

(2) CHAPTER I.

I AM the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-caped land. Only a speck in relation to the immensity that makes the surface of the globe and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighing bigger, more populous countries: England, seated in its northern sea, now visits my dreams in the semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves. In my boyish days she was the universe to me. When I stood on my native hills, and saw plain and mountain stretch out to the utmost limits of my vision, girdled by the dwellings of my countrymen and subdued to fertility by their labors, the earth's very centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest of it like nothing but a fable.

My father was one of those men gifted with neither reason nor judgment to guide their very enviable wit and imagination. His roots were obscure; but circumstances brought him early into public notice, and a small inheritance was soon dissipated in the splendid scene of fashion and luxury he came to inhabit. During the short years of thoughtless youth, he was adored by the high-bred triflers of the day—including a youthful sovereign, who would escape from party intrigues and arduous kingly duties to find never-failing amusement and exhilaration in his society. My father's impulses, never under his own control, perpetually led him into difficulties. He met his accumulating debts of honor and of trade, which would have broken another

man, with a light spirit and irrepressible hilarity; while his company was so necessary at the tables and assemblies of the rich, that his derelictions were considered venial, and he himself received with intoxicating flattery.

This kind of popularity, like every other, is evanescent. The difficulties of every kind with which he had to contend, increased in a frightful ratio to his small means of extricating himself. At such times the King would come to his relief, and then kindly take his friend to task. My father would promise to mend his ways but his social disposition, his craving for the usual diet of admiration, and more than all, the fiend of gambling, which fully possessed him, made his good resolutions fleeting, his promises vain. Then the King married; and the haughty princess of Austria, who became, as Queen of England, the head of fashion, looked with harsh eyes on the favorite's defects, and cast contempt on the affection her husband entertained for him. My father realized his fall was near. Far from profiting by a final calm before the storm to save himself, however, he sought out new rounds of senseless pleasures.

The King was a fine man, but easily led. His imperious consort now induced him to look with extreme disapprobation, and at last with distaste, on his favorite's imprudence and follies. True, my father's presence lifted many clouds; his warm-hearted frankness, brilliant repartee, and confiding demeanor were irresistible; but at a distance, while tales of his errors were being poured into his royal friend's ear, he lost his influence. The Queen worked dexterously to prolong these absences. She collected accusations. The King, who'd begun to see in him a source of perpetual disquiet, resolved to make one more

attempt to reclaim my father, and in case of ill success, cast him off for ever.

The scene was set. A powerful king, conspicuous for goodness, with alternate entreaty and reproof, besought his friend to attend to his real interests, and to spend his great powers on a worthy field, in which he, his sovereign, would be his prop and advocate. My father felt this kindness. With new and ambitious dreams floating before him, he determined to exchange his present pursuits for nobler duties; sincerely, he gave the required promise. As a pledge of continued favor, he received from his royal master a sum of money to defray pressing debts and set him up well in his new career. That very night, while yet full of gratitude and good resolutions, my father lost the whole sum at the gaming-table, tried to repair the loss by risking double stakes, lost that, and thus incurred a debt of honor he was wholly unable to pay. Ashamed to apply again to the King, he turned his back upon London's false delights and clinging miseries; and, with poverty for his sole companion, buried himself in solitude among the hills and lakes of Cumberland. His wit, his *bon mots*, his personal attractions, fascinating manners, and social graces, were long remembered and recounted. Those who asked his whereabouts heard he was under a cloud, a lost man. His long reign of brilliant wit earned him no pension on retiring. The King lamented his absence; he loved to repeat his sayings, relate the adventures they'd had together, and exalt his talents—but here ended the remembrance.

My father, forgotten, could neither forget nor recover from the loss of what was more necessary to him than air or food—the excitements of pleasure, the admiration of the noble, the

luxurious and polished living of the great. A nervous fever was the consequence. His nurse during this crisis was the daughter of the poor cottager under whose roof he lodged. She was lovely, gentle, and, above all, kind to him; nor is it surprising that the late idol of high-bred beauty should, even in a fallen state, appear a being of an elevated and wondrous nature to the lowly cottage girl. The attachment between them led to the ill-fated marriage of which I was one offspring. For all my mother's tenderness and sweetness, her husband still deplored his degraded state. Unaccustomed to work, he lacked any notion of how to support his growing family. He thought of applying to the King; but pride and shame withheld him. At last, before his necessities became so imperious as to compel him to some kind of exertion, he came to his deathbed. There, he looked forward to the future, and contemplated with anguish the desolate situation in which his wife and children would be left. His last effort was a letter to the King, full of touching eloquence and occasional flashes of that brilliant spirit which was inimitably his own. Bequeathing his widow and orphans to the friendship of his royal master, he felt satisfied that, by this means, their prosperity was better assured in his death than in his life. The letter was entrusted to the care of a nobleman whom he trusted would place it for him in the King's own hand.

He died in debt, and his little property was seized immediately by his creditors. My mother, penniless and burdened with two children, waited week after week, month after month, in sickening expectation of a reply that never came. She had no experience beyond her father's cottage; a large manor house was the highest type of grandeur she could conceive. From my father she'd learned the names of royalty

and court; but if, under any circumstances, she could have acquired sufficient courage to address them, the ill success of his own application caused her to banish the idea. Perpetual care and hard unceasing labor, joined to sorrow for the loss of the wondrous being with whom she was still in love, and her naturally delicate health, at length combined to release her from the sad prospect of more want and misery.

The condition of her orphan children was especially desolate. Her own father had been an emigrant from another part of the country, and had died long since; there was not a single relation to take them by the hand. They were outcasts, paupers, friendless beings left to the close-handed charity of the families around them.

I, the elder child, was five years old when my mother died. Memories of my parents talking, stories of my father's past, his royal friends, floated like an indistinct dream through my brain. I conceived that I was different and superior to the people around me, though how or wherefore, I had no idea; and a sense of injury, associated with the names of king and nobles, clung to me. But I could draw no conclusions from such feelings to serve as a guide to action. My first real knowledge of myself was as an unprotected orphan among the valleys and fells of Cumberland. I was in the service of a farmer. With crook in hand, my dog at my side, I shepherded a numerous flock on the near uplands. I cannot say much in praise of such a life. Its pains far exceeded its pleasures. There was freedom in it, a companionship with nature, and a reckless loneliness; but these, romantic as they were, clashed with a young person's love of action and desire for human sympathy. Neither the care of my flock, nor the change of seasons, were enough to tame my eager

spirit; my outdoor life and unfilled time became temptations that led me early into lawless habits. When I found others friendless like myself, I formed them into a band, became their chief and captain. All shepherd boys alike, while our flocks were spread over the pastures we schemed and executed mischievous pranks that drew on us the anger and revenge of the country folk. As my comrades' leader and protector, their misdeeds were usually blamed on me. I endured punishment and pain in their defense with heroic spirit, but claimed their praise and obedience as my reward.

In such a school my disposition became rugged and firm. Nursed by adversity, the appetite for admiration and incapacity for self-control which I inherited from my father, made me daring and reckless. I was rough as the elements, unlearned as the animals I tended and to whom I often compared myself. Finding that my chief superiority consisted in power, I soon decided that it was power only, and its lack, that distinguished me from any ruling potentate. Ignorant, untaught, pursued by a restless feeling of degradation from my true place in society, I wandered among the hills of civilized England as uncouth a savage as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome. My one law, was that of the strongest, and what I deemed the greatest act of virtue was never to submit.

Yet let me a little retract this sentence I've passed on myself. With her dying words, my mother had committed her other child, a girl three years younger, to my guardianship; and this one duty I performed with all the zeal and affection of which my nature was capable. When the difference of our sexes, reflected in the occupations we were given, in a great measure

divided us, the sister I'd nursed as an infant remained the object of my careful love.

She was a singular being, and, like me, inherited much of our father's peculiar character. Her face was wholly expressive. Her eyes were not dark, but impenetrably deep; you seemed to discover space after space in their glance, and to feel an universe of thought being comprehended by the soul therein. Her golden hair clustered on her temples, contrasting its rich hue with the pale living marble beneath. The coarse cast-off she wore for a dress little matched the refinement of feeling her face displayed, yet strangely accorded with it. She was like one of the painter Guido Reni's saints, with heaven in her heart and in her look; when you saw her, all thoughts turned inward. Her costume, even her features were secondary to the mind that beamed through her countenance.

Lovely and full of noble stuff, my poor, fancifully-named Perdita was yet not altogether saintly in her disposition, and her manners were cold. If she'd been nurtured by affectionate people, she might have been different; but, unloved save by me, and neglected, she repaid want of kindness with distrust and silence. She was submissive to those who held authority over her, but a perpetual cloud dwelt on her brow; she looked as if she expected enmity from everyone who approached her, and her actions sprang from the same feeling. She spent all the time she could in solitude, rambling to the most unfrequented places, scaling dangerous heights, seeking unvisited spots where she might wrap herself in the loneliness she prized.

Often she passed whole hours walking in the woods, or weaving garlands of flowers and ivy. Sometimes she sat tossing pebbles into a stream; or she'd set afloat crafts made of tree bark

or leaves, with feathers for sails, and study their navigation among the rapids and shallows. Meanwhile her active fancy wove a thousand stories. She'd lose herself delightedly in these self-created wanderings, and return with unwilling spirit to a dull daily laboring life. Poverty veiled her most excellent qualities, and all that was good in her seemed about to perish from want of affection. Lacking even my advantage of being able to remember our parents, she clung to me as her only friend. But her alliance with such a brother compounded the distaste in which her protectors held her—then every error was magnified by them into crimes. Orphans, in the fullest sense of the term, we were poorest among the poor, and despised by all. If my daring and courage obtained for me a kind of respectful aversion, her youth and sex caused her constant troubles; and her own disposition was not so constituted as to diminish the evil effects of a lowly station.

Though almost equally cut off from the usual forms of social life, my sister and I made a strong contrast to each other. I always required the stimulants of companionship and applause. Perdita was sufficient to herself. For all my lawless habits, my disposition was sociable, hers reclusive. My life was spent among tangible realities, hers was a dream. I might be said even to love my enemies, since by exciting me they in a sort bestowed happiness upon me; Perdita almost disliked her friends, for they interfered with her visionary moods. All my feelings, even of exultation and triumph, were changed to bitterness by solitude; Perdita, even in joy, fled to loneliness, and could go on from day to day neither expressing her emotions, nor seeking fellow feeling in another mind. Like a fruitful soil that imbibes the airs and dews of heaven, and gives them forth again to light in

loveliest forms of fruits and flowers, she was often dark and rugged, raked up for the unseen seed.

She dwelt in a cottage whose trim grass lawn overlooked the lake called Ulswater. From the beech wood that stretched up the hill behind, issued a purling brook that ran close by and down through poplar-shaded banks into the lake. I lived with a farmer whose house was built higher up among the hills. A dark crag rose behind it, with snow year-round in the crevices of its northern exposure. Before dawn I led my flock to the sheep-walks, and guarded them through the day. It was a life of toil. Rain and cold were more frequent than sunshine; but it was my pride to disdain the elements. My trusty dog watched the sheep as I slipped away to rendezvous with my comrades; at noon we'd toss aside our meager daily fare and build a blazing fire to cook the game we'd just stolen from the neighboring preserves. After lunch we'd sit around the pot trading tales of hair-breadth escapes, combats with dogs, flights, ambushes. The search after a stray lamb might fill up the hours of afternoon, when we weren't attempting to elude punishment for our crimes. In the evening my flock went to its fold, and I to see my sister.

It was seldom indeed that my band of poachers and I escaped, to use an old-fashioned term, scot free. Our tasty fare was often exchanged for blows and imprisonment. At thirteen, I was sent for a month to the county jail and rejoined society with my morals unimproved, my hatred of my oppressors increased tenfold. Bread and water hadn't tamed my blood, nor had solitary confinement inspired me with gentle thoughts. I was angry, impatient, miserable; my only happy hours were those during which I devised schemes of revenge. These I perfected in my forced solitude, with the result that during the whole of

the following season, and I was freed early in September, I never failed to provide excellent and plenteous fare for myself and my comrades. This was a glorious winter. The sharp frost and heavy snows tamed the animals, and kept the country gentlemen by their firesides; we got more game than we could eat, and my faithful dog grew sleek upon our refuse.

The next years only added fresh love of freedom, and contempt for all that was not as wild and rude as myself. At sixteen I was tall and athletic, adept at feats of strength and inured to any weather. Browned by the sun, my step firm with conscious power, I feared no man, and loved none. My life was almost an animal's, and my mind was in danger of degenerating to match it. Up to this point, my savage habits had done me no deep harm; in fact, while my physical powers had grown and flourished under their influence, they'd taught me all the hardy virtues, too. Now my unbridled strength was daily instigating me to acts of tyranny over my companions. And freedom was becoming licentiousness. On the brink of manhood, my passions, strong as the trees of a forest, had already taken root within me, and threatened to shadow with their noxious overgrowth my path of life.

Longing for enterprises beyond my childish exploits, I began to avoid the other shepherds. I'd soon have lost them anyhow. We reached the age when boys are lifted from the pastures and sent to fulfill their destined situations in life; but I, an outcast, with none to lead or drive me forward, paused, a shepherd still. Old people began to point at me as an example, and the young to wonder at my difference from themselves. I hated all of them and began, last and worst degradation, to hate myself. I clung to

my ferocious habits, yet half despised them; I continued my war against civilization, yet wished I could belong to it.

Time again and again I reviewed all my mother ever told me of my father's former life, and took out the few relics I possessed of his to hold. Here was greater refinement than could be found among the mountain cottages, but no guide to lead me to another and pleasanter way of life. My father had been connected with nobles, but all I knew of that was his subsequent neglect. The name of the king to whom my dying father had addressed his final prayers, and who had barbarously slighted them, was synonymous in my mind with unkindness, injustice, and consequent resentment. I told myself that I was born for something greater than I was, and greater I determined to become; but greatness, at least to my distorted perceptions, had nothing to do with goodness. Wild thoughts unchecked by moral considerations rioted through my mind in dreams of distinction. Thus I stood upon a pinnacle, a sea of evil boiling at my feet. I was just about to jump—when a strange new influence came over the current of my fortunes, and changed their tumultuous course to what was in comparison like the gentle meanderings of a streamlet around a meadow.

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