

The Fisherman's Ward.

It was a stormy night on a bleak New England coast. The wind and rain kept driving pitilessly, and the white, hungry waves came thundering over the sandhills and breaking in cataracts of foam over the desolate, rocky shore. In a room of a little cottage built so close to the sea that some of the breakers, more aggressive than the rest, seemed almost to threaten to overwhelm it, old Roger Boscawen sat smoking his pipe before the fire, that roared up the wide, old-fashioned chimney as if in defiance of the tempest of wind and rain outside.

"Bless me! Leah, do you hear the storm?"

"Yes, father."

It was a strangely beautiful face that looked up into the weather-beaten one of the old man from under the shadow of the projecting angle of the fireplace, and strangely out of place it seemed among the rough arrangements of the fisherman's cabin. Large and lustrous were the eyes of Oriental, midnight darkness, white-lidded and long-lashed. The forehead low but broad, around which the luxuriant hair was braided in heavy classic coils; the cheeks of a dusky carmine, and the mouth sweet and expressive, and perfect in its curves and the dimples that it showed when it parted in a smile. Many of the people often wondered how old Roger came to have a daughter equally unlike himself and her brother.

"I pity any craft that is out to-night," the old man went on. "I have lived on the coast for more than fifty years, man and boy, and I never saw a wilder night than this."

Leah did not answer. She had risen from her seat, and crossing the room, was looking out of the window, seaward. She could see nothing through the pane, except the driving storm and the red lurid lamp of the lighthouse, but in the other direction could be discerned a few twinkling lights of the fishing village, and further away towards the town, among its dark clump of evergreen, the windows of Hallam Lodge, ablaze with light. Hallam Lodge was the oldest and grandest house for miles around, and was owned by the man whose name it bore, the direct descendant of Ralph Hallam, colonel in the Parliamentary armies, who had crossed the ocean for his principles, and laid the first stone of this new dwelling-place more than two hundred years ago.

Suddenly the tramp of approaching feet was heard through the storm outside, and the next moment the door was opened to admit Stephen, old Roger's son, and three other men, who carried the insensible body of a man between them. He was a fine, handsome fellow, this son of the old fisherman, but utterly unlike his sister both in feature and complexion, having a clear ruddy skin, though somewhat browned by exposure to the weather; honest, blue eyes, and curling, chestnut hair. He might have sat to an artist for a picture of some old Norse viking's son, but a tender look came into his face and his voice assumed a softer tone as he spoke to the girl.

"It is the young gentleman that they say is going to marry Miss Edith Hallam," he said, as they laid the unconscious man on the warm hearth-stone before the fire. "His yacht struck on the rocks below the lighthouse, and all hands were lost but him. He has a breath of life in him yet, though, and we may pull him through. Give me some of that rum out of the closet, little sister."

She did so in silence, and then, in obedience to her brother's command, knelt down and chafed the wet, white hands of the unconscious man, while Stephen poured some of the spirits down his throat.

She could not help admiring the handsome face, so still and pallid, supported on her brother's knee. The features were regular and high-bred, with dark, black curls falling over the high, white forehead. She was thinking, too, what handsome hands they were into which she was trying to turn returning life—almost as small, and how much whiter, than her own—when a sharp knock came to the door, and a young lady, tall but stately, swept into the cabin and knelt beside the unconscious young man.

"I am his cousin, and it is my right," she said sweetly yet decisively, as she took the hands, to which the warmth of life was slowly beginning to return, between her own.

Leah relinquished them at once, and shrank back to her position in the shadow of the fireplace with a feeling in her breast she had never known before. This tall, stately young woman was Miss Edith Hallam, the heiress of the lodge, and she was only Leah Boscawen, a fisherman's daughter.

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In less than half an hour the young man was sufficiently revived to thank his preservers and accompany his cousin in her carriage, which waited outside, to the lodge. He thanked them all most cordially. To the three men who assisted him he gave money, and to Stephen his card, which showed his name to be Frank Vernon, and promised to call next day and thank them again. Both the old man and his son were taken with his manner, and spoke in praise of him and his supposed betrothed; but Leah, sitting silent in the shadow, said nothing, brooding in silence over her newly-awakened thoughts, with vague, rebellious feelings against her destiny surging in her heart.

The storm did not abate that night nor the next day. Neither did the next day bring Frank Vernon to the cottage, but he sent a message saying that he was too unwell to leave the house. When night again fell the wind was still driving the heavy rain along the shore, and the fury of the sea seemed unabated. The old man and his daughter sat in their old positions at the fire listening to the fury of the storm without.

"Leah," said the old man, breaking the silence, "Where is Stephen to-night?"

She had been busy with her own

thoughts, intently gazing into the glowing coals, and she raised her face, aglow with the firelight, to his. Then, with a cry of alarm, she sprang from her seat and caught his head, which was falling forward on his bosom, in her arms.

"Father! speak to me. What is the matter?" she cried, gazing with a great dread at the set and rigid features and lips, from which all colour had fled, leaving them white as ashes.

"Leah," the old man gasped. "I am dying. Quick—old Mr. Hallam at the lodge. I must see him. Tell him I sent for him, and he will come." The gray head fell back upon the chair as he spoke. The girl, nearly frantic, and not knowing what to do, kissed him in a wild, frenzied way, and then dashed out into the night and storm.

It was a long way, more than a mile, but she did not mind fatigue. She did not feel it any more than she felt the stormy sweep of rain that drenched her to the skin. Her mind had room only for one thought—that she might be too late.

She reached the house at last, and delivered the message to Mr. Hallam in person, and then her overstrained faculties gave way, and she sank in a swoon on the floor.

When she came to her senses again she was lying in a white curtained bed in a room finer than she had ever seen before, bending over her was the stately young lady who had come to her father's cottage the night before.

"Has he gone?" she asked.

"Yes," the lady answered, "he is with him now."

She would have arisen at once and returned through the storm in which she had come, but the lady was kindly resolute and firm, and forced her to lie quiet and wait. An hour passed it seemed an eternity to Leah—when the door opened and Mr. Hallam entered, still dripping with the rain. He crossed the room to the couch and took her hand in his.

"My poor child," he said "you cannot go home to-night—this is your home from this time forth."

She looked at him in dumb amazement.

"You are my daughter now," he said, "and you must learn to look on me as you would your father."

"And he?" she cried out, flinging up her arms with an unconscious gesture of entreaty.

"You must bear it calmly, poor child," he answered her. "He is dead."

How it chanced that she should become the adopted daughter of the wealthy Mr. Hallam was much of a mystery to Leah, even when months had passed, and the sorrow for her father beginning to wear off, she became more accustomed to her new position. Mr. Hallam was kindness personified; but from the rest of the household she held herself aloof. They were all kind to her, but an undefinable something, felt though not expressed, that she was not to the "manor born" and a sort of interloper, raised a barrier between them. As for the visitors, of whom there were many, of course this had nothing to do; but still the feeling was in her mind the same, and she became cold and reserved.

As for Frank Vernon, he became fascinated by her—so much so that it became a subject of remark. At last he proposed, and she accepted. He did not love him, but she liked his society, and loved no one else, and felt proud of his talents and handsome person, as any girl would have done. She made a condition, however, that their engagement should be kept a secret until her brother Stephen, who had gone on a voyage of several months, should return.

A week afterwards Stephen came. She was almost beside herself with delight at seeing him. It would have been a revelation to any one who knew her as the stately young lady who beauty of the Lodge to see her hang about his neck and kiss him again and again through her joyful tears.

At length she told him how Frank Vernon had asked her to be his wife, and she had accepted him. The change that came over him startled her, and a wild mist swept over his eyes—only for a moment, however, and then he brushed the back of his hand across his eyes and forced a smile.

"Leah," he said, in a voice that trembled in spite of all his efforts to keep it calm, "it is for your happiness I will try to bear it. I have had dreams, when I kept my lonely watches, that sometimes you might love me well enough to be something nearer than a sister. I see what a fool I have been now—a lady and an heiress, while I am but a poor fisherman—let it pass; the memory of my little sister will always be the dearest thing I have on earth."

"What do you mean?" she managed to gasp at length.

"Do you not know? Have they not told you," he cried, "that you are not my father's daughter, not my sister, but the only child of Mr. Hallam's brother, and the lawful mistress of Hallam Lodge?"

The color faded from her face, leaving it so pallid that he thought she was going to faint. Then as quickly the warm blood rushed back again, suffusing her face to the very roots of her hair.

"Are you sure of this?" she asked.

"As sure as of my own life," he answered. "I heard it from Mr. Hallam died, from father's dying lips, and saw the documents to prove his words. I know I should not have spoken to you as I did; but forget it all, Leah."

"It is so sudden," she interrupted him, "but I do not wish to forge them. They have lost me my brother, it is true, but they also found me something nearer, though dearer he could never be. Stephen look into my eyes and tell me were your dreams very wild after all?"

Of course Mr. Hallam was very disappointed, and Frank Vernon even more so. The one, however, found consolation in being allowed to retain Hallam Lodge, and the other by returning to his old love and marrying Edith. Leah and her husband are happy in each other's love.—what more need be said!

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