world but me—I broke down, and——"

He drew her gently but firmly into his arms.

"Forgive me, Noémie," he said, "it was pure jealousy—jealousy right through, and that Iago, Tim—he may have meant well, but out he goes. Kiss me, Noémie, kiss me, sweetheart, and forgive me—forgive me and forget the past month."

Her young arms went softly up and round his neck.

"I'll forgive it all and forget it all," she said, with her lips to his ear, "if *you'll* only forget and forgive poor Noémie's crime."



"IT WAS TIM," NOÉMIE GASPED.