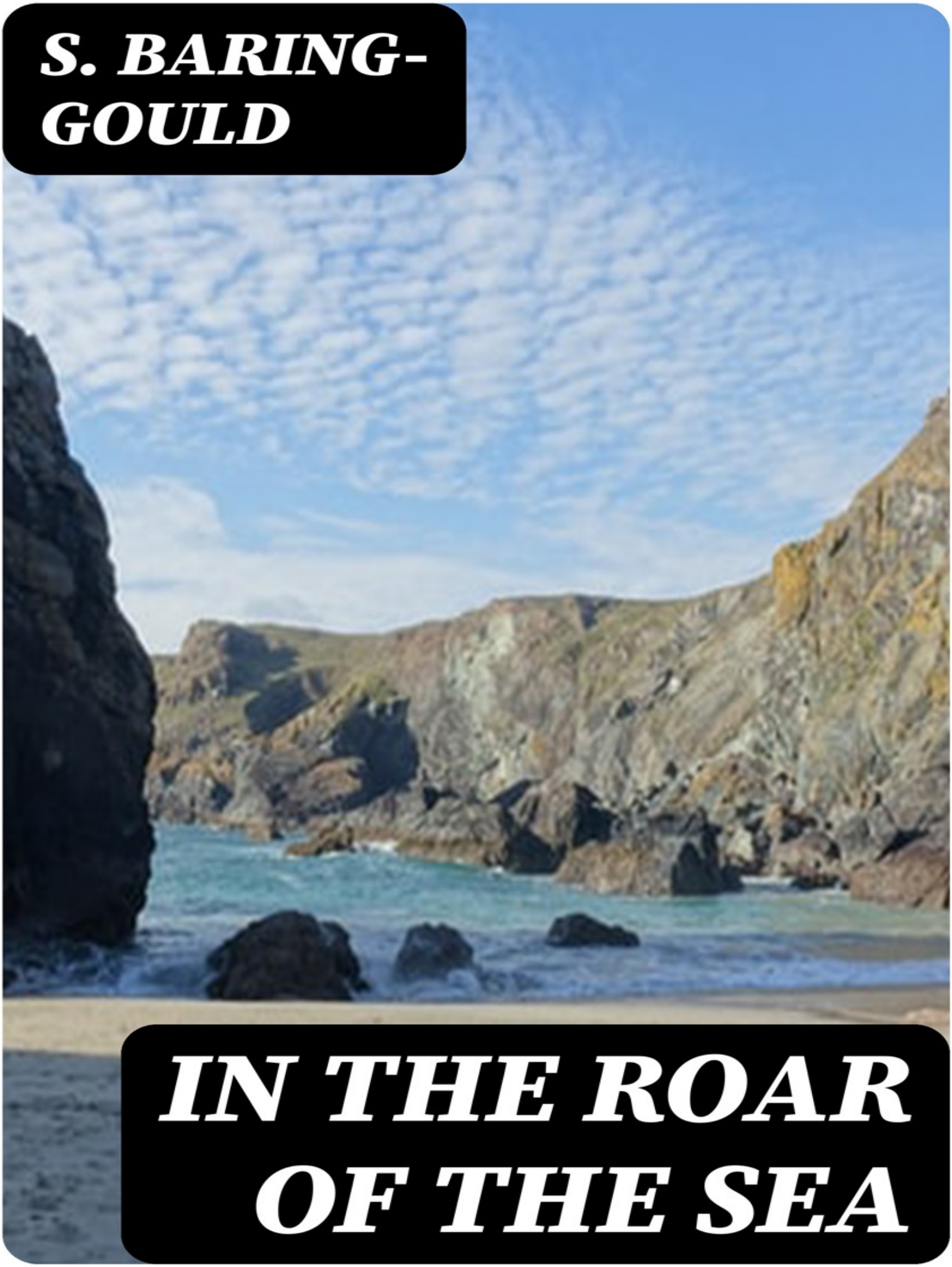
S. BARING-GOULD



IN THE ROAR OF THE SEA

S. Baring-Gould

In the Roar of the Sea

EAN 8596547311744

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

OVER AND DONE.

Table of Contents

Sitting in the parsonage garden, in a white frock, with a pale green sash about her waist, leaning back against the red-brick wall, her glowing copper hair lit by the evening sun, was Judith Trevisa.

She was tossing guelder-roses into the air; some dozens were strewn about her feet on the gravel, but one remained of the many she had plucked and thrown and caught, and thrown and caught again for a sunny afternoon hour. As each greenish-white ball of flowers went up into the air it diffused a faint but pleasant fragrance.

“When I have done with you, my beauty, I have done altogether,” said Judith.

“With what?”

Her father spoke. He had come up unperceived by the girl, burdened with a shovel in one hand and a bucket in the other, looking pale, weary, and worn.

“Papa, you nearly spoiled my game. Let me finish, and I will speak.”

“Is it a very serious matter, Judith, and engrossing?”

“Engrossing, but not serious, *Je m’amuse*.”

The old rector seated himself on the bench beside her, and he also leaned back against the red-brick, gold-and-gray-lichen-spotted wall, and looked into the distance before him, waiting till his daughter was ready to speak, not,

perhaps, sorry to have a little rest first, for he was overtired. Had Judith not been absorbed in her ball-play with the guelder-rose bunch she would have noticed his haggard appearance, the green hue about his mouth, the sunken eyes, the beaded brow. But she was counting the rebounds of her ball, bent on sustaining her play as long as was possible to her.

She formed a charming picture, fresh and pure, and had the old man not been overtired, he would have thought so with a throb of parental pride.

She was a child in size, slender in build, delicate in bone, with face and hands of porcelain transparency and whiteness, with, moreover, that incomparable complexion only seen in the British Isles, and then only with red-gold hair.

Her bronze-leather shoes were the hue of some large flies that basked and frisked on the warm wall, only slightly disturbed by the girl’s play, to return again and run and preen themselves again, and glitter jewel-like as studs on that sun-baked, lichen-enamelled wall. Her eyes, moreover, were lustrous as the backs of these flies, iridescent with the changing lights of the declining sun, and the changed direction of her glance following the dancing ball of guelder-rose. Her long fingers might have been of china, but that when raised so that the sun struck their backs they were turned to a translucent rose. There was no color in her cheek, only the faintest suffusion of pink on the temples below where the hair was rolled back in waves of luminous molten copper dashing against the brick wall.

“I have done my work,” said the rector.

“And I my play,” responded the girl, letting the ball drop into her lap and rock there from one knee to the other. “Papa, this fellow is the conqueror; I have made him dance thirty-five great leaps, and he has not yet fallen—wilfully. I let him go down and get breath just now. There lie all my dancers dead about me. They failed very speedily.”

“You cannot be forever playing, Ju.”

“That is why I play now, papa. When playtime is over I shall be in earnest indeed.”

“Indeed?” the old man sighed.

Judith looked round, and was shocked to see how ill her father appeared to be.

“Are you very tired, darling papa?”

“Yes—overtired.”

“Have you been at your usual task?”

“Yes, Ju—an unprofitable task.”

“Oh, papa!”

“Yes, unprofitable. The next wind from the sea that blows—one will blow in an hour—and all my work is undone.”

“But, my dear papa!” Judith stooped and looked into the bucket. “Why!—what has made you bring a load of sand up here? We want none in the garden. And such a distance too!—from the church. No wonder you are tired.”

“Have I brought it?” he asked, without looking at the bucket.

“You have, indeed. That, if you please, is unprofitable work, not the digging of the church out of the sand-heaps that swallow it.”

“My dear, I did not know that I had not emptied the pail outside the church-yard gate. I am very tired; perhaps that

explains it."

"No doubt about it, papa. It was work quite as unprofitable but much more exhausting than my ball-play. Now, papa, while you have been digging your church out of the sand, which will blow over it again to-night, you say, I have been pitching and tossing guelder-roses. We have been both wasting time, one as much as the other."

"One as much as the other," repeated the old man. "Yes, dear, one as much as the other, and I have been doing it all my time here—morally, spiritually, as well as materially, digging the church out of the smothering sands, and all in vain—all profitless work. You are right, Ju."

"Papa," said Judith hastily, seeing his discouragement and knowing his tendency to depression, "papa, do you hear the sea how it roars? I have stood on the bench, more than once, to look out seaward, and find a reason for it; but there is none—all blue, blue as a larkspur; and not a cloud in the sky—all blue, blue there too. No wind either, and that is why I have done well with my ball-play. Do you hear the roar of the sea, papa?" she repeated.

"Yes, Ju. There will be a storm shortly. The sea is thrown into great swells of rollers, a sure token that something is coming. Before night a gale will be on us."

Then ensued silence. Judith with one finger trifled with the guelder-rose bunch in her lap musingly, not desirous to resume her play with it. Something in her father's manner was unusual, and made her uneasy.

"My dear!" he began, after a pause, "one must look out to sea—into the vast mysterious sea of the future—and prepare for what is coming from it. Just now the air is still,

and we sit in this sweet, sunny garden, and lean our backs against the warm wall, and smell the fragrance of the flowers; but we hear the beating of the sea, and know that a mighty tempest, with clouds and darkness, is coming. So in other matters we must look out and be ready—count the time till it comes. My dear, when I am gone——”

“Papa!”

“We were looking out to sea and listening. That must come at some time—it may come sooner than you anticipate.” He paused, heaved a sigh, and said, “Oh, Jamie! What are we to do about Jamie?”

“Papa, I will always take care of Jamie.”

“But who will take care of you?”

“Of me? Oh, papa, surely I can take care of myself!”

He shook his head doubtfully.

“Papa, you know how strong I am in will—how firm I can be with Jamie.”

“But all mankind are not Jamies. It is not for you I fear, as much as for you and him together. He is a trouble and a difficulty.”

“Jamie is not so silly and troublesome as you think. All he needs is application. He cannot screw his mind down to his books—to any serious occupation. But that will come. I have heard say that the stupidest children make the sharpest men. Little by little it will come, but it will come certainly. I will set myself as my task to make Jamie apply his mind and become a useful man, and I shall succeed, papa.” She caught her father’s hand between hers, and slapped it joyously, confidently. “How cold your hand is, papa! and yet you look warm.”

“You were always Jamie’s champion,” said her father, not noticing her remark relative to himself.

“He is my twin brother, so of course I am his champion. Who else would be that, were not I?”

“No—no one else. He is mischievous and troublesome—poor, poor fellow. You will always be to Jamie what you are now, Ju—his protector or champion? He is weak and foolish, and if he were to fall into bad hands—I shudder to think what might become of him.”

“Rely on me, dearest father.”

Then he lifted the hand of his daughter, and looked at it with a faint smile. “It is very small, it is very weak, to fight for self alone, let alone yourself encumbered with Jamie.”

“I will do it, papa, do not fear.”

“Judith, I must talk very gravely with you, for the future is very dark to me; and I am unable with hand or brain to provide anything against the evil day. Numbness is on me, and I have been hampered on every side. For one thing, the living has been so poor, and my parishioners so difficult to deal with, that I have been able to lay by but a trifle. I believe I have not a relative in the world—none, at all events, near enough and known to me that I dare ask him to care for you——”

“Papa, there is Aunt Dionysia.”

“Aunt Dionysia,” he repeated, with a hesitating voice. “Yes; but Aunt Dionysia is—is not herself capable of taking charge of you. She has nothing but what she earns, and then—Aunt Dionysia is—is—well—Aunt Dionysia. I don’t think you could be happy with her, even if, in the event of my departure, she were able to take care of you. Then—and

that chiefly—she has chosen, against my express wishes—I may say, in defiance of me—to go as housekeeper into the service of the man, of all others, who has been a thorn in my side, a hinderer of God's work, a—But I will say no more."

"What! Cruel Coppinger?"

"Yes, Cruel Coppinger. I might have been the means of doing a little good in this place, God knows! I only *think* I might; but I have been thwarted, defied, insulted by that man. As I have striven to dig my buried church out of the overwhelming sands, so have I striven to lift the souls of my poor parishioners out of the dead engulfing sands of savagery, brutality, very heathenism of their mode of life, and I have been frustrated. The winds have blown the sands back with every gale over my work with spade, and that stormblast Coppinger has devastated every trace of good that I have done, or tried to do, in spiritual matters. The Lord reward him according to his works."

Judith felt her father's hand tremble in hers.

"Never mind Coppinger now," she said, soothingly.

"I must mind him," said the old man, with severe vehemence. "And—that my own sister should go, go—out of defiance, into his house and serve him! That was too much. I might well say, I have none to whom to look as your protector." He paused awhile, and wiped his brow. His pale lips were quivering. "I do not mean to say," said he, "that I acted with judgment, when first I came to S. Enodoc, when I spoke against smuggling. I did not understand it then. I thought with the thoughts of an inlander. Here—the sands sweep over the fields, and agriculture is in a measure

impossible. The bays and creeks seem to invite—well—I leave it an open question. But with regard to wrecking—" His voice, which had quavered in feebleness, according with the feebleness of his judgment relative to smuggling, now gained sonorousness. "Wrecking, deliberate wrecking, is quite another matter. I do not say that our people are not justified in gathering the harvest the sea casts up. There always must be, there will be wrecks on this terrible coast; but there has been—I know there has been, though I have not been able to prove it—deliberate provocation of wrecks, and that is the sin of Cain. Had I been able to prove——"

"Never mind that now, dear papa. Neither I nor Jamie are, or will be, wreckers. Talk of something else. You over-excite yourself."

Judith was accustomed to hear her father talk in an open manner to her. She had been his sole companion for several years, since his wife's death, and she had become the *confidante* of his inmost thoughts, his vacillations, his discouragements, not of his hopes—for he had none, nor of his schemes—for he formed none.

"I do not think I have been of any use in this world," said the old parson, relapsing into his tone of discouragement, the temporary flame of anger having died away. "My sowing has produced no harvest. I have brought light, help, strength to none. I have dug all day in the vineyard, and not a vine is the better for it; all cankered and fruitless."

"Papa—and me! Have you done nothing for me!"

"You!"

He had not thought of his child.

“Papa! Do you think that I have gained naught from you? No strength, no resolution from seeing you toil on in your thankless work, without apparent results? If I have any energy and principle to carry me through I owe it to you.”

He was moved, and raised his trembling hand and laid it on her golden head.

He said no more, and was very still.

Presently she spoke. His hands weighed heavily on her head.

“Papa, you are listening to the roar of the sea?”

He made no reply.

“Papa, I felt a cold breath; and see, the sun has a film over it. Surely the sea is roaring louder!”

His hand slipped from her head and struck her shoulder—roughly, she thought. She turned, startled, and looked at him. His eyes were open, he was leaning back, almost fallen against the wall, and was deadly pale.

“Papa, you are listening to the roar?”

Then a thought struck her like a bullet in the heart.

“Papa! Papa! My papa!—speak—speak!”

She sprang from the bench—was before him. Her left guelder-rose had rolled, had bounded from her lap, and had fallen on the sand the old man had listlessly brought up from the church. His work, her play, were forever over.

CHAPTER II.

A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

Table of Contents

The stillness preceding the storm had yielded. A gale had broken over the coast, raged against the cliffs of Pentyre, and battered the walls of the parsonage, without disturbing the old rector, whom no storm would trouble again, soon to be laid under the sands of his buried church-yard, his very mound to be heaped over in a few years, and obliterated by waves of additional encroaching sand. Judith had not slept all night. She—she, a mere child, had to consider and arrange everything consequent on the death of the master of the house. The servants—cook and house-maid—had been of little, if any, assistance to her. When Jane, the house-maid, had rushed into the kitchen with the tidings that the old parson was dead, cook, in her agitation, upset the kettle and scalded her foot. The gardener's wife had come in on hearing the news, and had volunteered help. Judith had given her the closet-key to fetch from the stores something needed; and Jamie, finding access to the closet, had taken possession of a pot of raspberry jam, carried it to bed with him, and spilled it over the sheets, besides making himself ill. The house-maid, Jane, had forgotten in her distraction to shut the best bedroom casement, and the gale during the night had wrenched it from its hinges, flung it into the garden on the roof of the small conservatory, and smashed both. Moreover, the casement being open, the rain

had driven into the room unchecked, had swamped the floor, run through and stained the drawing-room ceiling underneath, the drips had fallen on the mahogany table and blistered the veneer. A messenger was sent to Pentyre Glaze for Miss Dionysia Trevisa, and she would probably arrive in an hour or two.

Mr. Trevisa, as he had told Judith, was solitary, singularly so. He was of a good Cornish family, but it was one that had dwindled till it had ceased to have other representative than himself. Once well estated, at Crockadon, in S. Mellion, all the lands of the family had been lost; once with merchants in the family, all the fortunes of these merchants industriously gathered had been dissipated, and nothing had remained to the Reverend Peter Trevisa but his family name and family coat, a garb or, on a field gules. It really seemed as though the tinctures of the shield had been fixed in the crown of splendor that covered the head of Judith. But she did not derive this wealth of red-gold hair from her Cornish ancestors, but from a Scottish mother, a poor governess whom Mr. Peter Trevisa had married, thereby exciting the wrath of his only sister and relative, Miss Dionysia, who had hitherto kept house for him, and vexed his soul with her high-handed proceedings. It was owing to some insolent words used by her to Mrs. Trevisa that Peter had quarrelled with his sister at first. Then when his wife died, she had forced herself on him as housekeeper, but again her presence in the house had become irksome to him, and when she treated his children—his delicate and dearly loved Judith—with roughness, and his timid, silly Jamie with harshness, amounting in his view to cruelty—

harsh words had passed between them; sharp is, however, hardly the expression to use for the carefully worded remonstrances of the mild rector, though appropriate enough to her rejoinders. Then she had taken herself off and had become housekeeper to Curll Coppinger, Cruel Coppinger, as he was usually called, who occupied Pentyre Glaze, and was a fairly well-to-do single man.

Mr. Trevisa had not been a person of energy, but one of culture and refinement; a dispirited, timid man. Finding no neighbors of the same mental texture, nor sympathetic, he had been driven to make of Judith, though a child, his companion, and he had poured into her ear all his troubles, which largely concerned the future of his children. In his feebleness he took comfort from her sanguine confidence, though he was well aware that it was bred of ignorance, and he derived a weak satisfaction from the thought that he had prepared her morally, at all events, if in no other fashion, for the crisis that must come when he was withdrawn.

Mr. Peter Trevisa—Peter was a family Christian name—was for twenty-five years rector of S. Enodoc, on the north coast of Cornwall at the mouth of the Camel. The sand dunes had encroached on the church of S. Enodoc, and had enveloped the sacred structure. A hole was broken through a window, through which the interior could be reached, where divine service was performed occasionally in the presence of the church-wardens, so as to establish the right of the rectors, and through this same hole bridal parties entered to be coupled, with their feet ankle-deep in sand that filled the interior to above the pew-tops.

But Mr. Trevisa was not the man to endure such a condition of affairs without a protest and an effort to remedy it. He had endeavored to stimulate the farmers and land-owners of the parish to excavate the buried church, but his endeavors had proved futile. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, and certainly foremost, stood this reason: as long as the church was choked with sand and could not be employed for regular divine service, the tithe-payers could make a grievance of it, and excuse themselves from paying their tithes in full, because, as they argued, “Parson don’t give us sarvice, so us ain’t obliged to pay’n.” They knew their man, that he was tender-conscienced, and would not bring the law to bear upon them; he would see that there was a certain measure of justness in the argument, and would therefore not demand of them a tithe for which he did not give them the *quid pro quo*. But they had sufficient shrewdness to pay a portion of their tithes, so as not to drive him to extremities and exhaust his patience. It will be seen, therefore, that in the interests of their pockets the tithe-payers did not want to have their parish church excavated. Excavation meant weekly service regularly performed, and weekly service regularly performed would be followed by exaction of the full amount of rent-charge. Then, again, in the second place, should divine service be resumed in the church of S. Enodoc, the parishioners would feel a certain uneasiness in their consciences if they disregarded the summons of the bell; it might not be a very lively uneasiness, but just such an irritation as might be caused by a fly crawling over the face. So long as there was no service they could soothe their

consciences with the thought that there was no call to make an effort to pull on Sunday breeches and assume a Sunday hat, and trudge to the church. Therefore, secondly, for the ease of their own consciences, it was undesirable that S. Enodoc should be dug out of the sand.

Then lastly, and thirdly, the engulfment of the church gave them a cherished opportunity for being nasty to the rector, and retailing upon him for his incaution in condemning smuggling and launching out into anathema against wrecking. As he had made matters disagreeable to them—tried, as they put it, to take bread out of their mouths, they saw no reason why they should spend money to please him.

Mr. Trevisa had made very little provision for his children, principally, if not wholly, because he could not. He had received from the farmers and land-owners a portion of tithe, and had been contented with that rather than raise angry feelings by demanding the whole. Out of that portion he was able to put aside but little.

Aunt Dionysia arrived, a tall, bony woman, with hair turning gray, light eyes and an aquiline nose, a hard, self-seeking woman, who congratulated herself that she did not give way to feelings.

“I feel,” said she, “as do others, but I don’t show my feelings as beggars expose their bad legs.”

She went into the kitchen. “Hoity-toity!” she said to the cook, “fine story this—scalding yourself. Mind this, you cook meals or no wage for you.” To Jane, “The mischief you have done shall be valued and deducted from any little trifle my brother may have left you in his will. Where is Jamie? Give

me that joint of fishing-rod; I'll beat him for stealing raspberry jam."

Jamie, however, on catching a glimpse of his aunt had escaped into the garden and concealed himself. The cook, offended, began to clatter the saucepans.

"Now, then," said Mrs. Trevisa—she bore the brevet-rank—"in a house of mourning what do you mean by making this noise, it is impertinent to me."

The house-maid swung out of the kitchen, muttering.

Mrs. Trevisa now betook herself up-stairs in quest of her niece, and found her with red eyes.

"I call it rank *felo-de-se*," said Aunt Dionysia. "Every one knew—*he* knew, that he had a feeble heart, and ought not to be digging and delving in the old church. Who sent the sand upon it? Why, Providence, I presume. Not man. Then it was a flying in the face of Providence to try to dig it out. Who wanted the church? He might have waited till the parishioners asked for it. But there—where is Jamie? I shall teach him a lesson for stealing raspberry jam."

"Oh, aunt, not now—not now!"

Mrs. Trevisa considered a moment, then laid aside the fishing-rod.

"Perhaps you are right. I am not up to it after my walk from Pentyre Glaze. Now, then, what about mourning? I do not suppose Jamie can be measured by guesswork. You must bring him here. Tell him the whipping is put off till another day. Of course you have seen to black things for yourself. Not? Why, gracious heavens! is everything to be thrown on my shoulders? Am I to be made a beast of burden of? Now, no mewling and pewking. There is no time for that.

Whatever *your* time may be, *mine* is valuable. I can't be here forever. Of course every responsibility has been put on me. Just like Peter—no consideration. And what can I do with a set of babies? I have to work hard enough to keep myself. Peter did not want my services at one time; now I am put upon. Have you sent for the undertaker? What about clothing again? I suppose you know that you must have mourning? Bless my heart! what a lot of trouble you give me."

Mrs. Trevisa was in a very bad temper, which even the knowledge that it was seemly that she should veil it could not make her restrain. She was, no doubt, to a certain extent fond of her brother—not much, because he had not been of any advantage to her; and no doubt she was shocked at his death, but chiefly because it entailed on herself responsibilities and trouble that she grudged. She would be obliged to do something for her nephew and niece; she would have to provide a home for them somewhere. She could not take them with her to Coppinger's house, as she was there as a salaried servant, and not entitled to invite thither her young relatives. Moreover, she did not want to have them near her. She disliked young people; they gave trouble, they had to be looked after, they entailed expenses. What was she to do with them? Where was she to put them? What would they have to live upon? Would they call on her to part-maintain them? Miss Dionysia had a small sum put away, and she had no intention of breaking into it for them. It was a nest-egg, and was laid by against an evil day that might come on herself. She had put the money away for herself, in her old age, not for the children of her

feeble brother and his lack-penny wife to consume as moth and rust. As these thoughts and questions passed through her mind, Aunt Dionysia pulled open drawers, examined cupboards, pried open closets, and searched chests and wardrobes.

“I wonder now what he has put by for them,” she said aloud.

“Do you mean my dear papa?” asked Judith, whose troubled heart and shaken spirits were becoming angry and restless under the behavior of the hard, unfeeling woman.

“Yes, I do,” answered Mrs. Trevisa, facing round, and glaring malevolently at her niece. “It is early days to talk of this, but it must be done sooner or later, and if so, the sooner the better. There is money in the house, I suppose?”

“I do not know.”

“I must know. You will want it—bills must be paid. You will eat and drink, I suppose? You must be clothed. I’ll tell you what: I’ll put the whole case into the hands of Lawyer Jenkyns, and he shall demand arrears of tithes. I know what quixotish conduct Peter——”

“Aunt, I will not allow this.” A light flush came into the girl’s cheek.

“It is all very well talking,” said Aunt Dionysia; “but black is not white, and no power on earth can make me say that it is so. Money must be found. Money must be paid for expenses, and it is hard that I should have to find it; so I think. What money is there in the house for present necessities? I must know.”

Suddenly a loud voice was heard shouting through the house—

“Mother Dunes! old Dunes! I want you.”

Judith turned cold and white. Who was this that dared to bellow in the house of death, when her dear, dear father lay up-stairs with the blinds down, asleep? It was an insult, an outrage. Her nerves had already been thrilled, and her heart roused into angry revolt by the cold, unfeeling conduct of the woman who was her sole relative in the world. And now, as she was thus quivering, there came this boisterous shout.

“It is the master!” said Mrs. Trevisa, in an awestruck voice, lowered as much as was possible to her.

To Coppinger alone she was submissive, cringing, obsequious.

“What does he mean by this—this conduct?” asked Judith, trembling with wrath.

“He wants me.”

Again a shout. “Dunes! old fool! the keys!”

Then Judith started forward, and went through the door to the head of the staircase. At the foot stood a middle-sized, strongly built, firmly knit man, in a dress half belonging to the land and half to the sea, with high boots on his legs, and slouched hat on his head. His complexion was olive, his hair abundant and black, covering cheeks and chin and upper lip. His eyes were hard and dark. He had one brown hand on the banister, and a foot on the first step, as though about to ascend, when arrested by seeing the girl at the head of the stairs before him. The house was low, and the steps led without a break directly from the hall to the landing which gave communication to the bedrooms. There was a skylight in the roof over the staircase, through which a brilliant flood of pure white light fell over Judith, whereas

every window had been darkened by drawn blinds. The girl had found no sombre dress suitable to wear, and had been forced to assume the same white gown as the day before, but she had discarded the green sash and had bound a black ribbon about her waist, and another about her abundant hair. A black lace kerchief was drawn over her shoulders across her breast and tied at her back. She wore long, black mittens.

Judith stood motionless, her bosom rising and falling quickly, her lips set, the breath racing through her nostrils, and one hand resting on the banister at the stair-head.

In a moment her eyes met those of Coppinger, and it was at once as though a thrill of electric force had passed between them.

He desisted from his attempt to ascend, and said, without moving his eyes from hers, in a subdued tone, “She has taken the keys,” but he said no more. He drew his foot from the step hesitatingly, and loosened his hand from the banister, down which went a thrill from Judith’s quivering nerves, and he stepped back.

At the same moment she descended a step, still looking steadily into the dark, threatening pupils, without blinking or lowering her orbs. Emboldened by her boiling indignation, she stood on the step she had reached with both feet firmly planted there, and finding that the banister rattled under her hand she withdrew it, and folded her arms. Coppinger raised his hand to his head and took off his hat. He had a profusion of dark, curly, flowing hair, that fell and encircled his saturnine face.

Then Judith descended another step, and as she did so he retreated a step backwards. Behind him was the hall door, open; the light lay wan and white there on the gravel, for no sunshine had succeeded the gale. At every step that Judith took down the stair Coppinger retreated. Neither spoke; the hall was still, save for the sound of their breath, and his came as fast as hers. When Judith had reached the bottom she turned—Coppinger stood in the doorway now—and signed to her aunt to come down with the keys.

“Take them to him—Do not give them here—outside.”

Mrs. Trevisa, surprised, confounded, descended the stair, went by her, and out through the door. Then Judith stepped after her, shut the door to exclude both Aunt Dionysia and that man Coppinger, who had dared, uninvited, on such a day to invade the house.

She turned now to remount the stairs, but her strength failed her, her knees yielded, and she sank upon a step, and burst into a flood of tears and convulsive sobs.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN CRUEL.

Table of Contents

Captain Coppinger occupied an old farmhouse, roomy, low-built, granite quoined and mullioned, called Pentyre Glaze, in a slight dip of the hills near the cliffs above the thundering Atlantic. One ash shivered at the end of the house—that was the only tree to be seen near Pentyre Glaze. And—who was Coppinger? That is more than can be told. He had come—no one knew whence. His arrival on the north coast of Cornwall was mysterious. There had been haze over the sea for three days. When it lifted, a strange vessel of foreign rig was seen lying off the coast. Had she got there in the fog, not knowing her course; or had she come there knowingly, and was making for the mouth of the Camel? A boat was seen to leave the ship, and in it a man came ashore; the boat returned to the vessel, that thereupon spread sail and disappeared in the fog that re-descended over the water. The man gave his name as Coppinger—his Christian name, he said, was Curll, and he was a Dane; but though his intonation was not that of the Cornish, it was not foreign. He took up his residence in S. Enodoc at a farm, and suddenly, to the surprise of every one, became by purchase the possessor of Pentyre Glaze, then vacant and for sale. Had he known that the estate was obtainable when he had come suddenly out of the clouds

into the place to secure it? Nobody knew, and Coppinger was silent.

Thenceforth Pentyre Glaze became the harbor and den of every lawless character along the coast. All kinds of wild uproar and reckless revelry appalled the neighborhood day and night. It was discovered that an organized band of smugglers, wreckers, and poachers made this house the centre of their operations, and that “Cruel Coppinger” was their captain. There were at that time—just a century ago—no resident magistrates or gentry in the immediate neighborhood. The yeomen were bribed, by kegs of spirits left at their doors, to acquiesce in a traffic in illicit goods, and in the matter of exchange they took their shares. It was said that on one occasion a preventive man named Ewan Wyvill, who had pursued Coppinger in his boat, was taken by him, and his head chopped off by the captain, with his boat axe, on the gunwale. Such was the story. It was never proved. Wyvill had disappeared, and the body was recovered headless on the Doom Bar. That violence had been used was undoubted, but who had committed the crime was not known, though suspicion pointed to Coppinger. Thenceforth none ever called him Curll; by one consent he was named Cruel. In the West of England every one is given his Christian name. An old man is Uncle, and an old woman Aunt, and any one in command is a Captain. So Coppinger was known as Captain Cruel, or as Cruel Coppinger.

Strange vessels were often seen appearing at regular intervals on the coast, and signals were flashed from the one window of Pentyre Glaze that looked out to sea.

Among these vessels, one, a full-rigged schooner, soon became ominously conspicuous. She was for long the terror of the Cornish coast. Her name was The Black Prince. Once, with Coppinger on board, she led a revenue cutter into an intricate channel among the rocks, where, from knowledge of the bearings, The Black Prince escaped scathless, while the king’s vessel perished with all on board.

Immunity increased Coppinger’s daring. There were certain bridle-roads along the fields over which he exercised exclusive control. He issued orders that no man should pass over them by night, and accordingly from that hour none ever did.[A]

[A] Many stories of Cruel Coppinger may be found in Hawker's Footprints of Former Men in Cornwall. I have also told them in my Vicar of Morwenstow. I have ventured to translate the scene of Coppinger's activity further west, from Wellcombe to S. Enodoc. But, indeed, he is told of in many places on this coast.

Moreover, if report spoke true—and reports do not arise without cause—Coppinger was not averse from taking advantage, and that unlawful advantage, of a wreck. By "lawful" and "unlawful" two categories of acts are distinguished, not by the laws of the land but by common consent of the Cornish conscience. That same Cornish conscience distinguished wrecking into two classes, as it distinguished then, and distinguishes still, witchcraft into two classes. The one, white witchcraft, is legitimate and profitable, and to be upheld; the other, black witchcraft, is reprehensible, unlawful, and to be put down. So with wrecking. The Bristol Channel teemed with shipping, flights of white sails passed in the offing, and these vessels were, when inward bound, laden with sugars and spices from the Indies, or with spirits and wines from France. If outward bound they were deep in the water with a cargo of the riches of England.

Now, should a gale spring up suddenly and catch any of these vessels, and should the gale be—as it usually is, and to the Cornish folk, favorably is—from the northwest, then there was no harbor of refuge along that rock-bound coast, and a ship that could not make for the open was bound inevitably to be pounded to pieces against the precipitous walls of the peninsula. If such were the case, it was perfectly

legitimate for every householder in the district to come down on the wreck and strip it of everything it contained.

But, on the other hand, there was wrecking that was disapproved of, though practised by a few, so rumor said, and that consisted in luring a vessel that was in doubt as to her course, by false signals, upon a reef or bar, and then, having made a wreck of her, to pillage her. When on a morning after a night in which there had been no gale, a ship was found on the rocks, and picked as clean as the carcase of a camel in the desert, it was open to suspicion that this ship had not been driven there by wind or current; and when the survivors, if they reached the shore, told that they had been led to steer in the direction where they had been cast away by certain lights that had wholly deceived them, then it was also open to suspicion that these lights had been purposely exhibited for the sake of bringing that vessel to destruction; and when, further, it was proved that a certain set or gang of men had garnered all the profits, or almost all the profits, that accrued from a wreck, before the countryside was aware that a wreck had occurred, then it was certainly no very random conjecture that the wreck had been contrived in some fashion by those who profited by it. There were atrocious tales of murder of shipwrecked men circulating, but these were probably wholly, or at all events in part, untrue. If when a vessel ran upon the rocks she was deserted by her crew, if they took to the boats and made for shore, then there remained no impediment to the wreckers taking possession; it was only in the event of their finding a skipper on board to maintain right over the grounded vessel, or the mariners still on her engaged in getting her

off, that any temptation to violence could arise. But it was improbable that a crew would cling to a ship on such a coast when once she was on the breakers. It was a moral certainty that they would desert her, and leave the wreck to be pillaged by the rats from shore, without offer of resistance. The character of the coast-wreckers was known to seamen, or rather a legend full of horror circulated relative to their remorseless savagery. The fear of wreckers added to the fear of the sea would combine to drive a crew, to the last man, into the boats. Consequently, though it is possible that in some cases murder of castaway men may have occurred, such cases must have been most exceptional. The wreckers were only too glad to build a golden bridge by which the wrecked might escape. Morally, without a question, those who lured a hapless merchantman upon the rocks were guilty of the deaths of those sailors who were upset in their boats in escaping from the vessel, or were dashed against the cliffs in their attempts to land, but there was no direct blood-guiltiness felt in such cases; and those who had reaped a harvest from the sea counted their gains individually, and made no estimate of the misery accruing thereby to others.