

## *The Valley of Rocks*

THE  
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TOWARDS evening he came to a sudden valley in the bare-bosomed hills, where, as in an alembic, the vital humours of the land, the rains and the dews drawn from the sky by tall white cliffs with violet shadows that looked like thunder-clouds, were caught and distilled to be transmuted into quick, fierce crops of grapes and corn. In many places the naked rock was clothed with gourd plants growing like cables and bearing great yellow flowers. Wherever there was a hollow in the gleaming limestone or hold for a man's foot, mould of a noisome richness had been deposited. Here were terraced gardens overbrimming with hot flowers like some passion of the soil made visible; and secret caves full of twisted stalactites, like strange dreaming, pillared and aisled and reverberating with the organ music of subterranean water. Every now and again a spring of very cold water gushed out suddenly from the bare stone to run a few yards and as suddenly disappear. Cottages, half built, half excavated, as if they were but the sculptured portals to a labyrinth of hidden ways, clung to the cliff side, and the men and women that came out to stare at the stranger were heavy eyed and ivory pale as if they belonged to a separate race bred in darkness and braving the light only to snatch a livelihood from the shallow soil. They kept no cattle, they said, but a few goats, and no children had been born in the valley for many years. Many of the women were goitred, and all spoke like persons that use words to hide their thoughts; talking rapidly, with their eyes fixed on the stranger's face, beseeching him to begone. They told him that the place was called the valley of rocks, and that here the corn was richer, the wine stronger, the honey sweeter and all medicinal plants more active in their properties than anywhere else in that country. Dealers in drugs, they said, came here every autumn to collect roots and herbs. When he asked them where he should find lodgings for the night, they looked one at the other, and hastily directed him to the inn at the head of the valley. They told him to beware of the vipers which here were very deadly: themselves were often bitten as they contrived the union of the gourd flowers, in which art they were very cunning, but they took no harm.

As he walked up the road which wound like a snake beneath the crumpled cornice of the impending cliff, a curved billow

of stone, he was possessed by the thought that the place held a meaning, hinted at but not expressed, in its passionate fecundity: that he was drawing nearer to a final statement, a summing-up in human shape of strength and sweetness and soothing. At the head of the valley he came to the inn, a long, low-browed building with a line of windows under the eaves, standing in a clove-scented garden, with its back to the cliff and looking as if seaward but where no sea was. He passed through the open door, and as if guided by a dream, to a little room where from the wall there leaned the picture of a woman in whose eyes and on whose lips were concentrated the strength and sweetness and soothing of wine and honey and narcotic flowers.

Now suddenly he felt that his coming here had been predestined. The woman's face, fierce though tender-eyed, with bared throat and offered lips, hot though virgin, lawless as a flower yet like a flower the concrete symbol of many secret laws working together, was the answer to riddles that had long vexed him. Here was the unsatisfied desire of all the earth made evident in a single face. He knew that in all his wandering, apparently so purposeless, nothing had been left to chance. All his life he had been seeking her, and step by step he had been drawn hither.

The innkeeper and his wife came into the room while he stood before the picture. They glanced from him to each other with lowered lids and furtive smiles so that the question which rose to his lips was never spoken. The man was pot-bellied and thin-shanked, the woman's face a white mask of decorum: they were old and feeble, but had not the dignity of age. They asked his wants with pandering obsequiousness, consulting together in whispers so that the preparation of his meal seemed like a conspiracy. They tended him with knowing deference, as if he were long expected, rubbing their hands gently together and answering his questions eagerly to prevent his asking the one question which his lips would not frame. They made no mention of the woman whose picture leaned from the wall though all the house thrilled with her presence.

He ate and drank alone in the dusk, overlooked by the woman's face, her eyes fierce with desire, her lips smiling at him with a strange confidence. Afterwards the old couple came into the room and they sat talking of all that went on in the great

world outside the valley. Every time he involuntarily glanced up at the picture they dropped their eyes upon their folded hands and smiled secretly, and when he strained his ears to catch what seemed like a footfall on the stairs and the rustle of a gown they glanced quickly one at the other behind his back.

Towards midnight the innkeeper lighted him to his chamber, with many soft spoken wishes for his pleasant slumbers. By the door of a room the old man paused, as if listening intently, with eyes discreetly lowered, and a little guarded cough. Then looked up, as if in answer to a question which had not been asked, with "I beg your pardon, sir?" But immediately he passed on to the guest-chamber, threw open the door, and showed a carved and canopied bed and hangings shaken by the night air, with a muttered hope that the stranger had everything necessary for the night. Then he placed the candle on a table, bowed and withdrew, slamming a door at the far end of the passage, as if to intimate that this part of the house was private to his guest.

He flung wide the lattice, and leaning on the sill, gave himself up to musing upon the painted desire in the room downstairs. The wind came up the valley in hot puffs, bearing the scent of many flowers and the murmur of hidden water. He remembered with a thrill that this was midsummer eve. He was always impressed by dates and seasons; not those arbitrary days named after events sacred or secular, but those profoundly related to the intertwined orbits of the planetary system. He believed that at the intersection of those larger forces human life was deeply stirred, as quivering overtones are struck out when one note of music jars upon another; and he could understand why ancient peoples leaped through fires at the standing still of the sun. Now was the time and here was the place; and a dozen things, the half-betrayed confidence of the valley, the veiled manner of the innkeeper and his wife, told him that the woman expected him.

That he had neither seen her nor heard her name only deepened his feeling that this meeting was ordained. A chance encounter, the making of them known one to the other with the necessary forms of speech, would have blurred the mysterious directness of their coming together. He wondered how the inn people came by such a daughter, for so without any definite reason he supposed her. Then he remembered that, like exquisite wine

in unworthy vessels, rare types are often transmitted through common people, for generations degraded or lost altogether, re-appearing now and again to uplift men in grey times or to hearten them in blazing times of war. He thought of her less as a woman than as the incarnation of the valley's secret, which he was to discover from the touch of her lips. The innkeeper and his wife took on the character not of parents, but of priest and priestess, guardians of a vessel holding rare essences of the soil; the inn became a temple. All that he had ever done seemed meaningless and trivial, except in so far as it had been a preparation for this encounter. For this end only his life had been enriched with dreams and aspirations beyond the common.

For a time his mind was disturbed with thoughts of danger. What if the woman were a decoy for purposes of robbery or even of murder? Again, his heightened imagination pursued wilder paths: he had read of dragons taking the shape of beautiful women and of strangers incited to their embraces to rid a desperate people of a scourge. A moment later he laughed at his childishness.

He wondered when and how she would appear to him. Whether at dawn in the garden, or on the hot limestone ledges among the yellow gourd flowers, or in the pillared alleys of the secret caves. He knew that if words were needed at their meeting words would be given.

The house was very still, and from the room next his own came delicate intimations of a woman's presence: sighs, a low murmuring, movings to and fro, and once a subdued noise of crying—or was it the wind whimpering under the eaves?

His will ceased to be his own and he fell a prey to bold fancies born of the heat of his blood. Before his impassioned eyes the wall was gone and he saw her waiting for him now: a mystical night-blooming flower unfolded on this night only of all time. Yet it was not she that waited, but all nature working to an aim through her: the crude aspiration of the earth rising up through corn and grape, distilled and rectified through human channels, informed with soul as blood is brightened by air, until its essence was offered in such a vessel as gods might drink at.

And then the other part of him, the creature of reason and everyday habit and convention asserted itself. Like a grey rock thrusting in through the ribs of a dream galley, ideas of duty and

honour pierced his mind. His imagination leaped ahead and he saw the future in cold outlines. He remembered a dozen sordid stories: the phrase "a rustic entanglement" sounded in his ears. If he yielded to the prompting of the hour and the place, what could be the outcome but shame for her, disillusion and boredom for himself?

But then again the sense of a larger duty, owed not to convention but to the universe, obtruded itself. He was less the pursuer than the pursued; no more wanton than the moth to the flower. Like two people seeking each other blindly through a wood, guided by a cry or a word, the startling of a bird, the quiver of grass where a snake rustled, he and she had been pushed forward through generation after generation of human life, with here a check, there an encouragement, until on this night of all nights they were watching the sky side by side with but a thin wall between them. Of all creatures was not he who shirked the purpose of his being the most abject?

Out of the conflict of moods was born another, not of better or worse choice but of renunciation. Perhaps, after all, the aim of desire was not union nor even the furtherance of life, but rather the release of the finer things of the soul as latent fire is released at the approach of metal to metal. He had been ready and she had been ready, but while their bodily eyes watched the sky where one day trod upon the skirts of another on this night of all the year, somewhere on another plane their desires had met and mingled with the release of some new and better desire dowered with something of each, to return upon and enrich their lives as a rain-cloud, offspring of sun and earth, returns to bless and fertilize.

Early morning found him in the garden sobered and uplifted with a new purpose. To him came the innkeeper with downcast eyes and lips creased in a crafty smile, asking him how he had slept. His question was answered with another.

"My daughter? No; we have no child. Years ago a strange woman, waiting in vain for her lover, died by her own hand in the room next your own. Since then, they say, the valley has been under a curse: people may wed, but there are never any children. The picture downstairs was painted by a man who lost his reason seeking her whom he had never seen."

CHARLES MARRIOTT