

BY

THE LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE.

Chapter I

The great church clock which gave the time to the village of Castle Vere had just struck twelve, and almost as the last stroke died on the ear the moon broke out and filled the world with hard lights and shadows. The village lay wrapt in perfect repose, man and beast enjoyed their hard-earned rest, and the ticking of the clock overhead seemed the pulse of the sleeping world.

Suddenly and very softly one latch was raised, one door pushed open, and a strange figure emerged into the road. In the fitful light she stood on tiptoe, her hands clasped on her breast, leaning forward listening intently – no, sound, nothing but unbroken silence, hardly enough air even to blow back all the wild mass of Poll Miles's fair hair. For a moment the girl stood, like a wild stag pausing to let his keen instincts detect the vicinity of any foe, then she sprang forwards and fled away up the street very swiftly and noiselessly, passing through the lights and shadows, appearing and disappearing as she went. Now she was out of the village, out in the open fields, far from the habitations of men, alone under the solemn moon.

There was no one to see Poll Miles, no one to hear the loud wild ringing laugh that burst from her lips, or to see her gathering great bunches of poppies and corn and grass, weaving them fantastically together, and winding them round her head and her gown; and by-and-by her feet were moving, and she danced with the flowers in her hands, and laughed and played and spoke to them, as though they were living things, and then weary as a child she lay down nestling among her favourites and was soon asleep – and with that white harvest moon on her face, and on her small white hands, her sleep looked like death.

The moon passed away, and the sky grew paler and more wan, and the cold dawn stole over the sky, and still Poll slept on. But suddenly on the air came the far-off sound of a whistled tune. Then at the first human sound the girl awakened and sprang up, the joyous merry look was gone, and it was a pale scared maiden who hurried homewards with half-dead flowers fantastically decking her.

The reapers were coming near, with rapid haste Poll drew back, watching behind a hedge, but their eyes were too quick, and they started after her. “Hi! witch! witch! what has the witch been doing?” She fled a way rapidly, and they rudely followed her as far as the gate of the field, and then shouted after her from thence — the panting, defiant girl, who with her clenched hand hit her own brow hard, blaming herself passionately that she had not awakened sooner. In the village all was astir, but Poll

crept in, not hearing the cruel words said after her, or else, perhaps, not heeding them much.

It was Saturday, the general half-holiday, and it beloved her to prepare her best attire for the afternoon walk should her sweetheart ask her to-day – and Poll never doubted that he would.

“Are you going to the Green, Poll?”

“Yes, Joe. if you will go with me. Master Holmes would have me promise, and I told him I would, if you came to fetch me!”

“That was unseemly, Poll, to answer the good man so.”

“Unseemly was it? but it was in my mind, and what harm in saying it?”

“Well! Come sweetheart, Mother Basham has been gone this age, and the preaching waits for none.”

“Master Holmes will wait awhile for me,” said the girl, laughing, and throwing her scarlet cloak round her she came out from her cottage door.

Her lover, Joe Scott, looked at her with disapproval in his face.

“What is amiss?” she said quickly, and with a strangely sudden change of countenance.

“your hat, Poll! It does not become a quiet maiden thus.”

Her hat was wreathed round with wild flowers, scarlet poppies and yellow king-cups and ferns. Joe’s rustic eye saw not how its wild luxuriance suited the strange beauty of the wearer. Poll Miles was about eighteen years old, her beauty of of an uncommon and rare order; the face, exquisitely modelled, was very colourless, her eyes grey, sometimes very light, sometimes quite dark, as the shade of various emotions reflected in the; they were very large and had a peculiar expression all their own, more like that of an unreasoning child than a woman – at times they would flash with anger, or laugh with keenest merriment, at others there seemed such lack of response in their expression as to take from them even a look of intelligence. Her hair was very fair, it waved and rippled in unmanageable luxuriance, straying over her brow, floating on the wind if she ran. When let loose from the ribbons which generally bound it, it fell like a pale cloud round about her. She had few rustic admirers, for she had neither bright colour nor buxom form; her figure was slender and tall, and her hands very white and supple.

There were strange stories afloat about Poll Miles. She lived alone with her father; he never noticed and hardly spoke to her, did all the house-work himself, and every day went to his work in the same stolid fashion. The neighbours cried shame that she should do nothing but idle away her days, and at one time he tried to teach her; he was a hard man, and cries and blows could be heard in the house; but whether she tried or not, the work was never done by Poll. Coming home at night he found the hearth cold, the bread spoilt, the room unswept, and Poll seated on the floor drawing circles and rings with chalk, and twining flowers and grass into wreaths. He persevered for a time, but at last gave it up, and let the poor child be; and the neighbours, with her cries still ringing in their ears, forbore to recommend further compulsion, but they whispered to each other and spoke of old days, and of mysterious stories of the girl's dead mother, Barbara Miles, who had lived and died long ago, some twenty miles from the village of Castle Vere, farther than any of the villagers had been. One who knew more than the rest whispered that her death had been strange and awful, that she knew secrets that it is not given to man to know. In old days, he said, Miles had been gay and merry, but a spell had been thrown over him, and had compelled him to leave his home, and to wed a witch wife. He only returned after her death, bringing with him his strange, beautiful child. He maintained always a gloomy reserve, giving no account of the years of absence, and seeming to take interest in nothing but incessant toil. The neighbours said now, as malicious and ignorant gossips will say, that Joe Scott, the finest young man in the village, had fallen under some unholy spell when he went a-courting Poll Miles.

Joe Scott was a horsekeeper, and he looked so handsome when he followed his team of great chestnut horses, with a flower in his button-hole and a long tasselled whip in his hand, that not a girl in Castle Vere would have said him nay, and there were pretty girls there, with rosy cheeks and blue eyes, buxom maidens with comely faces, and in spite of all, in spite of the strong opposition of his mother and sisters, his fancy turned to that pale-haired Poll Miles. Man is a strange being, made up of many contradictions, and Joe was young, and cared not for what might be had for the asking, and there was much vanity, and some pleasure in piquing others, and of wish to be original, and not much genuine love, in his pursuit of Poll Miles. To all the world's astonishment, for a while she constantly flouted him. This increased his ardour, and, seeing the busy-bodies attributed her conduct to coquetry, and even said she was so sure of the efficacy of her spell that she could afford to try him hard. At last suddenly, and apparently without rhyme or reason, Poll changed her manner: she accepted his posy at church, walked with him on the bright Sunday afternoons, and they were duly betrothed.

For a little while her demeanour altered, and new gentleness came over her, and she tried to train herself to domestic duties; but alas! Poor Poll did it so ill, that her father roughly bade her desist. The mood did not last long, and she took to teasing her lover,

mocking him in her wild moods, weeping passionately when he was angry. Joe loved a peaceful life and the undisturbed comfort of self-satisfaction; her wild moods astonished then annoyed him deeply, he began to weary of the treasure he had coveted so much when it seemed difficult to attain.

There lived in Castle Vere a certain shoemaker, Isaac Holmes by name, who by labouring hard at his trade was enabled to perform a thousand acts of kindness and charity. From boyhood this man had possessed an extraordinary power of preaching; his parents hoped he might become a great light as a dissenting minister, but his genius took another bent. The man was intensely humble, looking upon himself as one of the lowest God's earth; he put himself under the guidance of the clergyman, told him of his gift of eloquence, which seemed to him at times a snare and temptation, and asked whether it should be hidden as a talent in a napkin. He trembled for the answer, the great power welled up within him like words to a poet, or music to a composer, with a force which seemed like inspiration; and his longing was not denied. The clergyman made him a Scripture-reader, gave him books to read, studies to pursue, lessons to learn, and bade him in God's name do his best to awaken slumbering souls.

All day he plied his humble trade, and read far into the night.

The money that he earned passed through his hands to the needy and the destitute, and left a blessing behind it.

Isaac Holmes was a man of small stature, pale and thin, the face rarely laughing, but now and then breaking into a smile of rare sweetness; his chest was contracted and weak, and it seemed marvellous to his audience that from so frail a body could come that powerful ringing voice. His high pale forehead was shaded with almost flaxen hair, soft and fine as silk, his eyes were large and prominent, a pale blue colour, that in moments of excitement seemed to shine from within.

In the warm autumn days of 1739, the inspiration was on Isaac with a great force, and when the afternoon work was over he would go up to the favourite green of the villagers, and, gathering them round him in increasing numbers, pour out all the fervour of his soul. Saturday was the best day of all, and those who could not spare the time on other days flocked to the preaching.

Joe Scott and Poll Miles went up to the green together, she with her hat in her hand, sorrowfully untwining the flowers from round it.

Quitting the village and turning through the park gate, their way lay under the shade of an avenue of old elms. Emerging from the trees, on the right hand lay "The Canal", a small lake called by this old name from the Norman days, and on the left rose a partly artificial hill, on which stood the great Norman keep which gave the village its name.

The straight lines of its vast squareness were as clear and unbroken against the sky as they had been in the days of King Stephen.

The old elms were in full leaf, weighed down by the weight of their foliage.

Poll would not speak; as she walked the light and shade chequered on her fair head.

“I wish you would try and be more like other folks, Poll,” said Joe, breaking the silence. “It is dull to walk half a mile with not a word spoken – there, you have finished at last, tie your hat on, like a tidy maid.”

But she only jerked it to and fro by the strings. He said no more, but walked sullenly by her side, kicking the pebbles before him. Presently a sound of low laughter from his companion made him start and turn round: a large black raven was flying round and round in the air, and finally perched on her outstretched arm.

“See,” she said. “How well they know me!”

But Joe shrank back from her side, while recollections and suspicions flashed through his mind.

“It is a beautiful bird, is it not, Joe” she said, looking up at him wonderingly.

“How do you tame them, Poll?” he asked uneasily.

“They come to me every day to feed, and I have taught them to love me. There are many of them.”

“Where do you feed them?”

“Up yonder,” she said, pointing to an old fir tree some twenty yards from the road. “I began when the snow was on the ground, and all was bound in ice like an iron chain – I cannot bear the ice.”

“We had not much of a winter last year,” said Joe carelessly. “Put on your hat, Poll, there are folks in the road, and you should go to the preaching dressed like other maids.”

“It is ugly now,” she said discontentedly, but, throwing the bird into the air, she put it on. The raven, to Joe's discomfiture, hovered round her still.

“Can't you drive it away?” he said, taking up a stone. Poll's eyes flashed with a blaze of anger.

“You shall not?” she cried, and stretched out her hands for the raven. The bird came whirling down, she pressed its glossy plumage to her breast, and seemed to whisper something; then suddenly throwing it from her, she laughed.

“He will not come again,” she said, and the bird, for a moment poising on the wing, took flight and disappeared. Joe felt a thrill of superstitious awe pass through him as they walked on side by side.

Presently Poll stole her hand into his.

“Are you displeased with me?” she said wistfully.

He drew his hand hastily away, looking anxiously round to see if anyone had seen the too demonstrative action; but as nobody was within sight he gave it back to her, saying:

“You see you are so strange, Poll, it is not that I am displeased with you, but I do not wish to see you as others do. Now what did you say to that bird?”

“Aha! That is my secret,” she laughed.

“Some heathen gibberish, but you see it makes folk talk.”

“Why should I care what they say?” said the girl fiercely.

“But for my sake, Poll – I have always lived with respectable people, and my wife should be like her neighbours.”

“I am not your wife yet.”

“Pshaw, I am talking seriously.”

“You had better have gone elsewhere, Joe,” said Poll sadly.

They passed by the Canal which lay smiling in the sun, and continued their way across the park to Bushy Green. By the side of the water stood a large disused barn. The owner of the castle often spoke of taking it away, but he let it be; it was useful for many things, and, tanned to red and brown colours, it was a not unpicturesque object. The moorhens swam on the water with the mixture of boldness and timidity of their wild nature, while stately swans floated on its blue surface; the pigeons wheeled round and round the old barn, and passed in and out of their old dove-cot. It was a happy and restful scene, and the picture was completed by the figures of the young lovers following the road, Poll in her scarlet cloak, Joe handsome and comely in spite of the frown which darkened his face. Alas, the peace and joy were not deeper than paint on

the canvas. In Joe's heart struggled a swarm of conflicting feelings, doubt and distaste, hurt vanity, and love that was half self-love, yet enough of pure love to give and aching pain to his selfish nature, and in hers all the wondering consternation of a child of a child whose soul is yet unawakened, and who knows not why it cannot please.

Chapter II

A crowd of listeners were gathered round Isaac Holmes; he had mounted on the fallen trunk of a tree, and was raised above them; he was speaking of "little sins," and his hands were tightly clenched in his eagerness.

"What do you call 'little sins'?" he cried. "Where on God's earth can you take a sin and call it little? An angry word, a sharp answer? Where is the warning 'Take heed that ye hurt not one of these little ones – a wounded spirit who shall bear?' More criminals have been driven to the gallows by nagging tongues at home than ye wot of. Little sins! Ye call vanity a little sin, yet it grows into covetousness and swells into debt and and passes onward to ruin. Let but one drop well through the embankment, and lo! the whole river will follow - a cloud the size of a man's hand at dawn, and at night the whole world is drowning. Were it not wise to stifle a nest of young adders before their poison has grown? They will not tarry, if undestroyed, they will grow and flourish, and death is in their growth."

Isaac's eyes fell upon the young couple on the outskirts of the crowd, Poll with her eager face raised, her eyes fixed on his, Joe looking around to see who the company might be. His voice sounded loudly.

"Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall! Ye, who are richly endowed, who have all that humanity craves, health and self-confidence, the respect of the world, ease and enjoyment of the good gifts of God, and honest congenial work to you I appeal. Beware of the nest of adders, brethren, dread little sins. To you the dark and awful temptations of life are as nothing, they come not near even to pollute with their foul proximity, but in the battle of life some are assailed with battle-axe and sword, some with great stones and sharp spears, others are pierced with a thousand petty arrow-heads, some even, in the siege of the city of God, untouched by weapons of war, fall victims to burning sand, the sand that forms your hedgerows, that covers the floors of your homes. To you, prosperous men, to you above all who are happy, I say beware."

There was an uneasy movement in the crowd, the preacher began again.

"Behold the tongue is a little member! But see how great a matter a little fire kindleth! I said, and I say it again, that many and many a man for whom Christ died has been driven into deadly sin by the power of a nagging tongue. Worry! Annoyance! How

little they seem! But, brethren, the whole world is made up of little things, the ocean of drops of water, the earth of tiniest atoms – nothing is little, nothing is insignificant. The rich man lifted up his voice in hell, and prayed for one drop of water – that drop to him the sum of ambition. It was but a little apple that Eve took and ate, and behold the wide world was filled with pain and remorse and death. Ben gentle, be merciful! Break not the bruised reed, quench not the smoking flax. Now listen!”

The whole figure of the man seemed to dilate as he raised his hands in the air.

“There are that kill the body, but, a thousand times worse, there are who would kill the soul. A whisper of evil, a little, calumny, is begun! A little whisper, no more! And it passes from house to house, and it becomes a tale – maybe none vouch for its truth – further on some say it is true, it grows blacker and stronger still, then it bursts on the village, a scandal to feed the hungry eagerness of gossips and tattlers and evil-speakers. There grows a bruised reed by the river of life, a kind hand to bind up its wounds would make it a fair ornament for the house of God. A tiny and wavering flame needs a soft fanning hand to blaze into light and warmth; but the neighbours pass by and they break the bruised reed, and they fling their robes upon the flame, and it is quenched. But God takes up the broken fragments, and gathers the ashes together – and lo! At the Second Coming they shall be brought forth as witnesses.”

The preacher ended exhausted; for more than an hour he had been speaking, and the drops stood on his brow. The crowd began slowly to disperse with thoughtful faces; Joe looked at the sinking sun, and went off down the hill to water the chestnut team, and Poll Miles went up to Master Holmes and sat down on the fallen tree looking wistfully into his face. When all were gone but these two, and old hobbled donkey, who distrusted the lords of creation, dragged himself up, and put his rough head over the girl's shoulder. All animals loved, and seemed to have a strong sympathy with, Poll Miles.

“I am glad you came, my child,” said Isaac gently. The fire had faded out of his eyes now, and they had a look of yearning tenderness as they rested upon her.

“I told you I would,” she said. “I should like to do all you tell me if I could.”

Isaac sighed.

“You do not always try, my poor child,” he said sadly. “One steady effort would make you curb your wild will, and bridle your imagination.”

“But,” she said sorrowfully, “it is all of no use. I am sorry when you bid me be sorry, I am glad when you say I am good; but nothing lasts more than one day with me. It is not wrong to love animals, is it?” she said, resting her cheek on the old donkey's neck,

“They seem to understand so well, and to love me dearly. Joe hates the birds because they follow me. I saw no harm, and yet I am always wrong.”

Isaac paused before he answered: he could not convince her of the village crime of unconventionality, of her idleness and fits of passion he could.

“There is no harm in loving the creatures,” he said, stroking the old donkey's back. “He does not mind that, but you should not let them follow you if it distresses him.”

“I never know,” she said sorrowfully. “All I do makes him angry, Master Holmes.” The tears rushed into her eyes. “I was far, far happier before I knew Joe.”

“My dear, dear child!”

“I was! I was!” cried the girl passionately. “He is angry, and he leaves me awhile; why should I care? I do not want to care! I long to wish him to go and leave me alone. Oh, I do not want to care! I want to be free of him, but I cannot! My heart aches, my eyes cry till I see him again, till I know he has forgiven me. Oh, why did he ever come?”

“My child,” said Isaac very gently, “you would very soon satisfy Joe if you tried to be - “

“Like other folks,” said the girl. “I know that, but I am not like them, it is all different with me. Once I was a child, and I went to school, and I learnt to read; but there came one day – if it were not so bright and fine this evening I would tell you why – but I never grew up after that. I neither learnt, nor grew in knowledge. What I was then I am now, and I shall never be otherwise, however I suffer!”

“Come home,” said Isaac, very pitifully; “we will walk together, and you shall tell me what you will.”

“I cannot, I dare not,” said the girl, turning very pale. Master Holmes began slowly to walk down the green towards the road. Poll kissed the donkey's brow, and followed him with her hands clasped and her head drooping.

“Why should you say that?” said he rather sternly, breaking silence. “Why dare you not speak in the light of God's day?”

She looked at him wonderingly. “Oh, the pain! The terror!” she said, shuddering.

“When I think of it I am so cold, and my limbs fail me. I can neither walk nor stand!”

“Do you speak of your mother's death,” he said softly, “that was long ago?”

"I was a little child once," she said dreamily, plucking a handful of grasses and weaving them together. "Mother took me with her wherever she went. I know all the herbs on the countryside; see this little yellow flower, it is a very powerful poison; all the herbs have strange and wonderful properties of their own, and some have no virtue except when the moon is at the full. We used to go out at night then, when it was almost as light as day, and each herb was wet with dew. It was cold, and I used to interrupt her, for she had no time to notice me. I could tell you strange things about some of the commonest flowers."

"Did you often go with her?"

"Yes, I loved those wanderings with my mother. I used to listen to her words, and I learnt the language of birds and beasts."

"Child, what do you mean?"

"They came to me trustingly, lovingly then; they are more afraid of me now, for I am so often unhappy."

Poll Miles suddenly drew herself up.

"No one flouted my mother, because she was not like other folks, and people came from far and wide to ask her advice - high and low came, rich and poor. You know Mistress Geraldine, with the raven hair? She was not lovely enough to win the chosen of her heart, and she came in the dead of night to beg for a love philtre for him."

Master Holmes recoiled with a movement of dismay, but Poll saw it not, she went on.

"They are not easy to make. There are herbs to be gathered with the dew of sunrise on their leaves, and one is wanted which has grown in such secrecy that no human eye rested has rested on it, and all this takes time: but we made it at last, and it was too late, he was wedded to another maiden. I can feel for her now," said Poll, pressing her hands to her throat. "I wish we had hastened it more, but the moon was on the wane when she came. I looked out every night to see how she wore away to a pale crescent but it was long before the full moon, and so it came about that it was too late. She turned bad and cruel, this Geraldine (poor soul, I do not marvel now), and she separated my mother and me. They sent me away upstairs, and they sat together at night. I could hear the fire roaring and a strange hot odour came up where I lay sobbing alone in bed, and my mother would never tell me what she did with Mistress Geraldine in the night hours. Once I found in the early morning a great waxen doll, and I thought that it was for me, and I was so glad, and I held it in my arms and sang for joy; but my mother took it away with angry words. After a while Mistress Geraldine came no more. We were rich then, and I should have been full of joy, but

that a shadow seemed to have fallen upon my mother, and she never smiled or played with me again."

"And your father, what of him?"

"He never lived with us. He did not love my mother, and for that I hated him. All of you who blame me that I can neither wash nor bake bread, nor cook dinner nor sweep out the house, you do not know what I can do, or all the strange things that I know."

Master Holmes seized her arm. Poll laughed that low laugh.

"I use my powers no more," she said. "I have never hurt anyone, my heart is not hard enough, though my will sometimes is strong! I could not do that, but I could use the sweet life-giving herbs to heal sickness, and make true lovers of idle swains, and there are essences pressed from their leaves, good to make maidens lovely, and all this and much more I know."

"Poll," said Master Holmes very gravely, "have you ever prepared any philtre for Joe?"

"Never, never!" she cried earnestly. "He came of his own will, I did nothing; but on the morning he told me his love I went to the hives and told it all to the bees, so I know now that all will go well."

A strange pain contracted the good man's heart; he felt as one feels who sees pain coming on a helpless child, and cannot avert it.

"How old were you when your mother died?" he said suddenly.

"I do not know how long ago it was," she answered, turning very pale. "One early morning we were together, when the door opened and Miss Geraldene came in, and she carried a letter in her hand, and her face had on it triumph and a kind of joy, and stronger than all an awful despair. She bent down and hissed something in my mother's ear, and she threw into her lap a roll of golden guineas, and the string broke, and they scattered over the room, and I ran after them to gather them up, and as I sat on the ground gathering them together I was suddenly frightened, for my mother and Mistress Geraldine stood grasping each other and staring into each other's eyes. I burst into tears. Mistress Geraldine went away; but my mother never heeded me. From that day the joy of my life was at an end, she grew feeble and ill, she used to tremble violently at every sound, her eyes grew larger and larger. She used to lie crying and moaning all day. At last she sent for a priest, and was a long, long time alone with him. I know not what passed, but I heard loud words, and my mother wailing for pardon. Then he went out of the house, as white and stern as a spectre. He came again,

and tried to take me away, and my father tried also, but I escaped from them again and again. One day we were alone together, and my mother was frail and weak, and she put out her hand, and her sleeve hanging over caught fire. Master Holmes! Master Holmes!"

Isaac caught her hands and held them tightly in his. She went on, panting.

"The flames wrapt her all round like a garment of fire, and she rushed out into the street. The people fled right and left, and shrieked 'The witch burns! Barbara's time has come.' One man was there at the well, and he threw the bucket of water he held, but it never reached her, and the folks shrieked, 'No water will quench that flame! Leave her alone!' and- and -"

The grasp with which Poll held him relaxed, and she sank suddenly on the ground, her eyes fixed before her. isaac touched her, then shook her, but she did not move. At last he knelt down beside her in tears. She began speaking again as if in a trance.

"Some flames are never quenched, there has been one in my brain ever since; whatever I do, it shines in my eyes. I was a child then, and I am a child now - life has stayed still with me. It is all that flame with its bright light or its dull burning spark. I must go home, Master Holmes."

And she rose up and suddenly fled away, so fast that she was lost to view before he could gain his feet.

Chapter III

The church bells were ringing their sweet even chimes, and the congregation slowly went in, by twos and by threes. They lingered round the old doorway chatting in low voices, lads and lassies making tryst for their afternoon walk. August was almost at an end, the sun blazed down through the windows, and the flies buzzed in the heat.

Poll sat close by the door. Joe had been lingering near when she came, and she thought he would come in with her; but he only averted his head and joined a small group of lads, and would not see his betrothed. She felt lost and bewildered, she tried to follow the words, but she never could do that long, and while the first hymn was still ringing through the old church Poll darted out of the half-closed door and away through the village into the avenue.

She sat down in the grass with her back to one great elm, and began plucking the flowers and grasses within her reach, and twining them into her hat. She was slightly raised on the rising ground, and could see the road through the village by which the congregation must return. As she twisted the flowers she sang low to herself.

"Good morning," said a clear voice close behind her, with an unfamiliar accent. Poll half turned around.

"Ah, is it you?" she said.

"You do not seem to be pleased that I see you," said the stranger, coming forward and standing before her. She was one of the French servants from the castle, a pretty coquettish *soubrette*, with bright eyes and a mocking smile.

"What do you want with me, Céleste?" said Poll, somewhat fiercely.

"Want! But nothing, only show me how you make those flowers into such lovely wreaths. Had I your talent, my fortune would be made."

She sat down on the grass beside her.

"You must sing to them as I sing, and watch that the light comes from the east as you weave."

"Ha, ha! But that joke is good - "

Poll said nothing, but went on with her work.

"Why," cried Céleste suddenly, "there is a dead leaf in your wreath, take it out!"

"Not I," said the girl. "That is for luck. There is a dead leaf in all that we do, whether we live or whether we die-"

"You speak strange," said Céleste, half fearfully.

"I speak truth."

Céleste took flowers into her lap.

"Wild flowers are well," she said, "but I should like to show Madame's false flowers to you: there are roses like with dew on their leaves, and gardenias from Paris, and carnations as there are few-"

"What are they made of?" said Poll.

"Who knows? Crape, linen, paint, honey-water. How can one tell?"

"I would rather have these-"

"Ah, if you would teach me to make garlands like yours, I too would say, I would rather have these."

"You can learn," said Poll carelessly. "See," and she went on singing low to herself. Céleste watched her fingers carefully, and strove to imitate her: she partly succeeded, but imperfectly, and stamping her foot she exclaimed-

"I cannot, but I will not cease till I can!"

Poll looked at her suddenly with her large eyes.

"You will not cease till you can," she said. "Teach me that, and I will weave garlands for you from morning till night."

"I know not what you mean?" said Céleste.

"If I cannot do things, I have no power to learn," she said wistfully. "And if I could only learn, Joe would be better pleased."

"And who is this Monsieur Joe?" said Céleste eagerly.

"Joe Scott."

"Ah, I know him. He goes with the horses down to the lake; and I watch him make them drink. He is very kind to me, this Monsieur Joe."

"He is kind to you?"

"Yes, for here in this desert, this wilderness of country, I am lonely, I have no friends, and to-day he asks me to walk with him up to the green."

"Ah, you are waiting for Joe?" said Poll, in a strange hard voice.

"Yes, when he comes from the church I am to be waiting here."

But Poll had fled away, leaving Céleste alone.

"Tiens! C'est une folle!" said she, looking after her.

By-and-by the congregation passed out again, and began their favourite walk up to the green. Last of all came Joe Scott and Master Holmes, talking earnestly together. The handsome face of the young man was gloomy and clouded, and that of the elder eager and sad.

"Joe, you will rue it if you are not more patient now. You are grieving her heart."

"If only," said Joe, "she would try and be like other maids in her manners and dress."

"There are many things more important than manners and dress."

"I do not see that," said Joe doggedly. "That scarlet cloak, and all those dragged weeds, make her look like a wild woman."

"What could have made you court her?" said Isaac impatiently.

"I thought I could teach her," cried Joe. "That she would soon become what I wished, fit to be my wife."

Master Holmes's eyes flashed. "Fit to be your wife!" he cried. "You are not fit to..." Then suddenly arresting himself, he said humbly, "My young friend, it is a poor love that does not esteem."

"I have always been so respectable," said Joe, almost fretfully, "and all about me have been so."

A vision of Joe's fat mother and buxom sisters passed through Master Isaac's mind, and he sighed. "Better give her up now," he said, "than wed her and break her heart."

"But I have no wish to give her up! You all seem to blame me for wishing that my betrothed wife knew her manners." Joe really felt himself injured.

"Alas! Joe, this child does not understand you; all her free fearlessness is leaving her now, for the first time she feels awkward and strange. You forget," he said eagerly, "You forget that you are none of her seeking: she would not have you at first, and only by long persuading and courting you won her at last."

"The maidens say that was to draw me on," Joe said sullenly.

"Then they lie!" cried Isaac, the force of his words bringing the colour into his cheeks.

"I must leave you, Master Holmes," said Joe very coldly, for Céleste came tripping through the trees in her pretty snowy apron with cherry-coloured knots.

"You are late, Monsieur Joe!" she cried. "Already they have all gone on, and I must be in by six to dress Madame."

"Do you walk with her to-day?" said Isaac, his heart swelling within him.

"Yes!" answered the young man, trying not to look shamefaced.

"I have been sitting with your *folle!*" Isaac heard Céleste exclaim, as they walked on together. "If you come with me I will show her to you now." And she led the way to the fir-tree.

Isaac followed a few steps and looked. Poll was standing leaning back against the tree, with her hands stretched high above her head, two ravens perched on them, another stood on her shoulder, others on the ground at her feet, and whirling in circles in the air; it was a strange sight, and he went away with an aching heart.

Chapter IV

One morning, very early, Céleste came out into the long wet grass; the breeze was fresh and damp, and made her shiver; her gown was pinned up, showing her dainty feet, the ribbons of her pretty cap floated on the air, and she carried a basket on her arm. Madame loved mushrooms for breakfast, and early in the morning the best are to be had, and early in the morning the handsome young horsekeeper drove the chestnut team to drink at the lake.

Céleste started suddenly, and was half frightened by the sight of Poll Miles coming along swiftly up to the fir-tree; her hair was unbound and floated uncovered on the air, she carried grain and pieces of food in a fold of her cloak, and there under the tree she spread it in a circle and began a slow strange sort of dance. Céleste crept nearer on tiptoe and saw how her feet and her arms moved in time, then she grew frightened, and, stooping, began to gather mushrooms hastily, and she hoped that Poll would not see her.

Coming up the road she heard the crack of a whip and jangle of coming horses, and she began industriously to fill her basket.

Now Poll paused in her movements, and shading her eyes with her pale hand looked all down the road; a slight movement caught her ear, and she turned suddenly, and saw Céleste stooping over the ground.

In a second the wild jealousy of the girl broke out, and over-mastered her half-learned self control; she flew upon Céleste, and hit her again and again, her grey eyes gleaming, her hair flying, and the terrified *soubrette* uttered shriek upon shriek. Help was near at hand. Up the road came the four huge horses, their scarlet tassels swaying as they walked, and behind them, with a flower in his mouth, came Joe Scott.

At the sight of him Céleste burst from her assailant's hands, and flying down to the road threw herself on his breast, crying, "Save me! Save me from the witch!"

Poll stood motionless now, and as Joe's angry eyes turned upon her she made a quick movement to tie up her hair, and draw her cloak around her. She went up to the two as they stood together, and said, "I did not mean it, I am sorry."

But Céleste only clung closer to Joe, crying and sobbing, "Save me! Save me!"

"You have done mischief enough," said Joe roughly. "She is ill, she will faint!"

"I have said I am sorry," said Poll sadly.

"It is too late to be sorry when the mischief is done," he said angrily. "Go home, while I take this poor girl up to the Castle," and uttering a sound well understood by his horses to mean that they were not to move, he put his arm round Céleste's waist, and half supported, half led her up the hill.

Poll stood for a moment looking after them, her beautiful piteous face hardening and becoming rigid: they were still in sight when a wild spirit of mischief seized upon her; she pushed back her hat and cloak, letting them dangle behind her, and going into the road she placed herself between two of the great horses, and stretching up to lead one by each hand, she turned them round and led them back the way they had come, through the village, the other obedient pair following behind.

"Soho! My pretties! Come up! she cried, and the horses stooped their sleek chestnut necks above her. They went slowly on down the street, and the children scrambled into the doorways and laughed at the sight. Poll went on till they came to a large field of standing corn, and then she led them in, closing the gate behind them, and fled away home, laughing her wild low laugh.

About half an hour later Joe came into old Miles's house. He was white with passion, having received a severe reprimand from the farmer to whom the field belonged.

He found Poll as usual seated on the floor, and in no measured language poured out stinging reproaches. The girl rose slowly to her feet, and stood looking at him, motionless, with gleaming eyes. This conduct, so unusual in his rank of life, subdued Joe at last, and the words died away on his lips.

The door opened, and drawn by the sound of angry words Master Holmes came in. He looked sorrowfully from one to another, and Joe began at once a loud explanation of the cause of his anger. Poll still did not move.

"She does everything that she can to annoy me," he finished; "and you know, Poll, that it is so, and I see no reason why I should bear it. This had best be the end of all that has been between us."

"Joe! Joe! Be silent, you will bitterly repent all you say," cried Isaac, but Poll with one swift movement put his hand aside, and, bending forwards, she said with fixed eyes, "So be it, it is at an end; but be faithful, Joe Scott! Do not tempt me to far. The first word of love you utter in another maiden's ear, by the memory of my dead mother I will have my revenge."

"Stop" Stop! You know not what you say!" cried Isaac. Poll uttered a low laugh, and, shivering as if with cold, she crouched down and spread her hands over the fire, her head still turned over her shoulder, watching with gleaming eyes every movement of her lover.

Joe stood silent for one moment, then he muttered, "Witch and sorceress, what harm can you do me?"

Poll laughed again, and the sound froze the blood in his veins. He could bear it no longer, and he burst away out of the house.

Then Poll Miles slowly turned round to Master Holmes, and he started violently at the sight of her face; it has changed pitably, a grey colour over all, a vagueness in the eyes, a strangely drawn mouth with vivid lips.

"My child! My child!" he cried.

Still she crouched over the fire; she spoke slowly and with apparent difficulty. "He is gone," she said, "Gone!"

"Ah, Poll, dear heart, you love him! Child, weep, shed tears, I beseech of you, weep if you can."

"Never again," she said. "I have no tears left now, only laughter. I can laugh still."

Isaac was terrified at her looks, when she suddenly threw up her hands.

"Céleste! Céleste!" she cried. "May every curse that-"

But once more the words were cut short, for the unfortunate girl fell to the ground in strong convulsions.

The sun was setting behind the old keep, one glorious background of crimson and gold on which black and sharp rose the great outline. With jangling harness Joe brought the horses to drink. There came a sound of loud high singing in the air, and Poll Miles danced down the avenue, the flowers and grasses streaming from the wreaths with which she had entwined her dress and her hair. She passed her lover with

a merry mocking smile, which made him shudder and mutter, "She is then a witch after all."

Chapter V

The year passed on, and the autumn leaves reddened and died, and dropped into the ever-increasing past, and hard and fast fell the cold rains of November.

Then December set in, bringing gusty snow-storms and fitful frosts, and Christmas with all its attendant joys drew near.

There was great talk of merry-making that Christmas-tide, and discussions as to where the annual village ball should be held, for in the castle itself repairs were being done, and the floor was said to want strengthening before the whole village could dance in it again. So after much thought it was decided that a little decoration and fresh boarding would make the old barn by the Canal a very good makeshift ball room for this year.

The workmen were busy all day mending holes, stopping draughts, replacing the broken panes in an upper window, and the gardeners in festooning the rafters with great wreaths of laurel and box and holly. A bunch of mistletoe hung at one end of the barn, opposite to the raised platform, which the fiddlers were to occupy. There were anxious looks at the sky all the morning of Christmas Eve, and congratulations that it looked clear and cloudless, and that a hard frost had covered the lake with a thin sheet of ice.

The villagers looked forward to this dance with all the anxious anticipation of those whose amusements are few; they counted the hours, the men crowded into the barber's shop, the women tried the colours of their knots of ribbon and talked over those whom they hoped for as partners, and many a maiden wondered whether Joe Scott would be there, and whether he would relax from the sulky mood that now seemed habitual to him.

Poll Miles alone made no preparations and seemed to give no thought to the coming festivities. There was a wild flightiness about her now which often gave rise to the suspicion of insanity; more and more, in spite of the earnest appeals of Isaac, the villagers called her witch, and repeated tales of her strange ways. Without thrusting herself forward, it seemed to Joe Scott that she was always watching him; he was superstitious by nature, and her wild threat of revenge kept him in perpetual dread - and now more than ever he suffered his thoughts to dwell in admiration of Céleste, whom he dared not approach for fear of the pale maiden's fury. He grew sullen and taciturn, and even the chestnut horses knew that all was not well.

The night came at last, and in merry muffled-up groups came the guests to the ball. It was bitterly cold, the wind had sunk, all was still, and nature was at work freezing the earth in her hand of ice.

The lights gleamed, and the scene was brilliantly gay; the musicians tuned their instruments, and young feet danced involuntarily in anticipation, and the lads, sleeking down their smooth hair, looked round and chose each the maiden who seemed the fairest in his eyes, and the dance began merrily.

In his little dark room by the light of a quivering rush-light Isaac Holmes was plying his trade; there was no fire in the grate - that day he had given away his coals, and he was late over his work.

There came a faint knock at the door, and without waiting for answer Poll Miles came softly in. "Is it you, my child?" said Isaac, putting down his work. "Are you not going to the dance to-night?"

"By-and-by!" she said wearily, and sitting down on a low stool by his side. "But the light is burning so in my head to-night that I have come to you to quench it."

"Ah! If you could but shed tears," he said gently.

"Never again," she answered. "They have all been scorched and dried up. You never reprove me now! Though I often do things to tempt you to do so. You never tell me my faults or blame me; all is different now."

"My child, it need not be so. Some day there will come down on you a blessing like dew from heaven, and soften your heart, and you will forgive and in time be forgiven by God."

"Forgive! What is forgiveness?"

"Be patient, pardon all that Joe has done, set him free to be happy in his own way - unsay the terrible words you uttered."

Poll shook her head slowly.

"What is done is done," she said. "But I have never injured him, nor her, though they are both in my hands - though I have strange powers, I do not use them. Is that forgiveness?"

Isaac paused for an answer. Poll's manner and the light in her eyes more and more convinced him that her mind was unhinged; he laid his hand on her head.

"Child," he said, "in His own good time God will enlighten your heart." His eyes filled with tears.

"Shall we go to the dance?" she cried, suddenly springing up. "I am longing and panting to dance to-night. It is so strange that they shut themselves up in that barn where the rats are dancing overhead, and do not dance in the grass under the wild white moon, as my mother and I used do. To-night I went up to the fir-tree, but just then it was very dark, and I felt unutterably lonely, so I came down to you."

"Would you like to go, child?" he said, watching her wistfully, feeling that his worst fears were being realised.

"If you will come with me. It is very cold to-night, a long frost is beginning, and the ice will bind all closely, tightly, with its iron band. The wind has gone down!" she said, opening the door. "See, the flame of the candle hardly flickers at all. Come, Master Holmes."

He put his tools together, and, wrapping a small worsted shawl round his throat, he took down his stick and followed the girl out into the bitter night.

As they went up the avenue the church clock struck twelve, and the peal of Christmas bells rang joyously out.

They emerged from the trees into the broad expanse of moonlight, in which the ice-bound lake was lying.

"Hark! The music! The bells and the dancing!" cried Poll. "Come on, Master Holmes, let us be merry to-night." And she hurried him on.

Over the door of the barn the men had erected a kind of thatched porch. As they drew near they perceived two figures standing within it, too absorbed in themselves to be conscious of their approach.

A low gasp burst from Poll's lips, and she suddenly drew Isaac aside into the shadow of the porch, and held him in a vice-like grasp. The low words of the two in the porch came distinctly to their ears.

"Ay, sweetheart, I could tell you a thousand times how I love you, but once is enough for me."

"Joe," said the other voice, "say it again. She never was more than a fancy, an idea, to you."

"Never! Never! She bewitched me; she is a witch, or a mad-woman I trow. My heart's love was reserved for thee."

"You are sure you love no more that pale fury?"

"I vow I love none but my Céleste."

Master Holmes felt Poll's hands suddenly loose him, she burst from him, with a whirling sound she rushed in among the astonished revellers.

Céleste uttered a wild shriek of dismay. Isaac followed her, and his heart died within him.

In the midst of the crowd of dancers she stood, they huddled together, startled and aghast, and the music broke off with a sudden twang, only the bells outside went on steadily ringing.

Poll stood with her hands upraised, her head thrown back, pale as a Medusa with wild glittering eyes, and the words poured thick and fast.

"I have looked for truth in this cruel world, and have found only a slanderous lie! I have heard of pity and found only bitter contempt. I thought I had found love, it was mine, all my own! I never asked for it, I craved it not, but it came and it was mine and it turned to ashes and gall, and hatred and bitterness. The world is all evil and bad, no truth, no happiness, its gifts are all rottenness, its pleasures are sin, its love is a bitter lie! This is all life has given to me, take witness, I call upon death, I claim her protection, her calm, and - her love. And to you, Joe, false! False! False as you are: be glad while you may, be happy; and to witness your joy, I will come from my new home, and, sweetheart - you shall see me again."

She was gone, they gathered round, they flocked to the door, and down the road, everywhere, but a cloud had passed over the moon, and in the darkness she had disappeared.

The revel broke up, the dancers dispersed. Some of her fellow-servants carried home the fainting Céleste.

When morning broke they were still searching, Isaac and old Miles, the terrified Joe and others. With sickening fear they examined the Canal by the earliest light, but they found it one unbroken sheet of ice.

Then the men dispersed, each to his work, for bread must be won though hearts be breaking, and all day passed without one word of the missing maiden.

It grew colder and colder. When night came Isaac felt too sick and sad to go to rest, he cowered over the fire, hoping against hope for the light tap at the door, for his darling to come softly in.

About eleven o'clock some one raised the latch, and he sprang forward with open arms.

"Oh, my child, my child, is it thee?"

"Hush, hush, Master Holmes," said a hoarse voice, which Isaac scarcely recognised as Joe Scott's. "It is only I. May I come in? I dare not stay at home to-night."

"Come in, Joe," said the old man sadly, and pale as a sheet the horsekeeper came in.

"I cannot stay at home," he said. "She will come to me first. Hark! What is that?"

It seemed as if his very hair stood on end, and the drops burst out on his brow, for just by the door they heard a well-known sound, and the two men grasped each other's hands - it was Poll Miles's slow rippling laughter.

They tore open the door. There she appeared before them, distinct in the dark night, her face pale as the dead, her hair like a cloud on the air.

"My child!" cried Isaac, and he held out his arms, but they grasped empty air; and there she was, fleeting before them.

"Joe! Joe! Be a man, we must follow!" cried Isaac, grasping his faltering companion.

On through the village she fled, the two men following still, their breath coming in loud gasps, and up the avenue, in and out of the shadows of the great elm-trees, and over the open space, then down towards the water, and they saw her no more. Once again they heard the sound of low laughter, the sound they knew so well. They went on down to the Canal, stooping, then kneeling, they felt, they saw - the ice was everywhere, harder, more binding more pitiless than ever. They crept home again, and sat over the fire with chattering teeth till dawn.

Chapter VI

Days passed on, and the cold increased more and more. The frost seemed to have bound the very wind in its grasp, for it was so wondrously still. And every day the ice deepened and thickened, and a light fall of snow froze on the surface of the earth into a white iron hardness, and as the days passed men wondered what would happen. On the rivers of England bonfires were lighted, and torch-lit dances were danced on the

ice, and the young amused themselves well, and the old and the ailing shivered and died.

All that white frozen world was strangely beautiful for a while, but there were times when the utter silence, the pale sheet-like sky, unbroken by clouds, became terrible; it was as though the reign of warmth and sun were over, and that other mighty attribute of God, cold justice, reigned alone. Isaac was gone: he had taken all his small store, and, still trying to cling to hope, had gone in search of Poll Miles. He went to her old mother's old home, and there the bitter cold laid its hand upon him, and for weeks he lay between life and death.

Joe Scott lived on in Isaac's home; he dared not go home. The villagers shook their head over his altered looks. Céleste, seeing that he no longer noticed her, turned her thoughts to another. The young horsekeeper lost all his bright smartness, his clothes were unbrushed and awry, his eyes were haggard, he never lost from his face an expression of deadly fear, and the least unexpected sound made him start like a timid child.

So weeks went by. One day Isaac Holmes came back; he crept feebly into his own door in the evening. Joe sat by the hearth, his arms on the table, his face buried upon them. Isaac touched him, but he did not move, and he heard by his breathing that he was in a profound sleep.

Isaac would not waken the weary man, but moved silently about, untying his bundle and putting on the kettle. He was weak and tired, and looked greatly aged. It was long before Joe Scott awoke, and Isaac's heart contracted with a pang of sorrow when he saw the sudden scared look come over his face as he sprang to his feet.

"Have you found her? Tell me you have found her!"

Isaac shook his head sadly.

"No, my poor lad, she is not there, and I have no further clue."

Joe sat down again with his hands on his knees.

"I knew it would be so," he said hoarsely.

Isaac rose feebly and began looking for food: the young man raised himself.

"You are ill, you are worn out," he said.

"Yes, I have been hard at death's door."

"I thought you would never come home, Master Holmes. What a weary long time it has been -"

"Eleven weeks to-day since the frost set in," said Isaac.

"Master Holmes," said Joe in a low voice, "I dread more than I can say the end of the frost. I dread the secrets the earth will disclose."

"We must trust, we must pray," said Isaac.

By-and-by the old man began to get together his materials as though he would resume his old trade.

"Leave working now, Master Holmes," said Joe gently.

"I have no money left."

"I have enough for both; leave working, dear master, and rest."

Isaac put away his work and came back to the fire.

"You were not wont to sleep in the daytime, Joe?" said he tenderly, looking at the young man's haggard face.

"I have such terrible nights," he said. "I dare not go to bed until after the Christmas bells have ceased ringing."

"The Christmas bells?"

"They ring in my ears every night, and then I do not hear her mocking laugh; they are all fancies and dreams, but sometimes I think they will drive me mad."

"They will cease now that I have come home."

"Hark! Hark! What is that?"

Outside the door came a succession of slight sounds, clinking, clanking, and a dripping as of water. Master Holmes opened the door and looked out, the sky was all overcast.

"'Tis the icicles falling," he said; "the thaw has begun," and he drew back shivering.

Two neighbours were passing each other in the road outside; they heard their loud cheery voices.

"Whither out so late, Dame Basham?"

"I have been to beg a drop of water from Jacobs to fill the kettle."

"Ah! The Lord be praised, the icicles are falling, at last the thaw has begun."

The next day the surface of the earth was all wet, hard as stone underneath, and clouds were driving rapidly over the sky. At night a cold sleet fell, now rattling like hail, now changing into driving rain, and the next morning the world was green. Still the wells and the Canal were deep frozen. On the fourth day the rain set in steadily, and the roads became one deep mire.

Then with a loud crack the ice broke from the sides of the Canal and floated on the water. It was Sunday morning, and Joe had not yet left the house when Isaac came in from the pump, his face ashy pale, his lips quivering, and took him by both arms.

"Joe! Joe!" he gasped, "they have found something there, there in the lake!"

The strong young man shook from head to foot. He said nothing, only drew Isaac's hand through his arm to support him, then went up the avenue.

There were gathered some twenty or thirty people round the water's edge, one or two men knee-deep in the water with ropes, and the clang of a hatchet told that they were still breaking up the strong ice.

One or two women came up and would have persuaded them to turn back, but Joe put them aside silently and drew his companion on.

There on the banks they stood and looked; from under the bending ice with a boat hook the men were drawing out something that had been scarlet. Joe staggered and put his hand to his brow staring wildly for what would follow.

It came at last, and from among rushes and reeds they drew out the dead maiden. Then Joe rushed forward and fell on his knees and gazed on her wildly, and with a cry which echoed for years in their hearts.

Tradition says, and it has been handed down to me, that she was all unchanged, the faint colour still in her lips, the smile she had worn when she laid down her life; the long, long dripping hair fell back into the water from her pale brow, and the weeds clung to her dress, and tangled her feet in her scarlet cloak.

They forced him away, still staring wildly - among them they overcame his resistance, and forced him away from that sight.

There is a spot among the green lanes of Castle Vere where four cross roads meet. They call it in local parlance a road's delect, and there in an unhallowed grave they laid her, for she had chosen death wilfully.

For a long time Joe Scott lay ill of a nervous fever, and Master Holmes nursed him tenderly. When he was sufficiently recovered in body, an intense longing seized him to escape from a place so haunted by terrible memories, so he persuaded Isaac to accompany him to another county, where he soon found employment again.

Old Miles still lived on in Castle Vere; his daughter's fate seemed to have but a short-lived effect on his apathetic nature. Caring for no one and uncared for, he went on with his daily work.

And there where the four roads meet was the mound of green grass which marked the last resting place of Poll Miles; and still in Castle Vere they speak of her as a witch, and at night the villagers will go a long way round to avoid passing the Road's Delect.

THE END