

A HANDFUL OF DUST



TRAVELLER wandered by night amid the ruins of an immense forsaken palace. Through portals of marble and passages of porphyry, he at length attained a little inner court which had been the private garden of the princess, underneath the window of her chamber. The degenerated shoots of the rose and myrtle were still contending for existence with the strangling crop of wild plants; otherwise, it retained no trace of ancient culture but a mutilated tomb and a dry fountain. The traveller seated himself upon the former, and remained absorbed in meditation, until the setting moon admonished him that he must withdraw if he would not lose the light which had hitherto guided him among the intricacies of the ruins. Starting up, he sought for some fragment of agate or malachite from the tomb to bear away as a relic. Seeing nothing of this kind, he thrust his hand through a cavity in the side of the sepulchre and seized the first object that met his grasp, which proved to be a handful of dust. As he withdrew his hand it was sharply caught by a long ragged briar springing on an adjoining mound, which seemed to urge its growth in the direction of the sepulchre, as though to surmount and clasp it. The smart was so severe that his hand unclosed, and shed its contents on the hillock, but he instantly stooped and picked them up, mingled with some of the brown and fetid mould which bestrewed the latter. He then enclosed the entire handful in a silken pouch, and quitted the ruins. On regaining his own country he deposited the sepulchral relic in a jasper urn, and placed this in a niche in his sleeping apartment.

The traveller's dwelling was situated in the midst of a large garden, remote from the noise of the busy capital. The land was southern, with a genial climate, and warm, brilliant nights. Hence, he was accustomed to late vigils—times of meditation on what he had seen and learned. The seclusion of the site, the tranquillity of the scene, and the nature of his reflections, contributed to enkindle a naturally exalted spirit, and to attune perceptions originally refined, until the mystic harmonies and rarely apprehended accents of Nature gradually became familiar to him. He would hearken and strive to interpret

interpret the rustling of leaves, the stirring of insects, the vague lispings of the night wind; nay, he sometimes seemed to surprise stray notes of the entrancing music which accompanies the sublime, but for most the silent, procession of the stars. It was, therefore, with the less astonishment that he one night heard tones distinctly proceeding from the jasper urn that contained the handful of dust. He listened intently, and clearly distinguished two voices: one a woman's, plaintive and distressed; the other a man's, imperious and exulting.

'Little, disdainful Princess, didst thou deem that it would ever be thus!'

'Alas, no!' sighed the other voice.

'The slave thou didst so scorn is now as closely blended with thyself as thy spirit with thy frame. The eyes are as the eyes on which they gazed, the neck is as the foot that trod it into the dust.'

'Wretch!' rejoined the other speaker. 'Know that whatever disaster may have overtaken the Princess's frame, her spirit is still her own and lives on to spurn, to detest, to defy thee.'

'Detestation and defiance sound marvellously well in my ears,' rejoined the slave. 'Time was when thou didst but despise.'

'As I do now,' replied the Princess.

'Not so. Detest thou mayest, despise thou canst not. Thy bondage galls too sore, and escape from it there is none. Were our atoms flung upon the hurricane, mine should pursue thine upon its wings; were we strewn upon the ocean, its billows should bear us away together. Nothing can wholly sunder us but that which shall one day subdue all, the elemental strength of Fire.'

'O, Fire!' exclaimed the Princess, 'at whose bidding wilt thou resolve me into my essence, and purge me from the stain of this abhorred companionship?'

'At mine!' cried the traveller; and, arising hastily, he seized the urn, and poured the contents into the flame of his lamp. A jet of light flashed up, and immediately divided itself into two fiery tongues, one white with a dazzling lustre, the other murky and lurid. For a moment the traveller seemed to have a confused perception of somewhat ethereal borne upwards, and of some wingless thing falling heavily to earth; but instantly the flames sank, his lamp resumed its accustomed steady radiance, and no sound disturbed his musings as he sat gazing on the jasper urn, now devoid of every particle of dust.

R. GARNETT.