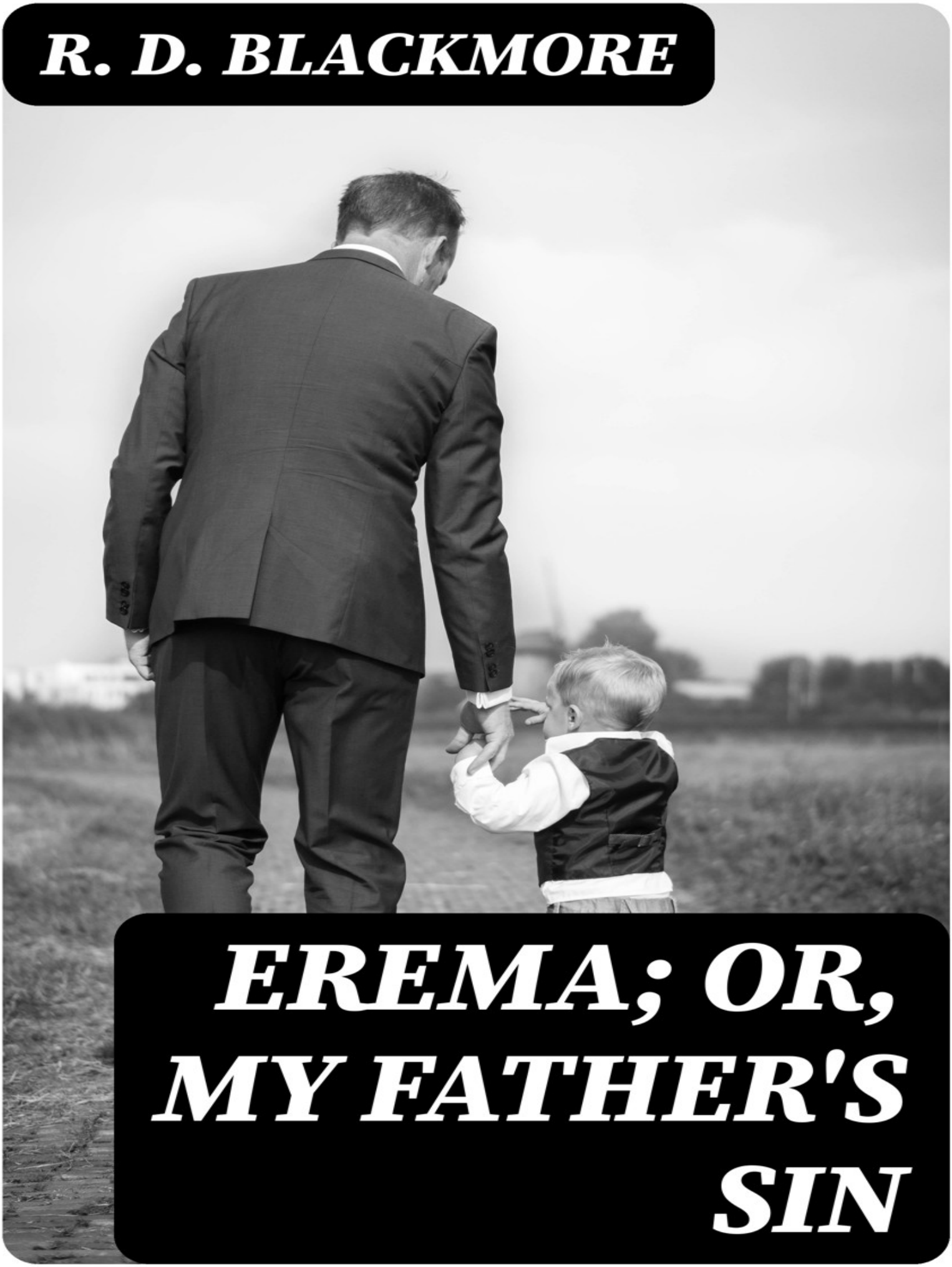
R. D. BLACKMORE



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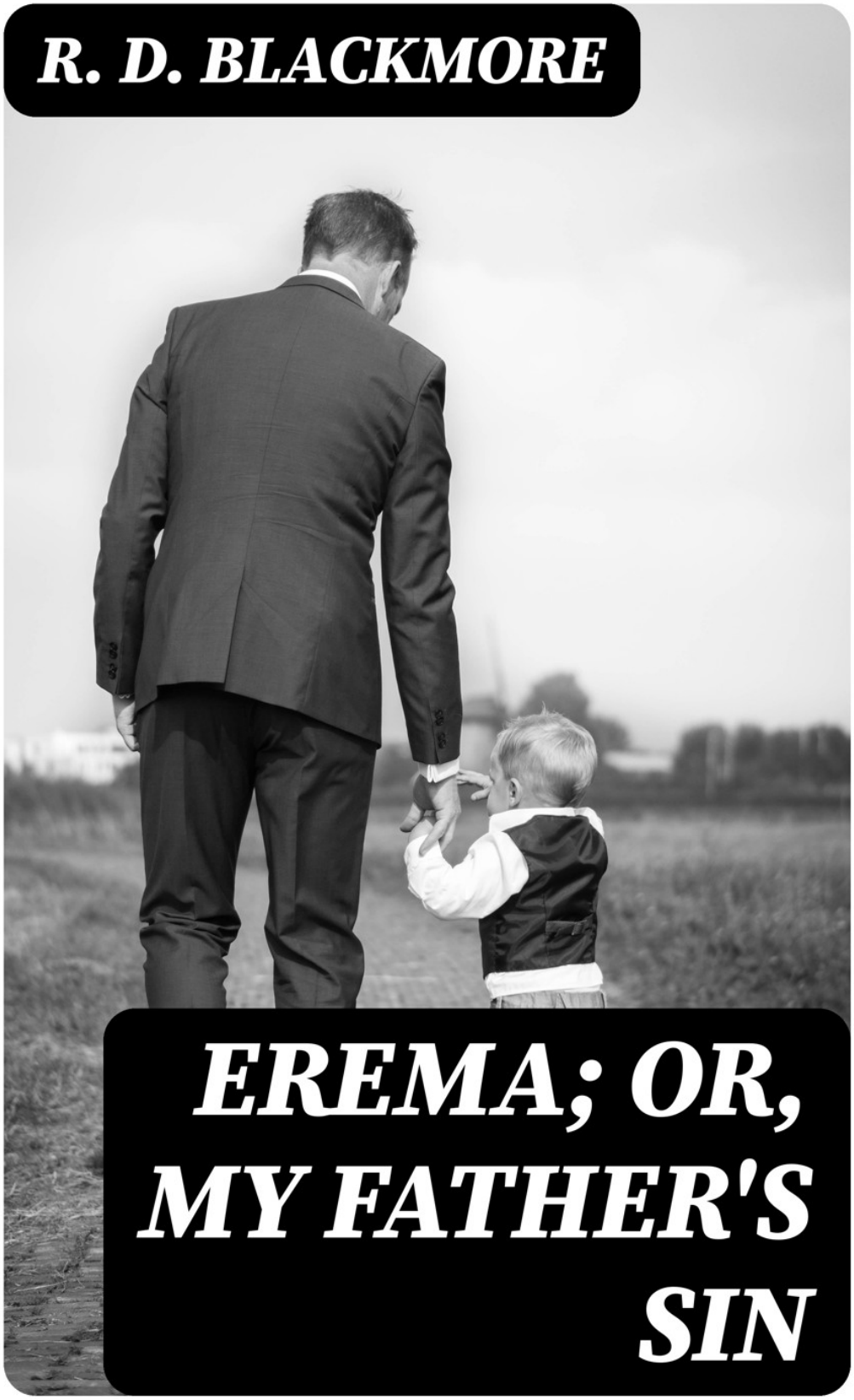

EREMA; OR, MY FATHER'S SIN

R. D. Blackmore

Erema; Or, My Father's Sin

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1877

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CHAPTER I

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A LOST LANDMARK

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“The sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”

These are the words that have followed me always. This is the curse which has fallen on my life.

If I had not known my father, if I had not loved him, if I had not closed his eyes in desert silence deeper than the silence of the grave, even if I could have buried and bewailed him duly, the common business of this world and the universal carelessness might have led me down the general track that leads to nothing.

Until my father fell and died I never dreamed that he could die. I knew that his mind was quite made up to see me safe in my new home, and then himself to start again for still remoter solitudes. And when his mind was thus made up, who had ever known him fail of it?

If ever a resolute man there was, that very man was my father. And he showed it now, in this the last and fatal act of his fatal life. “Captain, here I leave you all,” he shouted to the leader of our wagon train, at a place where a dark, narrow gorge departed from the moilsome mountain track. “My reasons are my own; let no man trouble himself about them. All my baggage I leave with you. I have paid my share of the venture, and shall claim it at Sacramento. My little girl and I will take this short-cut through the mountains.”

“General!” answered the leader of our train, standing up on his board in amazement. “Forgive and forget, Sir; forgive and forget. What is a hot word spoken hotly? If not for your own sake, at least come back for the sake of your young daughter.”

“A fair haven to you!” replied my father. He offered me his hand, and we were out of sight of all that wearisome, drearisome, uncompanionable company with whom, for eight long weeks at least, we had been dragging our rough way. I had known in a moment that it must be so, for my father never argued. Argument, to his mind, was a very nice amusement for the weak. My spirits rose as he swung his bear-skin bag upon his shoulder, and the last sound of the laboring caravan groaned in the distance, and the fresh air and the freedom of the mountains moved around us. It was the 29th of May—Oak-apple Day in England—and to my silly youth this vast extent of snowy mountains was a nice place for a cool excursion.

Moreover, from day to day I had been in most wretched anxiety, so long as we remained with people who could not allow for us. My father, by his calm reserve and dignity and largeness, had always, among European people, kept himself secluded; but now in this rough life, so pent in trackless tracts, and pressed together by perpetual peril, every body's manners had been growing free and easy. Every man had been compelled to tell, as truly as he could, the story of his life thus far, to amuse his fellow-creatures—every man, I mean, of course, except my own poor father. Some told their stories every evening, until we were quite tired—although they were never the same twice over; but

my father could never be coaxed to say a syllable more than, “I was born, and I shall die.”

This made him very unpopular with the men, though all the women admired it; and if any rough fellow could have seen a sign of fear, the speaker would have been insulted. But his manner and the power of his look were such that, even after ardent spirits, no man saw fit to be rude to him. Nevertheless, there had always been the risk of some sad outrage.

“Erema,” my father said to me, when the dust from the rear of the caravan was lost behind a cloud of rocks, and we two stood in the wilderness alone—“do you know, my own Erema, why I bring you from them?”

“Father dear, how should I know? You have done it, and it must be right.”

“It is not for their paltry insults. Child, you know what I think all that. It is for you, my only child, that I am doing what now I do.”

I looked up into his large, sad eyes without a word, in such a way that he lifted me up in his arms and kissed me, as if I were a little child instead of a maiden just fifteen. This he had never done before, and it made me a little frightened. He saw it, and spoke on the spur of the thought, though still with one arm round me.

“Perhaps you will live to be thankful, my dear, that you had a stern, cold father. So will you meet the world all the better; and, little one, you have a rough world to meet.”

For a moment I was quite at a loss to account for my father's manner; but now, in looking back, it is so easy to

see into things. At the time I must have been surprised, and full of puzzled eagerness.

Not half so well can I recall the weakness, anguish, and exhaustion of body and spirit afterward. It may have been three days of wandering, or it may have been a week, or even more than that, for all that I can say for certain. Whether the time were long or short, it seemed as if it would never end. My father believed that he knew the way to the house of an old settler, at the western foot of the mountains, who had treated him kindly some years before, and with whom he meant to leave me until he had made arrangements elsewhere. If we had only gone straightway thither, night-fall would have found us safe beneath that hospitable roof.

My father was vexed, as I well remember, at coming, as he thought, in sight of some great landmark, and finding not a trace of it. Although his will was so very strong, his temper was good about little things, and he never began to abuse all the world because he had made a mistake himself.

“Erema,” he said, “at this corner where we stand there ought to be a very large pine-tree in sight, or rather a great redwood-tree, at least twice as high as any tree that grows in Europe, or Africa even. From the plains it can be seen for a hundred miles or more. It stands higher up the mountainside than any other tree of even half its size, and that makes it so conspicuous. My eyes must be failing me, from all this glare; but it must be in sight. Can you see it now?”

“I see no tree of any kind whatever, but scrubby bushes and yellow tufts; and oh, father, I am so thirsty!”

“Naturally. But now look again. It stands on a ridge, the last ridge that bars the view of all the lowland. It is a very straight tree, and regular, like a mighty column, except that on the northern side the wind from the mountains has torn a gap in it. Are you sure that you can not see it—a long way off, but conspicuous?”

“Father, I am sure that I can not see any tree half as large as a broomstick. Far or near, I see no tree.”

“Then my eyes are better than my memory. We must cast back for a mile or two; but it can not make much difference.”

“Through the dust and the sand?” I began to say; but a glance from him stopped my murmuring. And the next thing I can call to mind must have happened a long time afterward.

Beyond all doubt, in this desolation, my father gave his life for mine. I did not know it at the time, nor had the faintest dream of it, being so young and weary-worn, and obeying him by instinct. It is a fearful thing to think of—now that I can think of it—but to save my own little worthless life I must have drained every drop of water from his flat half-gallon jar. The water was hot and the cork-hole sandy, and I grumbled even while drinking it; and what must my father (who was dying all the while for a drop, but never took one) —what must he have thought of me?

But he never said a word, so far as I remember; and that makes it all the worse for me. We had strayed away into a dry, volcanic district of the mountains, where all the snow-rivers run out quite early; and of natural springs there was none forth-coming. All we had to guide us was a little

traveler's compass (whose needle stuck fast on the pivot with sand) and the glaring sun, when he came to sight behind the hot, dry, driving clouds. The clouds were very low, and flying almost in our faces, like vultures sweeping down on us. To me they seemed to shriek over our heads at the others rushing after them. But my father said that they could make no sound, and I never contradicted him.

CHAPTER II

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A PACIFIC SUNSET

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At last we came to a place from which the great spread of the earth was visible. For a time—I can not tell how long—we had wholly lost ourselves, going up and down, and turning corners, without getting further. But my father said that we must come right, if we made up our minds to go long enough. We had been in among all shapes, and want of shapes, of dreariness, through and in and out of every thrup and thrum of weariness, scarcely hoping ever more to find our way out and discover memory of men for us, when all of a sudden we saw a grand sight. The day had been dreadfully hot and baffling, with sudden swirls of red dust arising, and driving the great drought into us. To walk had been worse than to drag one's way through a stubbly bed of sting-nettles. But now the quick sting of the sun was gone, and his power descending in the balance toward the flat places of the land and sea. And suddenly we looked forth upon an immeasurable spread of these.

We stood at the gate of the sandy range, which here, like a vast brown patch, disfigures the beauty of the sierra. On either side, in purple distance, sprang sky-piercing obelisks and vapor-mantled glaciers, spangled with bright snow, and shodden with eternal forest. Before us lay the broad, luxuriant plains of California, checkered with more tints than any other piece of earth can show, sleeping in alluvial ease,

and veined with soft blue waters. And through a gap in the brown coast range, at twenty leagues of distance, a light (so faint as to seem a shadow) hovered above the Pacific.

But none of all this grandeur touched our hearts except the water gleam. Parched with thirst, I caught my father's arm and tried to urge him on toward the blue enchantment of ecstatic living water. But, to my surprise, he staggered back, and his face grew as white as the distant snow. I managed to get him to a sandy ledge, with the help of his own endeavors, and there let him rest and try to speak, while my frightened heart throbbed over his.

“My little child,” he said at last, as if we were fallen back ten years, “put your hand where I can feel it.”

My hand all the while had been in his, and to let him know where it was, it moved. But cold fear stopped my talking.

“My child, I have not been kind to you,” my father slowly spoke again, “but it has not been from want of love. Some day you will see all this, and some day you will pardon me.”

He laid one heavy arm around me, and forgetting thirst and pain, with the last intensity of eyesight watched the sun departing. To me, I know not how, great awe was every where, and sadness. The conical point of the furious sun, which like a barb had pierced us, was broadening into a hazy disk, inefficient, but benevolent. Underneath him depth of night was waiting to come upward (after letting him fall through) and stain his track with redness. Already the arms of darkness grew in readiness to receive him: his upper arc was pure and keen, but the lower was flaked with atmosphere; a glow of hazy light soon would follow, and one

bright glimmer (addressed more to the sky than to the earth), and after that a broad, soft gleam; and after that how many a man should never see the sun again, and among them would be my father.

He, for the moment, resting there, with heavy light upon him, and the dark jaws of the mountain desert yawning wide behind him, and all the beautiful expanse of liberal earth before him—even so he seemed to me, of all the things in sight, the one that first would draw attention. His face was full of quiet grandeur and impressive calm, and the sad tranquillity which comes to those who know what human life is through continual human death. Although, in the matter of bodily strength, he was little past the prime of life, his long and abundant hair was white, and his broad and upright forehead marked with the meshes of the net of care. But drought and famine and long fatigue had failed even now to change or weaken the fine expression of his large, sad eyes. Those eyes alone would have made the face remarkable among ten thousand, so deep with settled gloom they were, and dark with fatal sorrow. Such eyes might fitly have told the grief of Adrastus, son of Gordias, who, having slain his own brother unwitting, unwitting slew the only son of his generous host and savior.

The pale globe of the sun hung trembling in the haze himself had made. My father rose to see the last, and reared his tall form upright against the deepening background. He gazed as if the course of life lay vanishing below him, while level land and waters drew the breadth of shadow over them. Then the last gleam flowed and fled upon the face of

ocean, and my father put his dry lips to my forehead, saying nothing.

His lips might well be dry, for he had not swallowed water for three days; but it frightened me to feel how cold they were, and even tremulous. “Let us run, let us run, my dear father!” I cried. “Delicious water! The dark falls quickly; but we can get there before dark. It is all down hill. Oh, do let us run at once!”

“Erema,” he answered, with a quiet smile, “there is no cause now for hurrying, except that I must hurry to show you what you have to do, my child. For once, at the end of my life, I am lucky. We have escaped from that starving desert at a spot—at a spot where we can see—”

For a little while he could say no more, but sank upon the stony seat, and the hand with which he tried to point some distant landmark fell away. His face, which had been so pale before, became of a deadly whiteness, and he breathed with gasps of agony. I knelt before him and took his hands, and tried to rub the palms, and did whatever I could think of.

“Oh, father, father, you have starved yourself, and given every thing to me! What a brute I was to let you do it! But I did not know; I never knew! Please God to take me also!”

He could not manage to answer this, even if he understood it; but he firmly lifted his arm again, and tried to make me follow it.

“What does it matter? Oh, never mind, never mind such, a wretch as I am! Father, only try to tell me what I ought to do for you.”

“My child! my child!” were his only words; and he kept on saying, “My child! my child!” as if he liked the sound of it.

At what time of the night my father died I knew not then or afterward. It may have been before the moon came over the snowy mountains, or it may not have been till the worn-out stars in vain repelled the daybreak. All I know is that I ever strove to keep more near to him through the night, to cherish his failing warmth, and quicken the slow, laborious, harassed breath. From time to time he tried to pray to God for me and for himself; but every time his mind began to wander and to slip away, as if through want of practice. For the chills of many wretched years had deadened and benumbed his faith. He knew me, now and then, betwixt the conflict and the stupor; for more than once he muttered feebly, and as if from out a dream,

“Time for Erema to go on her way. Go on your way, and save your life; save your life, Erema.”

There was no way for me to go, except on my knees before him. I took his hands, and made them lissome with a soft, light rubbing. I whispered into his ear my name, that he might speak once more to me; and when he could not speak, I tried to say what he would say to me.

At last, with a blow that stunned all words, it smote my stupid, wandering mind that all I had to speak and smile to, all I cared to please and serve, the only one left to admire and love, lay here in my weak arms quite dead. And in the anguish of my sobbing, little things came home to me, a thousand little things that showed how quietly he had prepared for this, and provided for me only. Cold despair and self-reproach and strong rebellion dazed me, until I lay at my father's side, and slept with his dead hand in mine. There in the desert of desolation pious awe embraced me,

and small phantasms of individual fear could not come nigh me.

By-and-by long shadows of morning crept toward me dismally, and the pallid light of the hills was stretched in weary streaks away from me. How I arose, or what I did, or what I thought, is nothing now. Such times are not for talking of. How many hearts of anguish lie forlorn, with none to comfort them, with all the joy of life died out, and all the fear of having yet to live, in front arising!

Young and weak, and wrong of sex for doing any valiance, long I lay by my father's body, wringing out my wretchedness. Thirst and famine now had flown into the opposite extreme; I seemed to loathe the thought of water, and the smell of food would have made me sick. I opened my father's knapsack, and a pang of new misery seized me. There lay nearly all his rations, which he had made pretense to eat as he gave me mine from time to time. He had starved himself; since he failed of his mark, and learned our risk of famishing, all his own food he had kept for me, as well as his store of water. And I had done nothing but grumble and groan, even while consuming every thing. Compared with me, the hovering vultures might be considered angels.

When I found all this, I was a great deal too worn out to cry or sob. Simply to break down may be the purest mercy that can fall on truly hopeless misery. Screams of ravenous maws and flaps of fetid wings came close to me, and, fainting into the arms of death, I tried to save my father's body by throwing my own over it.

CHAPTER III

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A STURDY COLONIST

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For the contrast betwixt that dreadful scene and the one on which my dim eyes slowly opened, three days afterward, first I thank the Lord in heaven, whose gracious care was over me, and after Him some very simple members of humanity.

A bronze-colored woman, with soft, sad eyes, was looking at me steadfastly. She had seen that, under tender care, I was just beginning to revive, and being acquainted with many troubles, she had learned to succor all of them. This I knew not then, but felt that kindness was around me.

“Arauna, arauna, my shild,” she said, in a strange but sweet and soothing voice, “you are with the good man in the safe, good house. Let old Suan give you the good food, my shild.”

“Where is my father? Oh, show me my father?” I whispered faintly, as she raised me in the bed and held a large spoon to my lips.

“You shall—you shall; it is too very much Inglese; me tell you when have long Sunday time to think. My shild, take the good food from poor old Suan.”

She looked at me with such beseeching eyes that, even if food had been loathsome to me, I could not have resisted her; whereas I was now in the quick-reviving agony of starvation. The Indian woman fed me with far greater care

than I was worth, and hushed me, with some soothing process, into another abyss of sleep.

More than a week passed by me thus, in the struggle between life and death, before I was able to get clear knowledge of any body or any thing. No one, in my wakeful hours, came into my little bedroom except this careful Indian nurse, who hushed me off to sleep whenever I wanted to ask questions. Suan Isco, as she was called, possessed a more than mesmeric power of soothing a weary frame to rest; and this was seconded, where I lay, by the soft, incessant cadence and abundant roar of water. Thus every day I recovered strength and natural impatience.

“The master is coming to see you, shild,” Suan said to me one day, when I had sat up and done my hair, and longed to be down by the water-fall; “if, if—too much Inglese—old Suan say no more can now.”

“If I am ready and able and willing! Oh, Suan, run and tell him not to lose one moment.”

“No sure; Suan no sure at all,” she answered, looking at me calmly, as if there were centuries yet to spare. “Suan no hurry; shild no hurry; master no hurry: come last of all.”

“I tell you, Suan, I want to see him. And I am not accustomed to be kept waiting. My dear father insisted always—But oh, Suan, Suan, he is dead—I am almost sure of it.”

“Him old man quite dead enough, and big hole dug in the land for him. Very good; more good than could be. Suan no more Inglese.”

Well as I had known it long, a catching of the breath and hollow, helpless pain came through me, to meet in dry

words thus the dread which might have been but a hovering dream. I turned my face to the wall, and begged her not to send the master in.

But presently a large, firm hand was laid on my shoulder softly, and turning sharply round, I beheld an elderly man looking down at me. His face was plain and square and solid, with short white curls on a rugged forehead, and fresh red cheeks, and a triple chin—fit base for remarkably massive jaws. His frame was in keeping with his face, being very large and powerful, though not of my father's commanding height. His dress and appearance were those of a working—and a really hard-working—man, sober, steadfast, and self-respecting; but what engaged my attention most was the frank yet shrewd gaze of deep-set eyes. I speak of things as I observed them later, for I could not pay much heed just then.

“'Tis a poor little missy,” he said, with a gentle tone. “What things she hath been through! Will you take an old man's hand, my dear? Your father hath often taken it, though different from his rank of life. Sampson Gundry is my name, missy. Have you ever heard your father tell of it?”

“Many and many a time,” I said, as I placed my hot little hand in his. “He never found more than one man true on earth, and it was you, Sir.”

“Come, now,” he replied, with his eyes for a moment sparkling at my warmth of words; “you must not have that in your young head, missy. It leads to a miserable life. Your father hath always been unlucky—the most unlucky that ever I did know. And luck cometh out in nothing clearer than

in the kind of folk we meet. But the Lord in heaven ordereth all. I speak like a poor heathen."

"Oh, never mind that!" I cried: "only tell me, were you in time to save—to save—" I could not bear to say what I wanted.

"In plenty of time, my dear; thanks to you. You must have fought when you could not fight: the real stuff, I call it. Your poor father lies where none can harm him. Come, missy, missy, you must not take on so. It is the best thing that could befall a man so bound up with calamity. It is what he hath prayed for for many a year—if only it were not for you. And now you are safe, and for sure he knows it, if the angels heed their business."

With these words he withdrew, and kindly sent Suan back to me, knowing that her soothing ways would help me more than argument. To my mind all things lay in deep confusion and abasement. Overcome with bodily weakness and with bitter self-reproach, I even feared that to ask any questions might show want of gratitude. But a thing of that sort could not always last, and before very long I was quite at home with the history of Mr. Gundry.

Solomon Gundry, of Mevagissey, in the county of Cornwall, in England, betook himself to the United States in the last year of the last century. He had always been a most upright man, as well as a first-rate fisherman; and his family had made a rule—as most respectable families at that time did—to run a nice cargo of contraband goods not more than twice in one season. A highly querulous old lieutenant of the British navy (who had served under Nelson and lost both, arms, yet kept "the rheumatics" in either stump) was

appointed, in an evil hour, to the Cornish coast-guard; and he never rested until he had caught all the best county families smuggling. Through this he lost his situation, and had to go to the workhouse; nevertheless, such a stir had been roused that (to satisfy public opinion) they made a large sacrifice of inferior people, and among them this Solomon Gundry. Now the Gundries had long been a thickset race, and had furnished some champion wrestlers; and Solomon kept to the family stamp in the matter of obstinacy. He made a bold mark at the foot of a bond for 150 pounds; and with no other sign than that, his partner in their stanch herring-smack (the Good Hope, of Mevagissey) allowed him to make sail across the Atlantic with all he cared for.

This Cornish partner deserved to get all his money back; and so he did, together with good interest. Solomon Gundry throve among a thrifty race at Boston; he married a sweet New England lass, and his eldest son was Sampson. Sampson, in the prime of life, and at its headstrong period, sought the far West, overland, through not much less of distance, and through even more of danger, than his English father had gone through. His name was known on the western side of the mighty chain of mountains before Colonel Fremont was heard of there, and before there was any gleam of gold on the lonely sunset frontage.

Here Sampson Gundry lived by tillage of the nobly fertile soil ere Sacramento or San Francisco had any name to speak of. And though he did not show regard for any kind of society, he managed to have a wife and son, and keep them free from danger. But (as it appears to me the more, the more I think of every thing) no one must assume to be aside

the reach of Fortune because he has gathered himself so small that she should not care to strike at him. At any rate, good or evil powers smote Sampson Gundry heavily.

First he lost his wife, which was a “great denial” to him. She fell from a cliff while she was pegging out the linen, and the substance of her frame prevented her from ever getting over it. And after that he lost his son, his only son—for all the Gundries were particular as to quality; and the way in which he lost his son made it still more sad for him.

A reputable and valued woman had disappeared in a hasty way from a cattle-place down the same side of the hills. The desire of the Indians was to enlarge her value and get it. There were very few white men as yet within any distance to do good; but Sampson Gundry vowed that, if the will of the Lord went with him, that woman should come back to her family without robbing them of sixpence. To this intent he started with a company of some twenty men—white or black or middle-colored (according to circumstances). He was their captain, and his son Elijah their lieutenant. Elijah had only been married for a fortnight, but was full of spirit, and eager to fight with enemies; and he seems to have carried this too far; for all that came back to his poor bride was a lock of his hair and his blessing. He was buried in a bed of lava on the western slope of Shasta, and his wife died in her confinement, and was buried by the Blue River.

It was said at the time and long afterward that Elijah Gundry—thus cut short—was the finest and noblest young man to be found from the mountains to the ocean. His father, in whose arms he died, led a sad and lonely life for

years, and scarcely even cared (although of Cornish and New England race) to seize the glorious chance of wealth which lay at his feet beseeching him. By settlement he had possessed himself of a large and fertile district, sloping from the mountain-foot along the banks of the swift Blue River, a tributary of the San Joaquin. And this was not all; for he also claimed the ownership of the upper valley, the whole of the mountain gorge and spring head, whence that sparkling water flows. And when that fury of gold-digging in 1849 arose, very few men could have done what he did without even thinking twice of it.

For Sampson Gundry stood, like a bull, on the banks of his own river, and defied the worst and most desperate men of all nations to pollute it. He had scarcely any followers or steadfast friends to back him; but his fame for stern courage was clear and strong, and his bodily presence most manifest. Not a shovel was thrust nor a cradle rocked in the bed of the Blue River.

But when a year or two had passed, and all the towns and villages, and even hovels and way-side huts, began to clink with money, Mr. Gundry gradually recovered a wholesome desire to have some. For now his grandson Ephraim was growing into biped shape, and having lost his mother when he first came into the world, was sure to need the more natural and maternal nutriment of money.

Therefore Sampson Gundry, though he would not dig for gold, wrought out a plan which he had long thought of. Nature helped him with all her powers of mountain, forest, and headlong stream. He set up a saw-mill, and built it

himself; and there was no other to be found for twelve degrees of latitude and perhaps a score of longitude.