

Jenny.

FROM THE FRENCH OF VICTOR HUGO.



JENNY'S CABIN.

I.



It was night. The cabin, poor, but warm and cosy, was full of a half twilight, through which the objects of the interior were but dimly visible by the glimmer of the embers which flickered on the hearth and reddened the dark rafters overhead. The fisherman's nets were hanging on the wall. Some homely pots and pans twinkled on a rough shelf in the corner. Beside a great bed with long, falling curtains, a mattress was extended on a couple of old benches, on which five little children were asleep like cherubs in a nest. By the bedside, with her forehead pressed against the counterpane, knelt the children's mother. She was alone. Outside the cabin the black ocean, dashed with stormy foam-flakes, moaned and murmured, and her husband was at sea.

From his boyhood he had been a fisherman. His life, as one may say, had been a daily fight with the great waters; for every day the children must be fed, and every day, rain, wind, or tempest, out went his boat to fish. And while, in his four-sailed boat, he plied his solitary task at sea, his wife at home patched the old sails, mended the nets, looked to the hooks, or watched the little fire where the fish-soup was boiling. As soon as the five children were asleep, she fell upon her knees and prayed to Heaven for her husband in his struggle with the waves and darkness. And truly such a life as his was hard. The likeliest place for fish was a mere speck among the breakers, not more than twice as large as his own cabin—a spot obscure, capricious, changing on the moving desert, and yet which had to be discovered in the fog and tempest of a winter night, by sheer skill and knowledge of the tides and winds.

And there—while the gliding waves ran past like emerald serpents, and the gulf of darkness rolled and tossed, and the straining rigging groaned as if in terror—there, amidst the icy seas, he thought of his own Jenny; and Jenny, in her cottage, thought of him with tears.

She was thinking of him then and praying. The sea-gull's harsh and mocking cry distressed her, and the roaring of the billows on the reef alarmed her soul. But she was wrapped in thoughts—thoughts of their poverty. Their little children went bare-footed winter and summer. Wheat-bread they never ate; only bread of barley. Heavens! the wind roared like the bellows of a forge, and the sea-coast echoed like an anvil. She wept and trembled. Poor wives whose husbands are at sea! How terrible to say, "My dear ones—father, lover, brothers, sons—are in the tempest." But Jenny was still more unhappy. Her husband was alone—alone without assistance on this bitter night. Her children were too little to assist him. Poor mother! Now she says, "I wish they were grown up to help their father." Foolish dream! In years to come, when they are with their father in the tempest, she will say with tears, "I wish they were but children still."

II.

JENNY took her lantern and her cloak. "It is time," she said to herself, "to see whether he is coming back, whether the sea is calmer, and whether the light is burning on the signal-mast." She went out. There was nothing to be seen—barely a streak of white

on the horizon. It was raining, the dark, cold rain of early morning. No cabin window showed a gleam of light.

All at once, while peering round her, her eyes perceived a tumble-down old cabin which showed no sign of light or fire. The door was swinging in the wind; the worm-eaten walls seemed scarcely able to support the crazy roof, on which the wind shook the yellow, filthy tufts of rotten thatch.

"Stay," she cried, "I am forgetting the poor widow whom my husband found the other day alone and ill. I must see how she is getting on."

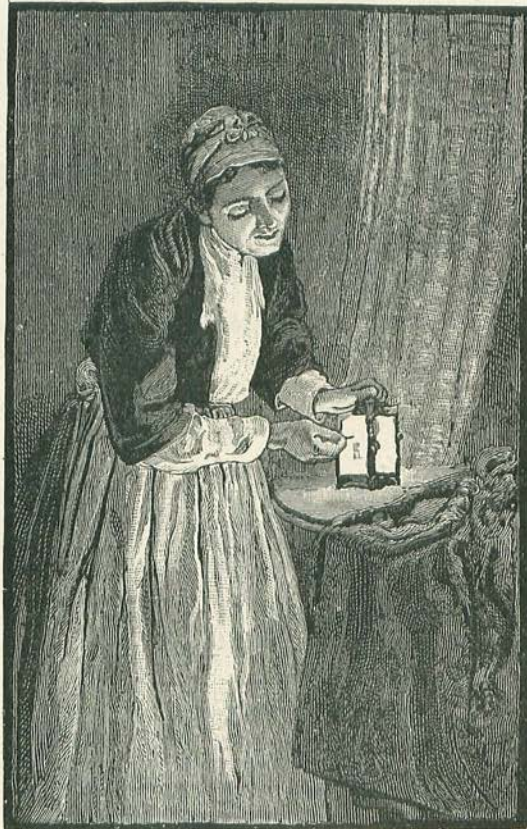
She knocked at the door and listened. No one answered. Jenny shivered in the cold sea-wind.

"She is ill. And her poor children! She has only two of them; but she is very poor, and has no husband."

She knocked again, and called out, "Hey, neighbour!" But the cabin was still silent.

"Heaven!" she said, "how sound she sleeps, that, it requires so much to wake her."

At that instant the door opened of itself. She entered. Her lantern illumined the interior of the dark and silent cabin, and showed her the water falling from the ceiling as through the openings of a sieve. At the end of the room an awful form was lying: a woman stretched out motionless, with bare feet and sightless eyes. Her cold white arm hung down among the straw of the pallet. She was dead. Once a strong and happy mother, she was now only the spectre of poor humanity, after a



"JENNY TOOK HER LANTERN."

long struggle with the world.

Near the bed on which the mother lay, two little children—a boy and a girl—slept together in their cradle, and were smiling in their dreams. Their mother, when she felt that she was dying, had laid her cloak across their feet and wrapt them in her dress, to keep them warm when she herself was cold.

How sound they slept in their old, tottering cradle, with their calm breath and quiet little faces! It seemed as if nothing could awake these sleeping orphans. Outside the rain beat down in floods, and the sea gave forth a sound like an alarm bell.

From the old creviced roof, through which blew the gale, a drop of water fell on the dead face, and ran down it like a tear.

III.

WHAT had Jenny been about in the dead woman's house? What was she carrying off beneath her cloak? Why was her heart beating? Why did she hasten with such trembling steps to her own cabin, without daring to look back? What did she hide in her own bed, behind the curtain? What had she been stealing?

When she entered the cabin, the cliffs were growing white. She sank upon the chair beside the bed. She was very pale; it seemed as if she felt repentance. Her forehead fell upon the pillow, and at intervals, with broken words, she murmured to herself, while outside the cabin moaned the savage sea.

"My poor man! O Heavens, what will he say? He has already so much trouble. What have I done now? Five children on our hands already! Their father toils and toils, and yet, as if he had not care enough



"TWO LITTLE CHILDREN SLEPT TOGETHER IN THEIR CRADLE."

already, I must give him this care more. Is that he? No, nothing. I have done wrong—he would do quite right to beat me. Is that he? No! So much the better. The door moves as if someone were coming in; but no. To think that I should feel afraid to see him enter!"

Then she remained absorbed in thought, and shivering with the cold, unconscious of all outward sounds, of the black cormorants, which passed shrieking, and of the rage of wind and sea.

All at once the door flew open, a streak of the white light of morning entered, and the fisherman, dragging his dripping net, appeared upon the threshold, and cried, with a gay laugh, "Here comes the Navy."

"You!" cried Jenny; and she clasped her husband like a lover, and pressed her mouth against his rough jacket.

"Here I am, wife," he said, showing in the firelight the good-natured and contented face which Jenny loved so well.

"I have been unlucky," he continued.

"What kind of weather have you had?"

"Dreadful."

"And the fishing?"

"Bad. But never mind. I have you in my arms again, and I am satisfied. I have caught nothing at all, I have only torn my net. The deuce was in the wind to-night. At one moment of the tempest I thought the boat was foundering, and the cable broke. But what have you been doing all this time?"

Jenny felt a shiver in the darkness

"I?" she said, in trouble "Oh, nothing; just as usual. I have been sewing. I have been listening to the thunder of the sea, and I was frightened."

"Yes; the winter is a hard time. But never mind it now."

Then, trembling as if she were going to commit a crime:

"Husband!" she said, "our neighbour is dead. She must have died last night, soon after you went out. She has left two little children, one called William and the other Madeline. The boy can hardly toddle, and the girl can only lisp. The poor, good woman was in dreadful want."

The man looked grave. Throwing into

a corner his fur cap, sodden by the tempest: "The deuce," he said, scratching his head. "We already have five children; this makes seven. And already in bad weather we have to go without our supper. What shall we do now? Bah, it is not my fault, it's God's doing. These are things too deep for me. Why has He taken away their mother from these mites? These matters are too difficult to understand. One has to be a scholar to see through them. Such tiny scraps of children! Wife, go and fetch them. If they are awake, they must be frightened to be alone with their dead mother. We will bring them up with ours. They will be brother and sister to our five. When God sees that we have to feed this little girl and boy besides our own, He will let us take more fish. As for me, I will drink water. I will work twice as hard. Enough. Be off and bring them! But what is the matter? Does it vex you? You are generally quicker than this."

His wife drew back the curtain.

"Look!" she said.

