



FANTASIES

I

A YEAR AND A DAY

ONE November day, when they had been married about a twelvemonth, there came to the door a strange-looking girl and asked the master if they were in want of a servant.

The mistress had just had her first baby and was still weak, though her heart was good, and the master, after asking the girl a few questions, said to the mistress, Well . . . he thought they might engage her.

'I don't altogether like her look,' said the mistress; for the girl's peaked face was so white and still that, if it hadn't been for her eyes, one would have taken her for a corpse.

'I can sew and knit, and there isn't a bit of housework I can't manage, and I can milk and make butter with the best,' said the girl.

And the master remarked again that he thought they might try her; she seemed to be strong and willing, for all she looked so pale.

'And I love children,' added the girl, glancing wistfully at the baby; 'I can quiet them however fretful they may be.'

The infant in the mother's arms had been crying lustily for a minute or two, either from wanting the breast or for some other reason, and hush it as she might the mother couldn't quiet it.

But now the girl fixed on it her great, mournful eyes and began to hum softly some old-world lullaby; and almost as soon

as her lips began to move the little one blinked and closed its eyes, and there it lay peacefully asleep.

That settled the matter as far as the mistress was concerned.

'Well, I'm willing to engage you,' said she to the girl.

But the master said nothing. He was watching the girl strangely out of the corners of his eyes.

'If you engage me,' said the girl, 'it must be for a year and a day.'

'Very well,' said the mistress, who was admiring the baby sleeping so peacefully in her arms; 'and what wages will you want?'

'Oh, I don't want money,' said the girl carelessly. 'Let me have anything that may take my fancy on the night I'm leaving.'

'Very well,' said the mistress, 'I'm agreeable to that.'

'You agree to it too?' asked the girl of the master.

'Yes . . . I agree to it . . . if the mistress does,' said he. And all the time he couldn't take his eyes off the girl. 'What's your name?' he asked her, watching her closely.

'Piggy-widden,'¹ said the girl.

'What a ridiculous name for a servant,' said the mistress. 'I shall call you Peggy,' said she to the girl.

The girl glanced at the master; but the latter held his tongue: so Peggy she became without further protest.

Peggy proved a perfect treasure in the house: early and late she was scouring and cleaning, and it was impossible to find fault with her in a single thing.

Or, at any rate, so the master thought. But the mistress thought the girl looked too often at the master (who had been a bit wild in his day, though he had sobered down since his marriage), and though the master said nothing, she was not far wrong.

Go where the master would the girl's eyes followed him. Yet she never addressed him, unless compelled to do so, and made

¹ Piggy-widden=little white pig, is in Cornwall a term of endearment for the last-born in a family.

no attempt to attract his attention. Always sparing of her speech, and always with that deathly pallor on her countenance, the girl moved about as noiselessly as a ghost: her great, mournful eyes apparently fixed on vacancy (unless the master happened to be near), and all her faculties seemingly sunk in torpor, except for the mechanical needs of the moment. Yet the master seemed oddly attracted towards her. His eyes sought her still, white face persistently, whenever he was anywhere where it was possible to get a glimpse of her; and when their glances met, the girl would hold him with her eyes with a control so uncanny that the master would shiver chilly, as if ice were in his blood. At last the term of the girl's engagement drew to an end: on the morrow she would have served them a twelvemonth and a day.

As she sat by the big turf fire in the evening, playing with the baby that crowed upon her lap, the wife began to speculate, with languid indifference, on what the girl would ask for her wages. Would it be clothes, or china, or goods from the linen-chest? Or perhaps it would be the baby's silver christening-cup, which she had once or twice seen the girl examining when she was cleaning it? Well, anything, even the cup (though she would be loth to part with this), would be cheap as payment for the girl's services, for a better servant, as far as work was concerned, she could never hope to get. And with that she proceeded to give the baby the breast, and lazily dismissed the subject from her thoughts.

On the morrow came the girl's last day at the farmhouse; and it was All Souls' Eve, and a wild day to boot.

'A poor day for the end of your engagement,' said the mistress; 'where are you thinking of going to when you leave us?'

'To my home,' said the girl.

'And where is that?' asked the mistress.

'Maybe you'll be coming there one day,' said the girl. 'I think I'll keep its name as a surprise for you,' said she.

'Oh, very well; as you please,' said the mistress. 'And what do you want for wages?' she asked her presently.

And at that moment the master entered the kitchen.

'Only a kiss from the master,' said the girl.

'You bold young hussy!' cried the mistress furiously. 'Get out of my house this instant, or I'll sweep you out with the broom!'

'I have served a year and a day for my wages,' said the girl, 'and the master will pay them honestly'; and she held him with her eyes.

'He sha'n't!' cried the mistress, rushing between them.

'He will,' said the girl, in her dull, lifeless tones.

And immediately the master thrust his wife aside and kissed the girl on her unresponsive lips.

'Now, he's mine!' cried the girl exultantly: her white face turning to the colour of clay.

The mistress fell back from her with a look of horror; but the master stood still, staring in her eyes.

'Are you Eileen, then?' asked the master, shuddering.

'When the time came I thought you would know me,' said the girl.

'But Eileen died. . . .'

The girl fixed her eyes on him steadily.

'And who says that I am not dead?' asked the girl.

And at that moment the windows and doors began to rattle, as if unseen hands were busy with their fastenings.

'My year and a day is up: I am wanted,' said the girl. And she held out her cold, white hand to the master.

The man took it mechanically, and his face began to pale.

'Come!' said the girl, and the door flew open; a sudden icy gust blowing through the kitchen so that the lights went out and the child began to wail.

'It is cold,' muttered the master, as she led him to the door.

'It will be colder where we are going,' said the girl.

'It is dark.'

'It will be darker where we'll have to sleep together.'

And out they went into the wild, mirk night.

II

AN ODD COINCIDENCE

ONE moonlight night, as Abe Chynoweth and his comrade Joe Branwell were whiffing for mackerel between Treen Dinas and the Runnelstone, Abe Chynoweth, in a struggle with a powerful conger, unfortunately overbalanced himself and plunged headlong into the sea.

The sullen waters closed over him with an angry growl, as if the old Sea Mother had gotten her prey at last and snarled her satisfaction as she savagely dragged him down, and Abe, with the waters sounding in his ears, as though the world were drifting, drifting away from him, felt the solemnity of death fall suddenly on his thoughts.

The next moment, however, he was surprised to find himself flung violently on the strand, the huge waves grumbling and rumbling as they sullenly recoiled from him.

As he rose to his feet he perceived a large black boat beached on the sand about a dozen yards away from him; and the oddity of her appearance at once set him wondering.

To his eyes—but perhaps it was the salt water still smarting in them—she seemed like a monstrous black coffin, fashioned precisely on the same lines as the latter, and as sinister and gloomy in the memories she awoke. To add to the strangeness, she had a stunted mast carrying a square black sail, and in her bow stood a lean, dwarfish figure, with a face whose pits and hollows were so extravagantly accentuated that it resembled nothing so much as a skeleton's.

While Abe stood gaping at the boat with a strange shivering, which he found it quite impossible to control, he could hear the bell on the Runnelstone tolling solemnly as the heaving surges swung it sullenly to and fro, and on the beach the waves moaned eerily all the while.

Suddenly the odd little figure in the bow of the boat put a horn to his mouth, and blew a long, wailing blast.

A sound more drearily mournful Abe had never heard ; it was as though the weepings and sobbings of unnumbered generations were concentrated in their sorrow in that long, deep wail.

As the last dreary note died away mournfully, Abe was aware of a string of shadows descending to the cove through the deep, black cutting that led up the cliffs.

Strange indeed was the procession ; its like Abe had never seen. The thin, misty shadows, as tremulous as wisps of vapour, yet with their lifelong identities wrought into them indelibly, appeared to be filled with the most agitating sorrow, to judge by the wild abandonment of their gestures, yet from the long procession winding down the beach not a single sound rose into the air. It was all as silent as if Abe had been looking at a picture, and the terror of the dumb scene chilled him to the bone.

In the throng of shadows Abe scanned the faces curiously, but with the curiosity of a terror that oppressed him like a nightmare, and his heart seemed to swell and ache as he scanned them.

One after the other, and still in silence, the figures entered the boat, wringing their hands helplessly, and Abe watched them with the blood congealing in his veins.

Suddenly he perceived among the gliding throng an ashen-faced, wet-eyed, frightened little child, her tiny feet showing beneath her long white night-dress, and her wee hands clutching at the skirt of a woman in front of her ; a great, dim terror evidently bursting her little heart.

In an instant Abe recognised his own wee daughter, and with the great and mighty cry of a parent's anguish—so loud, so deep, so appallingly poignant that even the lean white figure in the boat started visibly—Abe darted forward to clasp the little maid.

But it was too late.

Just at that instant the figure at the bow of the boat uttered another long, deep wail through his horn, and the ghostly procession drifted into the boat: drifted into it so rapidly that Abe, rushing after them, found the last thin shadow already in the boat and the latter floating outwards into the grey immensity at the very moment that he arrived at the edge of the water.

Across the side of the boat his little daughter leaned imploringly, her blue eyes entreating and full of the agony of separation—her dumb appealing cutting him to the heart.

Into the waves Abe rushed, regardless of their depth, following the retreating boat with passionate despair.

Up crept the waters to his waist, to his shoulders—up to his neck, to his chin, to his mouth—till at last he was struggling chokingly in the flood, his hands thrown up and the waters deepening above his head.

. . . 'All right agen, Abe?' a voice called to him suddenly; a voice from somewhere out of the depths of his past, dead life.

Abe opened his eyes feebly, and saw Joe bending over him as he lay in the bottom of the boat with the water streaming from his clothes.

'So close a shave as that I never seed!' said Joe. 'Thee went down like a stone. Thought I should never git'ee aboard agen. Thee'rt lookin' whisht,¹ sure 'nuff. Feelin' all right?' Abe sat up with an effort, and gazed around dazedly: his eyes sweeping the horizon in every direction.

There was nothing to be seen except the headlands black in the moonlight and the shimmering track of silver across the water; and nothing to be heard but the weary rumour of the waves, and the slow and heavy tolling of the Runnelstone bell.

'Feelin' all right agen?' Joe repeated.

'Iss,' said Abe slowly; 'iss, b'leeve I am.' Then shaking the water from him, with his tanned and bearded face looking ghastly in the moonlight, he remarked to Joe, 'I must go

¹ Mournful, or melancholy.

ashore, you; caan't haul anawther line to-night for the life o' me.'

Joe tried to argue with him, but it was quite useless. Abe protested that ashore he must go at once. Good catch or bad catch, he couldn't help it: he must go.

In the end, Joe began to suspect that his comrade had had his nerves unstrung by his sudden plunge overboard; so he submitted to the inevitable with the best grace he could, and, hauling in their lines, they rowed ashore.

Immediately the boat's bow grated on the beach Abe jumped out into the shallow water. Splashing through the frothing edge of the waves, he hauled the boat high and dry on the pebbles almost before Joe could collect his wits. Then waving his hand, with a shout 'Good night, you!' he strode off grimly, with his head on his breast.

As he laid his hand on the latch of his little thatched cottage, one of the neighbours came out of her house and hurried towards him.

'Beer up, Abe, for the sake o' thy wife!' said the grey-haired gossip, eyeing him anxiously.

'What es it? Wha's wrong?' Abe articulated hoarsely.

'She's gone, li'l dear! Falled ovver cleff, playin' weth her dolly.'

The crabber abruptly turned his face away from her.

For a minute, perhaps more, he fingered the door-latch . . . it was lifted from within, and he passed silently into the house.