JOHN OXENHAM

A MAID OF THE SILVER SEA

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CHAPTER I

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HOW TWO LAY IN A CLEFT

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A girl and a boy lay in a cubby-hole in the north side of the cliff overlooking Port Gorey, and watched the goings-on down below.

The sun was tending towards Guernsey and the gulf was filled witn golden light. A small brig, unkempt and dirty, was nosing towards the rough wooden landing-stage clamped to the opposite rocks, as though doubtful of the advisability of attempting its closer acquaintance.

"Mon Gyu, Bern, how I wish they were all at the bottom of the sea!" said the girl vehemently.

"Whe—e—e—w!" whistled the boy, and then with a twinkle in his eye,—"Who's got a new parasol now?"

"Everybody!—but it's not that. It's the bustle—and the dirt—and the noise—and oh—everything! You can't remember what it was like before these wretched mines came—no dust, no noise, no bustle, no dirty men, no silly women, no nothing as it is now. Just Sark as it used to be. And now—! Mon Gyu, yes I wish the sea would break in through their nasty tunnels and wash them all away—pumps and engines and houses—everything!"

And up on the hillside at the head of the gulf the great pumping-engine clacked monotonously "Never! Never! Never!"

"You've got it bad to-day, Nan," said the boy.

"I've always got it bad. It makes me sick. It has changed everything and everybody—everybody except mother and you," she added quickly. "Get—get—get! Why we hardly used to know what money was, and now no one thinks of anything but getting all they can. It is sickening."

"S—s—s—s—t!" signalled the boy suddenly, at the sound of steps and voices on the cliff outside and close at hand.

"Tom," muttered the boy.

"And Peter Mauger," murmured the girl, and they both shrank lower into their hiding-place.

It was a tiny natural chamber in the sharp slope of the hill. Ages ago the massive granite boulders of the headland, loosened and undercut by the ceaseless assaults of wind and weather and the deadly quiet fingers of the frost, had come rolling down the slope till they settled afresh on new foundations, forming holes and crannies and little angular chambers where the splintered shoulders met. In time, the soil silted down and covered their asperities, and—like a good colonist—carrying in itself the means of increase, it presently brought forth and blossomed, and the erstwhile shattered rocks were royally robed in russet and purple, and green and gold.

Among these fantastic little chambers Nance had played as a child, and had found refuge in them from the persecutions of her big half-brother, Tom Hamon. Tom was six when she was born—fourteen accordingly when she was at the teasable age of eight, and unusually tempting as a victim by reason of her passionate resentment of his unwelcome attentions.

She hated Tom, and Tom had always resented her and her mother's intrusion into the family, and Bernel's, when he came, four years after Nance.

What his father wanted to marry again for, Tom never could make out. His lack of training and limited powers of expression did not indeed permit him any distinct reasoning on the matter, but the feeling was there—a dull resentment which found its only vent and satisfaction in stolid rudeness to his stepmother and the persecution of Nance and Bernel whenever occasion offered.

The household was not therefore on too happy a footing.

It consisted, at the time when our story opens, of—Old Mrs. Hamon—Grannie—half of whose life had been lived in the nineteenth century and half in the eighteenth. She had seen all the wild doings of the privateering and free-trading days, and recalled as a comparatively recent event the raiding of the Island by the men of Herm, though that happened forty years before.

She was for the most part a very reserved and silent old lady, but her tongue could bite like a whip when the need arose.

She occupied her own dower-rooms in the house, and rarely went outside them. All day long she sat in her great arm-chair by the window in her sitting-room, with the door wide open, so that she could see all that went on in the house and outside it; and in the sombre depths of her great black silk sun-bonnet—long since turned by age and weather to dusky green—her watchful eyes had in them something of the inscrutable and menacing.

Her wants were very few, and as her income from her one-third of the farm had far exceeded her expenses for more than twenty years, she was reputed as rich in material matters as she undoubtedly was in common-sense and worldly wisdom. Even young Tom was sulkily silent before her on the rare occasions when they came into contact.

Next in the family came the nominal head of it, "Old Tom" Hamon, to distinguish him from young Tom, his son; a rough, not ill-natured man, until the money-getting fever seized him, since which time his home-folks had found in him changes that did not make for their comfort.

The discovery of silver in Sark, the opening of the mines, and the coming of the English miners—with all the very problematical benefits of a vastly increased currency of money, and the sudden introduction of new ideas and standards of life and living into a community which had hitherto been contented with the order of things known to its forefathers—these things had told upon many, but on none more than old Tom Hamon.

Suspicious at first of the meaning and doings of these strangers, he very soon found them advantageous. He got excellent prices for his farm produce, and when his horses and carts were not otherwise engaged he could always turn them to account hauling for the mines.

As the silver-fever grew in him he became closer in his dealings both abroad and at home. With every pound he could scrimp and save he bought shares in the mines and believed in them absolutely. And he went on scrimping and saving and buying shares so as to have as large a stake in the silver future as possible.

He got no return as yet from his investment, indeed. But that would come all right in time, and the more shares he could get hold of the larger the ultimate return would be. And so he stinted himself and his family, and mortgaged his future, in hopes of wealth which he would not have known how to enjoy if he had succeeded in getting it.

So possessed was he with the desire for gain that when young Tom came home from sea he left the farming to him, and took to the mining himself, and worked harder than he had ever worked in his life before.

He was a sturdy, middle-sized man, with a grizzled bullet head and rounded beard, of a dogged and pertinacious disposition, but capable, when stirred out of his usual phlegm, of fiery outbursts which overbore all argument and opposition. His wife died when his boy Tom was three, and after two years of lonely discomfort he married Nancy Poidestre of Petit Dixcart, whose people looked upon it as something of a *mésalliance* that she should marry out of her own country into Little Sark.

Nancy was eminently good-looking and a notable housewife, and she went into Tom Hamon's house of La Closerie with every hope and intention of making him happy.

But, from the very first, little Tom set his face against her.

It would be hard to say why. Nancy racked her brain for reasons, and could find none, and was miserable over it.

His father thrashed him for his rudeness and insolence, which only made matters worse.

His own mother had given way to him in everything, and spoiled him completely. After her death his father out of pity for his forlorn estate, had equally given way to him, and

only realised, too late, when he tried to bring him to with a round turn, how thoroughly out of hand he had got.

When little Tom found, as one consequence of the new mother's arrival, that his father thrashed instead of humouring him, he put it all down to the new-comer's account, and set himself to her discomfiture in every way his barbarous little wits could devise.

He never forgot one awful week he passed in his grandmother's care—a week that terminated in the arrival of still another new-comer, who, in course of time, developed into little Nance. It is not impossible that the remembrance of that black week tended to colour his after-treatment of his little half-sister. In spite of her winsomeness he hated her always, and did his very best to make life a burden to her.

When, on that memorable occasion, he was hastily flung by his father into his grandmother's room, as the result of some wickedness which had sorely upset his stepmother, and the door was, most unusually, closed behind him, his first natural impulse was to escape as quickly as possible.

But he became aware of something unusual and discomforting in the atmosphere, and when his grandmother said sternly, "Sit down!" and he turned on her to offer his own opinion on the matter, he found the keen dark eyes gazing out at him from under the shadowy penthouse of the great black sun-bonnet, with so intent and compelling a stare that his mouth closed without saying a word. He climbed up on to a chair and twisted his feet round the legs by way of anchorage.

Then he sat up and stared back at Grannie, and as an exhibition of nonchalance and high spirit, put out his tongue at her.

Grannie only looked at him.

And, bit by bit, the tongue withdrew, and only the gaping mouth was left, and above it a pair of frightened green eyes, transmitting to the perverse little soul within new impressions and vague terrors.

Before long his left arm went up over his face to shut out the sight of Grannie's dreadful staring eyes, and when, after a sufficient interval, he ventured a peep at her and found her eyes still fixed on him, he howled, "Take it off! Take it off!" and slipped his anchors and slid to the floor, hunching his back at this tormentor who could beat him on his own ground.

For that week he gave no trouble to any one. But after it he never went near Grannie's room, and for years he never spoke to her. When he passed her open door, or in front of her window, he hunched his shoulder protectively and averted his eyes.

Resenting control in any shape or form, Tom naturally objected to school.

His stepmother would have had him go—for his own sake as well as hers. But his father took a not unusual Sark view of the matter.

"What's the odds?" said he. "He'll have the farm. Book-learning will be no use to him," and in spite of Nancy's protests—which Tom regarded as simply the natural outcrop of her ill-will towards him—the boy grew up untaught and

uncontrolled, and knowing none but the worst of all masters —himself.

On occasion, when the tale of provocation reached its limit, his father thrashed him, until there came a day when Tom upset the usual course of proceedings by snatching the stick out of his father's hands, and would have belaboured him in turn if he had not been promptly knocked down.

After that his father judged it best for all concerned that he should flight his troublesome wings outside for a while. So he sent him off in a trading-ship, in the somewhat forlorn hope that a knowledge of the world would knock some of the devil out of him—a hope which, like many another, fell short of accomplishment.

The world knocks a good deal out of a man, but it also knocks a good deal in. Tom came back from his voyaging knowing a good many things that he had not known when he started—a little English among others—and most of the others things which had been more profitably left unlearnt.

CHAPTER II

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HOW NANCE CAME TO BE HERSELF

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And little Nance?

The most persistent memories of Nance's childhood were her fear and hatred of Tom, and her passionate love for her mother,—and Bernel when he came.

"My own," she called these two, and regarded even her father as somewhat outside that special pale; esteemed Grannie as an Olympian, benevolently inclined, but dwelling on a remote and loftier plane; and feared and detested Tom as an open enemy.

And she had reasons.

She was a high-strung child, too strong and healthy to be actually nervous, but with every faculty always at its fullest—not only in active working order but always actively at work—an admirable subject therefore for the malevolence of an enemy whose constant proximity offered him endless opportunity.

Much of his boyish persecution never reached the ears of the higher powers. Nance very soon came to accept Tom's rough treatment as natural from a big fellow of fourteen to a small girl of eight, and she bore it stoically and hated him the harder.

Her mother taught her carefully to say her prayers, which included petitions for the welfare of Grannie and father and brother Tom, and for a time, with the perfunctoriness of

childhood, which attaches more weight to the act than to the meaning of it, she allowed that to pass with a stickle and a slur. But very soon brother Tom was ruthlessly dropped out of the ritual, and neither threats nor persuasion could induce her to re-establish him.

Later on, and in private, she added to her acknowledged petitions an appendix, unmistakably brief and to the point —"And, O God, please kill brother Tom!"—and lived in hope.

She was an unusually pretty child, though her prettiness developed afterwards—as childish prettiness does not always—into something finer and more lasting.

She had, as a child, large dark blue eyes, which wore as a rule a look of watchful anxiety—put there by brother Tom. To the end of her life she carried the mark of a cut over her right eyebrow, which came within an ace of losing her the sight of that eye. It was brother Tom did that.

She had an abundance of flowing brown hair, by which Tom delighted to lift her clear off the ground, under threat of additional boxed ears if she opened her mouth. The wide, firm little mouth always remained closed, but the blue eyes burned fiercely, and the outraged little heart, thumping furiously at its impotence, did its best to salve its wounds with ceaseless repetition of its own private addition to the prescribed form of morning and evening prayer.

Once, even Tom's dull wit caught something of meaning in the blaze of the blue eyes.

"What are you saying, you little devil?" he growled, and released her so suddenly that she fell on her knees in the mud.

And she put her hands together, as she was in the habit of doing, and prayed, "O God, please kill brother Tom!"

"Little devil!" said brother Tom, with a startled red face, and made a dash at her; but she had foreseen that and was gone like a flash.

One might have expected her childish comeliness to exercise something of a mollifying effect on his brutality. On the contrary, it seemed but to increase it. She was so sweet; he was so coarse. She was so small and fragile; he was so big and strong. Her prettiness might work on others. He would let her see and feel that he was not the kind to be fooled by such things.

He had the elemental heartlessness of the savage, which recognises no sufferings but its own, and refuses to be affected even by them.

When Nance's kitten, presented to her by their neighbour, Mrs. Helier Baker, solved much speculation as to its sex by becoming a mother, Tom gladly undertook the task of drowning the superfluous offspring. He got so much amusement out of it that, for weeks, Nance's horrified inner vision saw little blind heads, half-drowned and mewing piteously, striving with feeble pink claws to climb out of the death-tub and being ruthlessly set swimming again till they sank.

She hurled herself at Tom as he gloated over his enjoyment, and would have asked nothing better than to treat him as he was treating the kittens—righteous retribution in her case, not enjoyment!—but he was too strong for her. He simply kicked out behind, and before she could get up had thrust one of his half-drowned victims into

the neck of her frock, and the clammy-dead feel of it and its pitiful screaming set her shuddering for months whenever she thought of it.

But now and again her tormentor overpassed the bounds and got his reward—to Nance's immediate satisfaction but subsequent increased tribulation. For whenever he got a thrashing on her account he never failed to pay her out in the smaller change of persecution which never came to light.

On a pitch-dark, starless night, the high-hedged—and in places deep-sunk—lanes of Little Sark are as black as the inside of an ebony ruler.

When the moon bathes sea and land in a flood of shimmering silver, or on a clear night of stars—and the stars in Sark, you must know, shine infinitely larger and closer and brighter than in most other places—the darkness below is lifted somewhat by reason of the majestic width and height of the glittering dome above. But when moon and stars alike are wanting, then the darkness of a Sark lane is a thing to be felt, and—if you should happen to be a little girl of eight, with a large imagination and sharp ears that have picked up fearsome stories of witches and ghosts and evil spirits—to be mortally feared.

Tom had a wholesome dread of such things himself. But the fear of fourteen, in a great strong body and no heavenly spark of imagination, is not to be compared with the fear of eight and a mind that could quiver like a harp even at its own imaginings. And, to compass his ends, he would blunt his already dull feelings and turn the darkness to his account.

When he knew Nance was out on such a night—on some errand, or in at a neighbour's—to crouch in the hedge and leap silently out upon her was huge delight; and it was well worth braving the grim possibilities of the hedges in order to extort from her the anger in the bleat of terror which, as a rule, was all that her paralysed heart permitted, as she turned and fled.

Almost more amusing—as considerably extending the enjoyment—was it to follow her quietly on such occasions, yet not so quietly but that she was perfectly aware of footsteps behind, which stopped when she stopped and went on again when she went on, and so kept her nerves on the quiver the whole time.

Creeping fearfully along in the blackness, with eyes and ears on the strain, and both little shoulders humped against the expected apparition of Tom—or worse, she would become aware of the footsteps behind her.

Then she would stop suddenly to make sure, and stand listening painfully, and hear nothing but the low hoarse growl of the sea that rarely ceases, day or night, among the rocks of Little Sark.

Then she would take a tentative step or two and stop again, and then dash on. And always there behind her were the footsteps that followed in the dark.

Then she would fumble with her foot for a stone and stoop hastily—for you are at a disadvantage with ghosts and with Toms when you stoop—and pick it up and hurl it promiscuously in the direction of the footsteps, and quaver, in a voice that belied its message, "Go away, Tom Hamon! I can see you,"—which was a little white fib born of the black

urgency of the situation;—"and I'm not the least bit afraid,"—which was most decidedly another.

And so the journey would progress fitfully and in spasms, and leave nightmare recollections for the disturbance of one's sleep.

But there were variations in the procedure at times.

As when, on one occasion, Nance's undiscriminating projectile elicited from the darkness a plaintive "Moo!" which came, she knew, from her favourite calf Jeanetton, who had broken her tether in the field and sought companionship in the road, and had followed her doubtfully, stopping whenever she stopped, and so received the punishment intended for another.

Nance kissed the bruise on Jeanetton's ample forehead next day very many times, and explained the whole matter to her at considerable length, and Jeanetton accepted it all very placidly and bore no ill-will.

Another time, when Nance had taken a very specially compounded cake over to her old friend, Mrs. Baker, as a present from her mother, and had been kept much longer than she wished—for the old lady's enjoyment of her pretty ways and entertaining prattle—she set out for home in fear and trembling.

It was one of the pitch-black nights, and she went along on tiptoes, hugging the empty plate to her breast, and glancing fearfully over first one shoulder, then the other, then over both and back and front all at once.

She was almost home, and very grateful for it, when the dreaded black figure leaped silently out at her from its

crouching place, and she tore down the lane to the house, Tom's hoarse guffaws chasing her mockingly.

The open door cleft a solid yellow wedge in the darkness. She was almost into it, when her foot caught, and she flung head foremost into the light with a scream, and lay there with the blood pouring down her face from the broken plate.

A finger's-breadth lower and she would have gone through life one-eyed, which would have been a grievous loss to humanity at large, for sweeter windows to a large sweet soul never shone than those out of which little Nance Hamon's looked.

Most houses may be judged by their windows, but these material windows are not always true gauge of what is within. They may be decked to deceive, but the clear windows of the soul admit of no disguise. That little life tenant is always looking out and showing himself in his true colours—whether he knows it or not.

Nance's terrified scream took old Tom out at a bound. He had heard the quick rush of her feet and Tom's mocking laughter in the distance. He carried Nance in to her mother, snatched up a stick, and went after the culprit who had promptly disappeared.

It was two days before Tom sneaked in again and took his thrashing dourly. Little Nance had shut her lips tight when her father questioned her, and refused to say a word. But he was satisfied as to where the blame lay and administered justice with a heavy hand.

Bernel—as soon as he grew to persecutable age—provided Tom with another victim. But time was on the victims' side, and when Nance got to be twelve—Bernel

being then eight and Tom eighteen—their combined energies and furies of revolt against his oppressions put matters more on a level.

Many a pitched battle they had, and sometimes almost won. But, win or lose, the fact that they had no longer to suffer without lifting a hand was great gain to them, and the very fact that they had to go about together for mutual protection knitted still stronger the ties that bound them one to the other.

But, though little Nance's earlier years suffered much from the black shadow of brother Tom, they were very far from being years of darkness.

She was of an unusually bright and enquiring disposition, always wanting to see and know and understand, interested in everything about her, and never satisfied till she had got to the bottom of things, or at all events as far down as it was possible for a small girl to get.

Her lively chatter and ceaseless questions left her mother and Grannie small chance of stagnation. But, if she asked many questions—and some of them posers—it was not simply for the sake of asking, but because she truly wanted to know; and even Grannie, who was not naturally talkative, never resented her pertinent enquiries, but gave freely of her accumulated wisdom and enjoyed herself in the giving.

When she got beyond their depth at times, or outside their limits, she would boldly carry her queries—and strange ones they were at times—to old Mr. Cachemaille, the Vicar up in Sark, making nothing of the journey and the Coupée in order to solve some, to her, important problem. And he not

only never refused her but delighted to open to her the stores of a well-stocked mind and of the kindest and gentlest of hearts.

Often and often the people of Vauroque and Plaisance would see them pass, hand in hand and full of talk, when the Vicar had wished to see with his own eyes one or other of Nance's wonderful discoveries, in the shape of cave or rock-pool, or deposit of sparkling crystal fingers—amethyst and topaz—or what not.

For she was ever lighting on odd and beautiful bits of Nature's craftsmanship. Books were hardly to be had in those days, and in place of them she climbed fearlessly about the rough cliff-sides and tumbled headlands, and looked close at Nature with eyes that missed nothing and craved everything.

To the neighbours the headlands were places where rabbits were to be shot for dinner, the lower rocks places where ormers and limpets and vraie might be found. But to little Nance the rabbits were playfellows whose sudden deaths she lamented and resented; the cliff-sides were glorious gardens thick with sweet-scented yellow gorse and honeysuckle and wild roses, carpeted with primroses and bluebells; and, in their season, rich and juicy with blackberries beyond the possibilities of picking.

She was on closest visiting terms with innumerable broods of newly-hatched birdlings—knew them, indeed, while they were still but eggs—delighted in them when they were as yet but skin and mouth—rejoiced in their featherings and flyings. Even baby cuckoos were a joy to her, though, on their foster-mothers' accounts she resented

the thriftlessness of their parents, and grew tired each year of their monotonous call which ceased not day or night. But of the larks never, for their songs seemed to her of heaven, while the cuckoos were of earth. The gulls, too, were somewhat difficult from the friendly point of view, but she lay for hours overlooking their domestic arrangements and envying the wonders of their matchless flight.

And down below the cliffs what marvels she discovered! —marvels which in many cases the Vicar was fain to content himself with at second hand, since closer acquaintance seemed to him to involve undoubted risk to limb if not to life. Little Nance, indeed, hopped down the seamed cliffs like a rock pipit, with never a thought of the dangers of the passage, and he would stand and watch her with his heart in his mouth, and only shake his grey head at her encouraging assertions that it was truly truly as easy as easy. For he felt certain that even if he got down he would never get up again. And so, when the triumphant shout from below told him she was safely landed, he would wave a grateful hand and get back from the edge and seat himself securely on a rock, till the rosy face came laughing up between him and the shimmering sea, with trophy of weed or shell or crystal quartz, and he would tell her all he knew about them, and she would try to tell him of all he had missed by not coming down.

There were wonderful great basins down there, all lined with pink and green corallines, and full of the loveliest weeds and anemones and other sea-flowers, and the rivulets that flowed from them to the sea were lined pink and green, too. And this that she had brought him was the

flaming sea-weed, though truly it did not look it now, but in the water it was, she assured him, of the loveliest, and there were great bunches there so that the dark holes under the rocks were all alight with it.

She coaxed him doubtfully to the descent of the rounded headland facing L'Etat, picking out an easy circuitous way for him, and so got him safely down to her own special pool, hollowed out of the solid granite by centuries of patient grinding on the part of the great boulders within.

It was there, peering down at the fishes below, that she expressed a wish to imitate them; and he agreeing, she ran up to the farm for a bit of rope and was back before he had half comprehended all the beauties of the pool. And he had no sooner explained the necessary movements to her and she had tried them, than she cast off the rope, shouting, "I can swim! I can swim!" and to his amazement swam across the pool and back—a good fifty feet each way—chirping with delight in this new-found faculty and the tonic kiss of the finest water in the world. But after all it was not so very amazing, for she was absolutely without fear, and in that water it is difficult to sink.

They were often down there together after that, for close alongside were wonderful channels and basins whorled out of the rock in the most fantastic ways, and to sit and watch the tide rush up them was a never-failing entertainment.

And not far away was a blow-hole of the most extraordinary which shot its spray a hundred feet into the air, and if you didn't mind getting wet you could sit quite alongside it, so close that you could put your hand into it as it came rocketing out of the hole, and then, if the sun was

right, you sat in the midst of rainbows—a thing Nance had always longed to do since she clapped her baby hands at her first one. But the Vicar never did that.

And once, in quest of the how and the why, Nance swam into the blow-hole's cave at a very low tide, and its size and the dome of its roof, compared with the narrowness of its entrance, amazed her, but she did not stay long for it gave her the creeps.

These were some of the ways by which little Nance grew to a larger estate than most of her fellows, and all these things helped to make her what she came to be.

When she grew old enough to assist in the farm, new realms of delight opened to her. Chickens, calves, lambs, piglets—she foster-mothered them all and knew no weariness in all such duties which were rather pleasures.

It was a wounded rabbit, limping into cover under a tangle of gorse and blackberry bashes, that discovered to her the entrance to the series of little chambers and passages that led right through the headland to the side looking into Port Gorey. Which most satisfactory hiding-place she and Bernel turned to good account on many an occasion when brother Tom's oppression passed endurance.

It had taken time, and much screwing up of childish courage, to explore the whole of that extraordinary little burrow, and it was not the work of a day.

When Nance crept along the little run made by many generations of rabbits, she found that it led finally into a dark crack in the rock, and, squeezing through that, she was in a small dark chamber which smelt strongly of her friends.

As soon as her eyes recovered from the sudden change from blazing sunlight to almost pitch darkness, she perceived a small black opening at the far end, and looking through it she saw a lightening of the darkness still farther in which tempted her on.

It was a tough scramble even for her, and the closeness of the rocks and the loneliness weighed upon her somewhat. But there was that glimmer of light ahead and she must know what it was, and so she climbed and wriggled over and under the huge splintered rocks till she came to the light, like a tiny slit of a window far above her head, and still there were passages leading on.

Next day, with Bernel and a tiny crasset lamp for company, she explored the burrow to its utmost limits and adopted it at once as their refuge and stronghold. And thereafter they spent much time there, especially in the end chamber where a tiny slit gave on to Port Gorey, and they could lie and watch all that went on down below.

There they solemnly concocted plans for brother Tom's discomfiture, and thither they retreated after defeat or victory, while he hunted high and low for them and never could make out where they had got to.

Then Tom went off to sea, and life, for those at home, became a joy without a flaw—except the thought that he would sometime come back—unless he got drowned.

When he returned he was past the boyish bullying and teasing stage, and his stunts and twists developed themselves along other lines. Moreover, sailor-fashion, he wore a knife in a sheath at the back of his belt.

He found Nance a tall slim girl of sixteen, her childish prettiness just beginning to fashion itself into the strength and comeliness of form and feature which distinguished her later on.

He swore, with strange oaths, that she was the prettiest bit of goods he'd set eyes on since he left home, and he'd seen a many. And he wondered to himself if this could really be the Nance he used to hate and persecute.

But Nance detested him and all his ways as of old.

CHAPTER III

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HOW THE NEW MINE CAPTAIN CAME

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Tom Hamon and Peter Mauger seated themselves on a rock within a few feet of the narrow slit out of which Nance and Bernel had been looking.

"Ouaie," said Tom, taking up his parable—"wanted me to join him in getting a loan on farm, he did."

"Aw, now!"

"Ouaie—a loan on farm, and me to join him, 'cause he couldn' do it without. 'And why?' I asked him."

"Ah!"

"An' he told me he was goin' to make a fortune out them silver mines."

"Aw!"

"Ouaie! He'd put in every pound he had and every shilling he earned. An' the more he could put in the more he would get out."

"Aw!"

"'But,' I said, 'suppos'n it all goes into them big holes and never comes out—'"

"Aw!"

"But he's just crazy 'bout them mines. Says there's silver an' lead, and guyabble-knows-what-all in 'em, and when they get it out he'll be a rich man."

"Aw!" said Peter, nodding his head portentously, as one who had gauged the futility of earthly riches.

He was a young man of large possessions but very few words. When he did allow his thoughts out they came slowly and in jerks, with lapses at times which the hearer had to fill in as best he could.

His father had been an enterprising free-trader, and had made money before the family farm came to him on the death of his father. He had married another farm and the heiress attached to it, and Peter was the result. An only son, both parents dead, two farms and a good round sum in the Guernsey Bank, such were Peter's circumstances.

And himself—good-tempered; lazy, since he had no need to work; not naturally gifted mentally, and the little he had, barely stirred by the short course of schooling which had been deemed sufficient for so worldly-well-endowed a boy; tall, loose-limbed, easy going and easily led, Peter was the object of much speculation among marriageably inclined maiden hearts, and had set his own where it was not wanted.

"Ouaie," continued Tom, "an' if I'd join him in the loan the money'd all come to me when he'd done with it."

"Aw!... Money isn't everything.... Can't get all you want sometimes when you've got all money you want."

"G'zammin, Peter! You're as crazy 'bout that lass as th' old un is 'bout his mines. Why don't ye ask her and ha' done with it?"

"Aw—yes. Well.... You see.... I'm makin' up to her gradual like, and in time——"

And Bernel in the hole dug his elbow facetiously into Nance's side.

"Mon Gyu! To think of a slip of a thing like our Nance making a great big fellow like you as fool-soft as a bit of tallow!" and Tom stared at him in amazement. "Why, I've licked her scores of times, and I used to lift her up by the hair of her head."

"I'd ha' knocked your head right off, Tom Hamon, if I'd been there. Right off—yes, an' bumped it on the ground."

"No, you wouldn't. 'Cause, in the first place, you couldn't, and in the second place you wouldn't have looked at her then. She was no more to look at than a bit of a rabbit, slipping about, scared-like, with her big eyes all round her."

"Great rough bull of a chap you was, Tom. Ought to had more lickings when you was young."

"Aw!" said Tom.

"Join him?" asked Peter after a pause.

"No, I won't, an' he's no right to ask it, an' he knows it. Them dirty mines may pay an' they may not, but the farm's a safe thing an' I'll stick to it."

"Maybe new capt'n'll make things go better. That's him, I'm thinking, just got ashore from brig without breaking his legs," nodding towards the wooden landing-stage on the other side of the gulf. For landing at Port Gorey was at times a matter requiring both nerve and muscle.

A man, however, had just leaped ashore from the brig, and was now standing looking somewhat anxiously after the landing of his baggage, which consisted of a wooden chest and an old carpet-bag.

When at last it stood safely on the platform, he cast a comprehensive look at his surroundings and then turned to the group of men who had come down to watch the boat