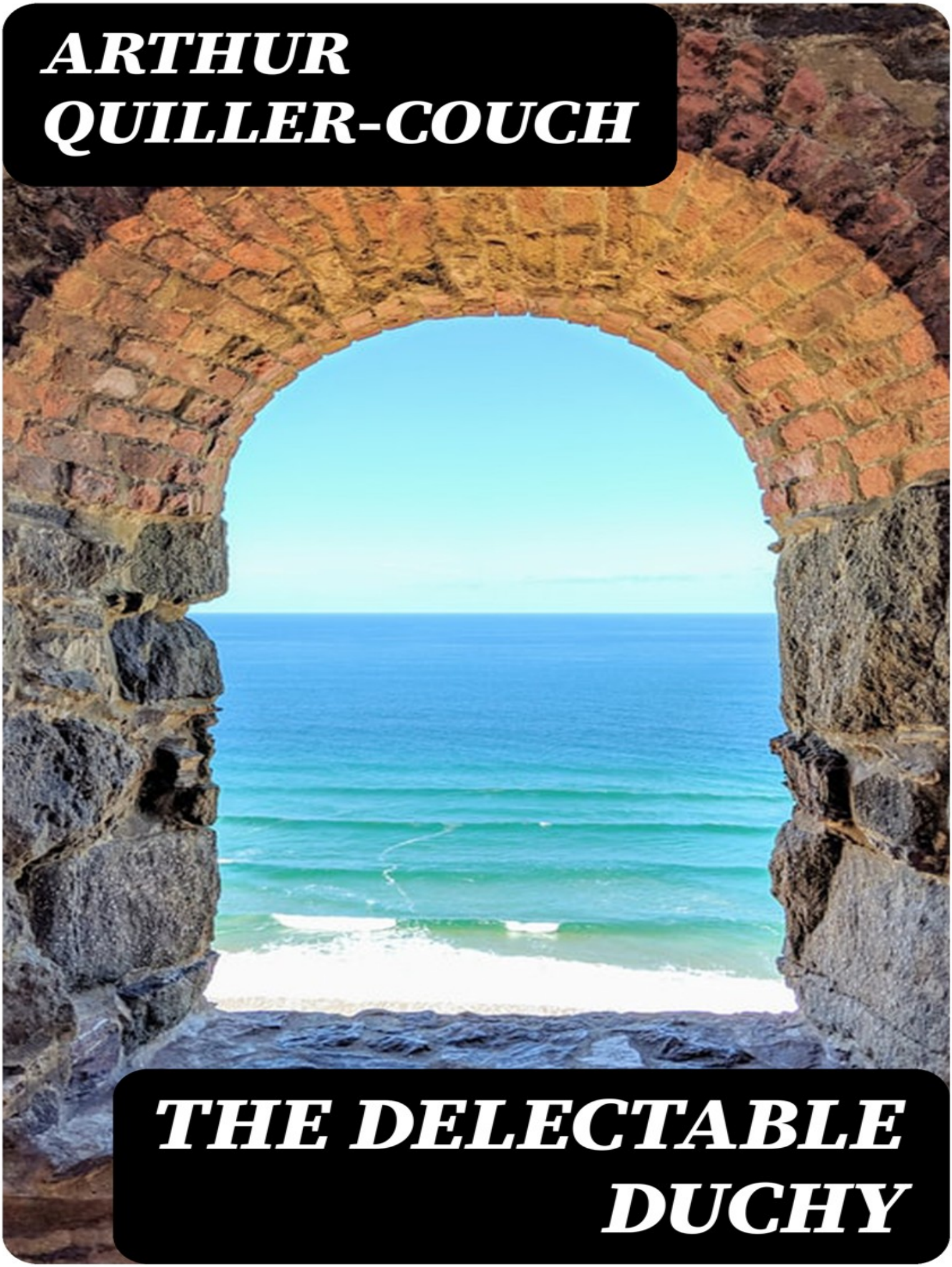
ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



THE DELECTABLE DUCHY

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PROLOGUE.

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A week ago, my friend the Journalist wrote to remind me that once upon a time I had offered him a bed in my cottage at Troy and promised to show him the beauties of the place. He was about (he said) to give himself a fortnight's holiday, and had some notion of using that time to learn what Cornwall was like. He could spare but one day for Troy, and hardly looked to exhaust its attractions; nevertheless, if my promise held good.… By anticipation he spoke of my home as a "nook." Its windows look down upon a harbour, wherein, day by day, vessels of every nation and men of large experience are for ever going and coming; and beyond the harbour, upon leagues of open sea, highway of the vastest traffic in the world: whereas from his own far more expensive house my friend sees only a dirty laurel-bush, a high green fence, and the upper half of a suburban lamp post. Yet he is convinced that I dwell in a nook.

I answered his letter, warmly repeating the invitation; and last week he arrived. The change had bronzed his face, and from his talk I learnt that he had already seen half the Duchy, in seven days. Yet he had been unreasonably delayed in at least a dozen places, and used the strongest language about 'bus and coach communication, local trains, misleading sign-posts, and the like. Our scenery enraptured him—every aspect of it. He had travelled up the Tamar to Launceston, crossed the moors, climbing Roughtor and Brown Willy on his way, plunged down towards Camelford, which he appeared to have reached by following two valleys simultaneously, coached to Boscastle, walked to Tintagel, climbed up to Uther's Castle, diverged inland to St. Nectan's

Kieve, driven on to Bedruthan Steps, Mawgan, the Vale of Lanherne, Newquay, taken a train thence to Truro, a steamer from Truro to Falmouth, crossed the ferry to St. Mawes, walked up the coast to Mevagissey, driven from Mevagissey to St. Austell, and at St. Austell taken another train for Troy. This brought half his holiday to a close: the remaining half he meant to devote to the Mining District, St. Ives, the Land's End, St. Michael's Mount, the Lizard, and perhaps the Scilly Isles.

Then I began to feel that I lived in a nook, and to wonder how I could spin out its attractions to cover a whole day: for I could not hear to think of his departing with secret regret for his lavished time. In a flash I saw the truth; that my love for this spot is built up of numberless trivialities, of small memories all incommunicable, or ridiculous when communicated; a scrap of local speech heard at this corner, a pleasant native face remembered in that doorway, a battered vessel dropping anchor—she went out in the spring with her crew singing dolefully; and the grey-bearded man waiting in his boat beneath her counter till the custom-house officers have made their survey is the father of one among the crew, and is waiting to take his son's hand again, after months of absence. Would this interest my friend, if I pointed it out to him? Or, if I walk with him by the path above the creek, what will he care to know that on this particular bank the violets always bloom earliest—that one of a line of yews that top the churchyard wall is remarkable because a pair of missel-thrushes have chosen it to build in for three successive years? The violets are gone. The empty nest has almost dissolved under the late heavy rains, and the yew is so like its fellows that I myself have no idea why the birds chose it. The longer I reflected the more certain I felt that my friend could find all he wanted in the guide-books.

None the less, I did my best: rowed him for a mile or two up the river; took him out to sea, and along the coast for half a dozen miles. The water was choppy, as it is under the slightest breeze from the south-east; and the Journalist was sea-sick; but seemed to mind this very little, and recovered sufficiently to ask my boatman two or three hundred questions before we reached the harbour again. Then we landed and explored the Church. This took us some time, owing to several freaks in its construction, for which I blessed the memory of its early-English builders. We went on to the Town Hall, the old Stannary Prison (now in ruins), the dilapidated Block-houses, the Battery. We traversed the town from end to end and studied the barge-boards and punkin-ends of every old house. I had meanly ordered that dinner should he ready half-an-hour earlier than usual, and, as it was, the objects of interest just lasted out.

As we sat and smoked our cigarettes after dinner, the Journalist said—

"If you don't mind, I'll he off in a few minutes and shut myself up in your study. I won't he long turning out the copy; and after that I can talk to you without feeling I've neglected my work. There's an early post here, I suppose?"

"Man alive!" said I, "you don't mean to tell me that you're working, this holiday?"

"Only a letter for the 'Daily——' three times a week—a column and a half, or so."

"The subject?"

"Oh, descriptive stuff about the places I've been visiting. I call it
'An Idler in Lyonesse.'"

"Why Lyonesse?"

"Why not?"

"Well, Lyonesse has lain at the bottom of the Atlantic, between Land's End and Scilly, these eight hundred years. The chroniclers relate that it was overwhelmed and lost in 1099, A.D. If your Constant Readers care to ramble there, they're welcome, I'm sure."

"I had thought" said he, "it was just a poet's name for Cornwall. Well, never mind, I'll go in presently and write up this place: it's just as well to do it while one's impressions are still fresh."

He finished his coffee, lit a fresh cigarette, and strolled off to the little library where I usually work. I stepped out upon the verandah and looked down on the harbour at my feet, where already the vessels were hanging out their lamps in the twilight. I had looked down thus, and at this hour, a thousand times; and always the scene had something new to reveal to me, and much more to withhold—small subtleties such as a man finds in his wife, however ordinary she may appear to other people. And here, in the next room, was a man who, in half-a-dozen hours, felt able to describe Troy, to deck her out, at least, in language that should captivate a million or so of breakfasting Britons.

"My country," said I, "if you have given up, in these six hours, a tithe of your heart to this man—if, in fact, his screed be not arrant bosh—then will I hie me to London for good and all, and write political leaders all the days of my life."

In an hour's time the Journalist came sauntering out to me, and announced that his letter was written.

"Have you sealed it up?"

"Well, no. I thought you might give me an additional hint or two; and maybe I might look it over again and add a few lines before turning in."

"Do you mind my seeing it?"

"Not the least in the world, if you care to. I didn't think, though, that it could possibly interest you, who know already every mortal thing that is to be known about the place."

"You're mistaken. I may know all about this place when I die, but not before. Let's hear what you have to say."

We went indoors, and he read it over to me.

It was a surprisingly brilliant piece of description; and accurate, too. He had not called it "a little fishing-town," for instance, as so many visitors have done in my hearing, though hardly a fishing-boat puts out from the harbour. The guide-books call it a fishing-town, but the Journalist was not misled, though he had gone to them for a number of facts. I corrected a date and then sat silent. It amazed me that a man who could see so much, should fail to perceive that what he had seen was of no account in comparison with what he had not: or that, if he did indeed perceive this, he could write such stuff with such gusto. "To be capable of so much and content with so little," I thought; and then broke off to wonder if, after all, he were not right. To-morrow he would be on his way, crowding his mind with quick and brilliant impressions, hurrying, living, telling his fellows a thousand useful and pleasant things, while I pored about to discover one or two for them.

"I thought," said the Journalist, swinging his gold pencil-case between finger and thumb, "you might furnish me with just a hint or so, to give the thing a local colour. Some little characteristic of the natives, for instance. I noticed, this afternoon, when I was most sea-sick, that your fellow took off his hat and pulled something out of the lining. I was too ill to see what it was; but he dropped it overboard the next minute and muttered something."

"Oh, you remarked that, did you?"

"Yes, and meant to ask him about it afterwards; but forgot, somehow."

"Do you remember where we were—what we were passing—when he did this?"

"Not clearly. I was infernally ill just then. Why did he do it?"

I was silent.

"I suppose it had some meaning?" he went on.

"Yes, it had. And excuse me when I say that I'm hanged if either you or your Constant Readers shall know what that meaning was. My dear fellow, you belong to a strong race—a race that has beaten us and taken toll of us, and now carves 'Smith' and 'Thompson' and such names upon our fathers' tombs. But there are some things you have not laid hands on yet; secrets that we all know somehow, but never utter, even among ourselves, nor allude to. If I told you what Billy Tredegar did to-day, and why he did it, I tell you frankly your article would make some thousands of Constant Readers open wide eyes over their breakfast-cups. But you won't know. Why, after all, should I say anything to spoil Cornwall's prospects as a health-resort?"

My friend took this very quietly, merely observing that it was rather late in the day to take sides against Hengist and Horsa. But he was sorry, I could see, to lose his local colour. And as I looked down, for the last time that night, upon Troy, this petition escaped me—

"O my country, if I keep your secrets, keep for me your heart!"

THE SPINSTER'S MAYING.

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"*The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet,*
Young lovers meet, old wives a-sunning sit;
In every street these tunes our ears do greet—
Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-wee, to-witta-woo!
Spring, the sweet Spring."

At two o'clock on May morning a fishing-boat, with a small row-boat in tow, stole up the harbour between the lights of the vessels that lay at anchor. She came on a soundless tide, with her sprit-mainsail wide and drawing, and her foresail flapping idle; and although her cuddy-top and gunwale glistened wet with a recent shower, the man who steered her looked over his shoulder at the waning moon, and decided that the dawn would be a fine one. A furlong below the Town Quay he left the tiller and lowered sail: two furlongs above, he dropped anchor: then, having made all ship-shape, he lit a pipe and pulled an enormous watch from his fob. The vessels he had passed since entering the harbour's mouth seemed one and all asleep. But a din of horns, kettles, and tea-trays, and a wild tattoo of door-knockers, sounded along the streets behind the stores and houses that lined the water-side. Already the town-boys were ushering in the month of May.

The man waited until the half-hour chimed over the 'long-shore roofs from the church-tower up the hill; set his watch with care; and sat down to wait for the sun. Upon the wooded cliff that faces the town the birds were waking; and by-and-bye, from the three small quays came the sound of voices laughing, and then a boat or two stealing out of the shadow, each crowded with boys and maids. Before the dawn grew red above the cliff where the birds sang, a dozen boats had gone by him on their way up the river, the chatter and broken laughter returning down its dim reaches long after the rowers had passed out of sight.

For some moments longer he watched the broadening daylight, till the sun, mounting above the cliff, blazed on the watch he had again pulled out and now shut with a brisk snap. His round, shaven face, still boyish in middle age, wore the shadow of a solemn responsibility. He clambered out into the small boat astern, and, casting loose, pulled towards a bright patch of colour in the grey shore wall: a blue quay-door overhung with ivy. The upper windows of the cottage behind it were draped with snowy muslin, and its walls, coated with recent whitewash, shamed its neighbours to right and left.

As the boat dropped under this blue quay-door, its upper flap opened softly, and a voice as softly said—

"Thank you kindly, John. And how d'ye do this May morning?"

"Charming," the man answered frankly. "Handsome weather 'tis, to be sure."

He looked up and smiled at her, like a lover.

"I needn't to ask how *you* be; for you'm looking sweet as blossom," he went on.

And yet the woman that smiled down on him was fifty years old at least. Her hair, which usually lay in two flat bands, closely drawn over the temples, had for this occasion been worked into waves by curling-papers, and twisted in front of either ear, into that particular ringlet locally called a kiss-me-quick. But it was streaked with grey, and the pinched features wore the tint of pale ivory.

"D'ye think you can clamber down the ladder, Sarah? The tide's fairly high."

"I'm afraid I'll be showing my ankles."

"I was hoping so. Wunnerful ankles you've a-got, Sarah, and a wunnerful cage o' teeth. Such extremities 'd well beseem a king's daughter, all glorious within!"

Sarah Blewitt pulled open the lower flap of the door and set her foot on the ladder. She wore a white print gown beneath her cloak, and a small bonnet of black straw decorated with sham cowslips. The cloak, hitching for a moment on the ladder's side, revealed a beaded reticule that hung from her waist, and clinked as she descended.

"I reckon there's scarce an inch of paint left on my front door," she observed, as the man steadied her with an arm round her waist, and settled her comfortably in the stern-sheets.

He unshipped his oars and began to pull.

"Ay. I heard 'em whackin' the door with a deal o' tow-row. They was going it like billy-O when I came past the Town Quay. But one mustn' complain, May-mornin's."

"I wasn' complaining," said the woman; "I was just remarking. How's

Maria?"

"She's nicely, thank you."

"And the children?"

"Brave."

"I've put up sixpennyworth of nicey in four packets—that's one apiece—and I've written the name on each, for you to take home to 'em."

She fumbled in her reticule and produced the packets. The peppermint-drops and brandy-balls were wrapped in clean white paper, and the names written in a thin Italian hand. John thanked her and stowed them in his trousers pockets.

"You'll give my love to Maria? I take it very kindly her letting you come for me like this."

"Oh, as for that—" began John, and broke off; "I don't call to mind that ever I saw a more handsome morning for the time o' year."

They had made this expedition together more than a score of times, and always found the same difficulty in conversing. The boat moved easily past the town, the jetties above it, and the vessels that lay off them awaiting their cargoes; it turned the corner and glided by woods where the larches were green, the sycamores dusted with bronze, the wild cherry-trees white with blossom, and all voluble. Every little bird seemed ready to burst his throat that morning with the deal he had to say. But these two—the man especially—had nothing to say, yet ached for words.

"Nance Treweek's married," the woman managed to tell him at last.

"I was thinking it likely, by the way she carried on last Maying."

"That wasn' the man. She've kept company with two since him, and mated with a fourth man altogether—quite a different sort, in the commercial traveller line."

"Did he wear a seal weskit?"

"Well, he might have; but not to my knowledge. What makes you ask?"

"Because I used to know a Johnny Fortnight that wore one in these parts; and I thought it might be he, belike."

"Jim had a greater gift o' speech than you can make pretence to," said the woman abruptly. "I often wonder that of two twin-brothers one should be so glib and t'other so mum-chance."

"'Tis the Lord's ways," the man answered, resting on his oars. "Will you be dabblin' your feet as usual, Sarah?"

"Why not?"

He turned the boat's nose to a small landing-place cut in the solid rock, where a straight pathway dived between hazel-bushes and appeared again twenty feet above, winding inland around the knap of a green hill. Here he helped her to disembark, and waited with his back to the shore. The spinster behind the hazel screen pulled off shoes and stockings, and paddled about for a minute in the dewy grass that fringed the meadow's lower slope. Then, drawing a saucer from her reticule, she wrung some dew into it and bathed her face. Ten minutes later she re-appeared on the river's bank.

"A happy May, John!"

"A happy May to *you*, Sarah!"

John stepped out beside her, and making his boat fast, followed her up the narrow path and around the shoulder of the steep meadow. They overed a stile, then a second, and were among pink slopes of orchards in bloom. Ahead of them a church tower rose out of soft billows of apple-blossom, and above the tower a lark was singing. A child came along the footpath from the village with two garlands mounted cross-wise on a pole and looped together with strings of painted birds' eggs. John gave him a penny for his show.

"Here's luck to your lass!" said the wise child.

Sarah was pleased, and added a second penny from her reticule. The boy spat on it for luck, slipped it into his breeches pocket, and went on his way skipping.

They stood still and looked after him for some moments, out of pure pleasure in his good humour; then descended among the orchards to the village. Half-way up the street stood the inn, the Flowing Source, with whitewashed front and fuchsia-trees that reached to the first-floor windows; and before it a well enclosed with a round stone wall, over which the toadflax spread in a tangle. Around the well, in the sunshine, were set a dozen or more small tables, covered with white cloths, and two score at least of young people eating bread and cream and laughing. The landlady, a broad woman in a blue print gown, and large apron, came forward.

"Why, Miss Sarah, I'd nigh 'pon given you up. Your table's been spread this hour, an' at last I was forced to ask some o' the young folks if you was dead or no."

"Why should I be dead more than another?"

"Well, well—in the midst o' life, we're told. 'Tisn' only the ripe apples that the wind scatters. He that comes by your side to-day is but twin-brother to him that came wi' you the first time I mind 'ee, seemin' but yesterday. Eh, Miss Sarah, but I envied 'ee then, sittin' wi' hand in hand, an' but one bite taken out o' your bread an' cream; but I was just husband-high myself i' those days, an' couldn't make the men believe it."

"Mary Ann Jacobs," Miss Sarah broke out, "if 'twas not for the quality of your cream, I'd go a-mayin' elsewhere, for I can truly say I hate your way of talkin' from the bottom of my soul."

"Sarah," said John, wiping his mouth as he finished his bread and cream, "I'm a glum man, as you well know; an' why Providence drowned poor Jim, when it might have taken his twin image that hadn' half his mouth—speech, is past findin' out. But 'tis generally allowed that the grip o' my hand is uncommon like what Jim's used to be; an' when I gets home to-night, the first thing my old woman'll be sure to ask is 'Did 'ee give Sarah poor Jim's hand-clasp?'—an' what to say I shan't know, unless you honours me so far."

"'Tis uncommon good of Maria," said the woman simply, and stole her thin hand into his horny palm. She had done so, in answer to the same speech, more than twenty times.

"Not at all," said John.

His fingers closed over hers, and rested so. All but a few of the mayers had risen from the table, and were romping and chasing each other back to the boats, for the majority were shop-girls and apprentices, and must be back in time for business. But Miss Sarah was in no hurry.

"Not yet," she entreated, as John's grasp began to relax. He tightened it again and waited, while she leant back, breathing short, with half-closed eyes.

At length she said he might release her.

"I'm sure 'tis uncommon kind of Maria," she repeated.

"I don't see where the kindness comes in. Maria can have as good any day o' the year, an' don't appear to value it to that extent."

They walked back through the orchards in silence. At Miss Sarah's quay-door they parted, and John hoisted sail for his home around the corner of the coast.

DAPHNIS.

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Has olim exuvias mihi perfidus ille reliquit,
Pignora cara sui: quae nunc ego limine in ipso,
Terra, tibi mando; debent haec pignora Daphnin—
Ducite ab urbe domum, mea, carmina, ducite Daphnin.

I knew the superstition lingered along the country-side: and I was sworn to find it. But the labourers and their wives smoothed all intelligence out of their faces as soon as I began to hint at it. Such is the way of them. They were my good friends, but had no mind to help me in this. Nobody who has not lived long with them can divine the number of small incommunicable mysteries and racial secrets chambered in their inner hearts and guarded by their hospitable faces. These alone the Celt withholds from the Saxon, and when he dies they are buried with him.

A chance word or two of my old nurse, by chance caught in some cranny of a child's memory and recovered after many days, told me that the charm was still practised by the woman-folk, or had been practised not long before her death. So I began to hunt for it, and, almost as soon, to believe the search hopeless. The new generation of girls, with their smart frocks, in fashion not more than six months behind London, their Board School notions, and their consuming ambition to "look like a lady"—were these likely

to cherish a local custom as rude and primitive as the long-stone circles on the tors above? But they were Cornish; and of that race it is unwise to judge rashly. For years I had never a clue: and then, by Sheba Farm, in a forsaken angle of the coast, surprised the secret.

Sheba Farm stands high above Ruan sands, over which its windows flame at sunset. And I sat in the farm kitchen drinking cider and eating potato-cake, while the farmer's wife, Mrs. Bolverson, obligingly attended to my coat, which had just been soaked by a thunder-shower. It was August, and already the sun beat out again, fierce and strong. The bright drops that gemmed the tamarisk-bushes above the wall of the town-place were already fading under its heat; and I heard the voices of the harvesters up the lane, as they returned to the oat-field whence the storm had routed them. A bright parallelogram stretched from the window across the white kitchen-table, and reached the dim hollow of the open fire-place. Mrs. Bolverson drew the towel-horse, on which my coat was stretched, between it and the wood fire, which (as she held) the sunshine would put out.

"It's uncommonly kind of you, Mrs. Bolverson," said I, as she turned one sleeve of the coat towards the heat. "To be sure, if the women in these parts would speak out, some of them have done more than that for the men with an old coat."

She dropped the sleeve, faced round, and eyed me.

"What do you know of that?" she asked slowly, and as if her chest tightened over the words. She was a woman of fifty and more, of fine figure but a worn face. Her chief surviving beauty was a pile of light golden hair, still lustrous as a girl's. But her blue eyes—though now they narrowed on me suspiciously—must have looked out magnificently in their day.