



Chapter 5

A Beggar's Palace

That I had said something, in the act of waking, I felt sure: the hoarse stifled cry was still ringing in my ears, even if the startled look of my fellow-traveler had not been evidence enough: but what could I possibly say by way of apology?

“I hope I didn’t frighten you?” I stammered out at last. “I have no idea what I said. I was dreaming.”

“You said ‘Uggug indeed!’” the young lady replied, with quivering lips that would curve themselves into a smile, in spite of all her efforts to look grave. “At least—you didn’t say it—you shouted it!”

“I’m very sorry,” was all I could say, feeling very penitent and helpless. “She has Sylvie’s eyes!” I thought to myself, half-doubting whether, even now, I were fairly awake. “And that sweet look of innocent wonder is all Sylvie’s too. But Sylvie hasn’t got that calm resolute mouth nor that far-away look of dreamy sadness, like one that has had some deep sorrow, very long ago—” And the thick-coming fancies almost prevented my hearing the lady’s next words.

“If you had had a ‘Shilling Dreadful’ in your hand,” she proceeded, “something about Ghosts or Dynamite or Midnight Murder—one could understand it: those things aren’t worth the shilling, unless they give one a Nightmare. But really—with only a medical treatise, you know—” and she glanced, with a pretty shrug of contempt, at the book over which I had fallen asleep.

Her friendliness, and utter unreserve, took me aback for a moment; yet there was no touch of forwardness, or boldness, about the child for child, almost, she seemed to be: I guessed her at scarcely over twenty—all was the innocent frankness of some angelic visitant, new to the ways of earth and the conventionalisms or, if you will, the barbarisms—of Society. “Even so,” I mused, “will Sylvie look and speak, in another ten years.”

“You don’t care for Ghosts, then,” I ventured to suggest, unless they are really terrifying?”

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"Quite so," the lady assented. "The regular Railway-Ghosts—I mean the Ghosts of ordinary Railway-literature—are very poor affairs. I feel inclined to say, with Alexander Selkirk, 'Their tameness is shocking to me!' And they never do any Midnight Murders. They couldn't 'welter in gore,' to save their lives!"

"'Weltering in gore' is a very expressive phrase, certainly. Can it be done in any fluid, I wonder?"

"I think not," the lady readily replied—quite as if she had thought it out, long ago. "It has to be something thick. For instance, you might welter in bread-sauce. That, being white, would be more suitable for a Ghost, supposing it wished to welter!"

"You have a real good terrifying Ghost in that book?" I hinted.

"How could you guess?" she exclaimed with the most engaging frankness, and placed the volume in my hands. I opened it eagerly, with a not unpleasant thrill like what a good ghost-story gives one) at the 'uncanny' coincidence of my having so unexpectedly divined the subject of her studies.

It was a book of Domestic Cookery, open at the article Bread Sauce.'

I returned the book, looking, I suppose, a little blank, as the lady laughed merrily at my discomfiture. "It's far more exciting than some of the modern ghosts, I assure you! Now there was a Ghost last month—I don't mean a real Ghost in in Supernature—but in a Magazine. It was a perfectly flavourless Ghost. It wouldn't have frightened a mouse! It wasn't a Ghost that one would even offer a chair to!"

"Three score years and ten, baldness, and spectacles, have their advantages after all!", I said to myself. "Instead of a bashful youth and maiden, gasping out monosyllables at awful intervals, here we have an old man and a child, quite at their ease, talking as if they had known each other for years! Then you think," I continued aloud, "that we ought sometimes to ask a Ghost to sit down? But have we any authority for it? In Shakespeare, for instance—there are plenty of ghosts there—does Shakespeare ever give the stage-direction 'hands chair to Ghost'?"

The lady looked puzzled and thoughtful for a moment: then she almost clapped her hands. "Yes, yes, he does!" she cried. "He makes Hamlet say 'Rest, rest, perturbed Spirit!'"

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"And that, I suppose, means an easy-chair?"

"An American rocking-chair, I think—"

"Fayfield Junction, my Lady, change for Elveston!" the guard announced, flinging open the door of the carriage: and we soon found ourselves, with all our portable property around us, on the platform.

The accommodation, provided for passengers waiting at this Junction, was distinctly inadequate—a single wooden bench, apparently intended for three sitters only: and even this was already partially occupied by a very old man, in a smock frock, who sat, with rounded shoulders and drooping head, and with hands clasped on the top of his stick so as to make a sort of pillow for that wrinkled face with its look of patient weariness.

"Come, you be off!" the Station-master roughly accosted the poor old man. "You be off, and make way for your betters! This way, my Lady!" he added in a perfectly different tone. "If your Ladyship will take a seat, the train will be up in a few minutes." The cringing servility of his manner was due, no doubt, to the address legible on the pile of luggage, which announced their owner to be "Lady Muriel Orme, passenger to Elveston, via Fayfield Junction."

As I watched the old man slowly rise to his feet, and hobble a few paces down the platform, the lines came to my lips:-

"From sackcloth couch the Monk arose,
With toil his stiffen'd limbs he rear'd;
A hundred years had flung their snows
On his thin locks and floating beard."

But the lady scarcely noticed the little incident. After one glance at the 'banished man,' who stood tremulously leaning on his stick, she turned to me. "This is not an American rocking-chair, by any means! Yet may I say," slightly changing her place, so



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as to make room for me beside her, "may I say, in Hamlet's words, 'Rest, rest—'" she broke off with a silvery laugh.

"—perturbed Spirit!" I finished the sentence for her. "Yes, that describes a railway-traveler exactly! And here is an instance of it," I added, as the tiny local train drew up alongside the platform, and the porters bustled about, opening carriage-doors—one of them helping the poor old man to hoist himself into a third-class carriage, while another of them obsequiously conducted the lady and myself into a first-class.

She paused, before following him, to watch the progress of the other passenger. "Poor old man!" she said. "How weak and ill he looks! It was a shame to let him be turned away like that. I'm very sorry—" At this moment it dawned on me that these words were not addressed to me, but that she was unconsciously thinking aloud. I moved away a few steps, and waited to follow her into the carriage, where I resumed the conversation.

"Shakespeare must have traveled by rail, if only in a dream: 'perturbed Spirit' is such a happy phrase."

"'Perturbed' referring, no doubt," she rejoined, "to the sensational booklets peculiar to the Rail. If Steam has done nothing else, it has at least added a whole new Species to English Literature!"

"No doubt of it," I echoed. "The true origin of all our medical books—and all our cookery-books—"

"No, no!" she broke in merrily. "I didn't mean our Literature! We are quite abnormal. But the booklets—the little thrilling romances, where the Murder comes at page fifteen, and the Wedding at page forty—surely they are due to Steam?"

"And when we travel by Electricity if I may venture to develop your theory we shall have leaflets instead of booklets, and the Murder and the Wedding will come on the same page."

"A development worthy of Darwin!", the lady exclaimed enthusiastically. "Only you reverse his theory. Instead of developing a mouse into an elephant, you would develop an elephant into a mouse!" But here we plunged into a tunnel, and I leaned back and closed my eyes for a moment, trying to recall a few of the incidents of my recent dream.

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"I thought I saw—" I murmured sleepily: and then the phrase insisted on conjugating itself, and ran into "you thought you saw—he thought he saw—" and then it suddenly went off into a song:—

"He thought he saw an Elephant,
That practised on a fife:
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
'At length I realise,' he said,
"The bitterness of Life!"

And what a wild being it was who sang these wild words! A Gardener he seemed to be yet surely a mad one, by the way he brandished his rake—madder, by the way he broke, ever and anon, into a frantic jig—maddest of all, by the shriek in which he brought out the last words of the stanza!

It was so far a description of himself that he had the feet of an Elephant: but the rest of him was skin and bone: and the wisps of loose straw, that bristled all about him, suggested that he had been originally stuffed with it, and that nearly all the stuffing had come out.

Sylvie and Bruno waited patiently till the end of the first verse. Then Sylvie advanced alone (Bruno having suddenly turned shy) and timidly introduced herself with the words "Please, I'm Sylvie!"

"And who's that other thing?", said the Gardener.

"What thing?" said Sylvie, looking round. "Oh, that's Bruno. He's my brother."

"Was he your brother yesterday?" the Gardener anxiously enquired.

"Course I were!" cried Bruno, who had gradually crept nearer, and didn't at all like being talked about without having his share in the conversation.



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"Ah, well!" the Gardener said with a kind of groan. "Things change so, here. Whenever I look again, it's sure to be something different! Yet I does my duty! I gets up wriggle-early at five—"

"If I was oo," said Bruno, "I wouldn't wriggle so early. It's as bad as being a worm!" he added, in an undertone to Sylvie.

"But you shouldn't be lazy in the morning, Bruno," said Sylvie. "Remember, it's the early bird that picks up the worm!"

"It may, if it likes!" Bruno said with a slight yawn. "I don't like eating worms, one bit. I always stop in bed till the early bird has picked them up!"

"I wonder you've the face to tell me such fibs!" cried the Gardener.

To which Bruno wisely replied "Oo don't want a face to tell fibs wiz—only a mouf."

Sylvie discreetly changed the subject. "And did you plant all these flowers?" she said.

"What a lovely garden you've made! Do you know, I'd like to live here always!"

"In the winter-nights—" the Gardener was beginning.

"But I'd nearly forgotten what we came about!" Sylvie interrupted. "Would you please let us through into the road? There's a poor old beggar just gone out—and he's very hungry—and Bruno wants to give him his cake, you know!"

"It's as much as my place is worth!", the Gardener muttered, taking a key from his pocket, and beginning to unlock a door in the garden-wall.

"How much are it wurf? "Bruno innocently enquired.

But the Gardener only grinned. "That's a secret!" he said. "Mind you come back quick!" he called after the children, as they passed out into the road. I had just time to follow them, before he shut the door again.

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We hurried down the road, and very soon caught sight of the old Beggar, about a quarter of a mile ahead of us, and the children at once set off running to overtake him.

Lightly and swiftly they skimmed over the ground, and I could not in the least understand how it was I kept up with them so easily. But the unsolved problem did not worry me so much as at another time it might have done, there were so many other things to attend to.

The old Beggar must have been very deaf, as he paid no attention whatever to Bruno's eager shouting, but trudged wearily on, never pausing until the child got in front of him and held up the slice of cake. The poor little fellow was quite out of breath, and could only utter the one word "Cake!" not with the gloomy decision with which Her Excellency had so lately pronounced it, but with a sweet childish timidity, looking up into the old man's face with eyes that loved 'all things both great and small.'

The old man snatched it from him, and devoured it greedily, as some hungry wild beast might have done, but never a word of thanks did he give his little benefactor—only growled "More, more!" and glared at the half-frightened children.

"There is no more!", Sylvie said with tears in her eyes. "I'd eaten mine. It was a shame to let you be turned away like that. I'm very sorry—"

I lost the rest of the sentence, for my mind had recurred, with a great shock of surprise, to Lady Muriel Orme, who had so lately uttered these very words of Sylvie's—yes, and in Sylvie's own voice, and with Sylvie's gentle pleading eyes!

"Follow me!" were the next words I heard, as the old man waved his hand, with a dignified grace that ill suited his ragged dress, over a bush, that stood by the road side, which began instantly to sink into the earth. At another time I might have doubted the evidence of my eyes, or at least have felt some astonishment: but, in this strange scene, my whole being seemed absorbed in strong curiosity as to what would happen next.

When the bush had sunk quite out of our sight, marble steps were seen, leading downwards into darkness. The old man led the way, and we eagerly followed.

The staircase was so dark, at first, that I could only just see the forms of the children, as, hand-in-hand, they groped their way down after their guide: but it got lighter every moment, with a strange silvery brightness, that seemed to exist in the air, as there were

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no lamps visible; and, when at last we reached a level floor, the room, in which we found ourselves, was almost as light as day.

It was eight-sided, having in each angle a slender pillar, round which silken draperies were twined. The wall between the pillars was entirely covered, to the height of six or seven feet, with creepers, from which hung quantities of ripe fruit and of brilliant flowers, that almost hid the leaves. In another place, perchance, I might have wondered to see fruit and flowers growing together: here, my chief wonder was that neither fruit nor flowers were such as I had ever seen before. Higher up, each wall contained a circular window of coloured glass; and over all was an arched roof, that seemed to be spangled all over with jewels.

With hardly less wonder, I turned this way and that, trying to make out how in the world we had come in: for there was no door: and all the walls were thickly covered with the lovely creepers.

“We are safe here, my darlings!” said the old man, laying a hand on Sylvie’s shoulder, and bending down to kiss her. Sylvie drew back hastily, with an offended air: but in another moment, with a glad cry of “Why, it’s Father!”, she had run into his arms.

“Father! Father!” Bruno repeated: and, while the happy children were being hugged and kissed, I could but rub my eyes and say “Where, then, are the rags gone to?”; for the old man was now dressed in royal robes that glittered with jewels and gold embroidery, and wore a circlet of gold around his head.

