

# The Daughter of Hippocrates

By Leigh Hunt

In the time of the Norman reign in Sicily, a vessel bound from that island for Smyrna was driven by a westerly wind upon the island of Cos. The crew did not know where they were, though they had often visited the island; for the trading towns lay in other quarters, and they saw nothing before them but woods and solitudes. They found, however, a comfortable harbour; and the wind having fallen in the night, they went on shore next morning for water. The country proved as solitary as they thought it; which was the more extraordinary, inasmuch as it was very luxuriant, full of wild figs and grapes, with a high uneven ground, and stocked with goats and other animals, who fled whenever they appeared. The bees were remarkably numerous, so that the wild honey, fruits, and delicious water, especially one spring which fell into a beautiful marble basin, made them more and more wonder at every step that they could see no human inhabitants.

Thus idling about and wondering, stretching themselves now and then among the wild thyme and grass, and now getting up to look at some specially fertile place which another called them to see, and which they thought might be turned to fine trading purpose, they came upon a mound covered with trees, which looked into a flat wide lawn of rank grass, with a house at the end of it. They crept nearer towards the house along the mound, still continuing among the trees, for fear they were trespassing at last upon somebody's property. It had a large garden wall at the back, as much covered with ivy as if it had been built of it. Fruit-trees looked over the wall with an unpruned thickness; and neither at the back nor front of the house were there any signs of humanity. It was an ancient marble building, where glass was not to be expected in the windows; but it was much dilapidated, and the grass grew up over the steps. They listened again and again; but nothing was to be heard like a sound of men; nor scarcely of anything else. There was an intense noon-day silence. Only the hares made a rustling noise as they ran about the long hiding grass. The house looked like the tomb of human nature amidst the vitality of earth.

"Did you see?" said one of the crew, turning pale, and hastening to go.

"See what?" said the others.

"What looked out of window."

They all turned their faces towards the house, but saw nothing. Upon this they laughed at their companion, who persisted, however, with great earnestness, and with great reluctance at stopping, to say that he saw a strange hideous kind of face look out of window.

"Let us go, sir," said he, to the captain;—"for I tell ye what: I know this place now: and you, Signor Gualtier," continued he, turning to a young man, "you may now follow that adventure I have often heard you wish to be engaged in."

The crew turned pale, and Gualtier among them.

"Yes," added the man, "we are fallen upon the enchanted part of the island of Cos, where the daughter of—Hush! Look there!"

They turned their faces again, and beheld the head of a large serpent looking out of window. Its eyes were direct upon them; and stretching out of window, it lifted back its head with little sharp jerks like a fowl, and so stood keenly gazing.

The terrified sailors would have begun to depart quicker than they did, had not fear itself made them move slowly. Their legs seemed melting from under them.

Gualtier tried to rally his voice. "They say," said he, "it is a gentle creature. The hares that feed right in front of the house are a proof of it:—let us all stay."

The others shook their heads, and spoke in whispers, still continuing to descend the mound as well as they could.

"There is something unnatural in that very thing," said the captain: "but we will wait for you in the vessel, if you stay. We will, by St. Ermo."

The captain had not supposed that Gualtier would stay an instant; but seeing him linger more than the rest, he added the oath in question, and in the meantime was hastening with the others to get away as fast as possible.

The truth is, Gualtier was, in one respect, more frightened than any one of them. His legs were more rooted to the spot. But the same force of imagination that helped to detain him, enabled him to muster up a courage beyond those who found their wills more powerful; and in the midst of his terror he could not help thinking what a fine adventure this would be to tell in Salerno, even if he did but conceal himself a little, and stay a few minutes longer than the rest. The thought, however, had hardly come upon him, when it was succeeded by a fear still more lively, and he was preparing to follow the others with all the expedition he could contrive, when a fierce rustling took place in the trees behind him, and in an instant the serpent's head was at his feet. Gualtier's brain, as well as heart, seemed to sicken, as he thought the monstrous object scented him like a bear; but despair coming in aid of a courage naturally fanciful and chivalrous, he bent his eyes more steadily, and found the huge jaws and fangs not only abstaining from hurting him, but crouching and fawning at his feet like a spaniel. At the same time, he called to mind the old legend respecting the creature, and, corroborated as he now saw it, he ejaculated with good firmness, "In the name of God and His saints, what art thou?"

"Hast thou not heard of me?" answered the serpent, in a voice whose singular human slenderness made it seem the more horrible.

"I guess who thou art," answered Gualtier: "the fearful thing in the island of Cos."

"I am that loathly thing," replied the serpent; "once not so."

And Gualtier thought that its voice trembled sorrowfully.

The monster told Gualtier that what was said of her was true: that she had been a serpent hundreds of years, feeling old age and renewing her youth at the end of each century; that it was a curse of Diana's which had changed her, and that she was never to resume a human form till somebody was found kind and bold enough to kiss her on the mouth. As she spoke this word, she raised her crest, and sparkled so with her fiery green eyes, dilating at the same time the corners of her jaws, that the young man thrilled through his very scalp.

He stepped back with a look of the utmost horror and loathing. The creature gave a sharp groan inwardly, and, after rolling her neck frantically on the ground, withdrew a little back likewise, and seemed to be looking another way.

Gualtier heard two or three little sounds as of a person weeping piteously, yet trying to subdue its voice; and, looking with breathless curiosity, he saw the side of the loathly creature's face bathed in tears.

"Why speakest thou, lady," said he, "if lady thou art, of the curse of the false goddess Diana, who never was, or only a devil? I cannot kiss thee!" and he shuddered with a horrible shudder as he spoke; "but I will bless thee in the name of the true God, and even mark thee with His cross."

The serpent shook her head mournfully, still keeping it turned round. She then faced him again, hanging her head in a dreary and desponding manner.

"Thou knowest not," said she, "what I know. Diana both was, and never was; and there are many other things on earth which are, and yet are not. Thou canst not comprehend it, even though thou art kind. But the heavens alter not, neither the sun, nor the strength of nature; and if thou wert kinder, I should be as I once was, happy and human. Suffice it, that nothing can change me but what I said."

"Why wert thou changed, thou fearful and mysterious thing?" said Gualtier.

"Because I denied Diana, as thou dost," answered the serpent; "and it was pronounced an awful crime in me, though it is none in thee; and I was to be made a thing loathsome in men's eyes. Let me not catch thine eye, I beseech thee; but go thy way, and be safe; for I feel a cruel thought coming on me, which will shake my innermost soul, though it shall not harm thee. But I could make thee suffer for the pleasure of seeing thine anguish, even as some tyrants do; and is not that dreadful?" And the monster openly shed tears, and sobbed.

There was something in this mixture of avowed cruelty and weeping contradiction to it, which made Gualtier remain in spite of himself. But fear was still uppermost in his mind, when he looked upon the mouth that was to be kissed; and he held fast round a tree with one hand, and his sword as fast in the other, watching the movements of her neck as he conversed.

"How did thy father, the sage Hippocrates," asked he, "suffer thee to come to this?"

"My father," replied she, "sage and good as he was, was but a Greek mortal; and the great virgin was a worshipped goddess. I pray thee go."

She uttered the last word in a tone of loud anguish; but the very horror of it made Gualtier hesitate, and he said,— "How can I know that it is not thy destiny to deceive the merciful into this horrible kiss, that then, and then only, thou may'st devour them?"

But the serpent rose higher at this, and, looking around loftily, said in a mild and majestic tone of voice:

"O ye green and happy woods, breathing like sleep O safe and quiet population of these leafy places, dying brief deaths! O sea! O earth! O heavens, never uttering syllable to man! Is there no way to make better known the meaning of your gentle silence, of your long basking pleasures and brief pains! And must the want of what is beautiful and kind from others ever remain different from what is beautiful and kind in itself? And must form obscure essence? And human confidence in good from within never be holder than suspicion of evil from without? O ye large-looking and grand benignities of creation, is it that we are atoms in a dream; or that your largeness and benignity are in those only who see them, and that it is for us to hang over ye till we wake you into a voice with our kisses? I yearn to be made beautiful by one kind action, and beauty itself will not believe me!"

Gualtier, though not a foolish youth, understood little or nothing of this mystic apostrophe; but something or other made him bear in mind, and really incline to believe that it was a transformed woman speaking to him; and he was making a violent internal effort to conquer his repugnance to the kiss, when some hares, starting from him as they passed, ran and cowered behind the folds of the monster: and she stooped her head and licked them.

"By Christ!" exclaimed he, "whom the wormy grave gathered into its arms, to save us from our corruptions, I will do this thing; so may He have mercy on my soul, whether I live or die; for the very hares take refuge in her shadow."

And, shuddering and shutting his eyes, he put his mouth out for her to meet; and he seemed to feel, in his blindness, that dreadful mouth approaching; and he made the sign of the cross, and he murmured internally the flame of Him who cast seven devils out of Mary Magdalen, that afterwards anointed his feet; and in the midst of his courageous agony he felt a small mouth fast

and warm upon his, and a hand about his neck, and another on his left hand; and opening his eyes, he dropped them upon two of the sweetest that ever looked into the eye of man. But the hares fled, for they had loved the serpent, and knew not the beautiful human being.

Great was the fame of Gualtier, not only throughout all the Grecian islands, but on both continents, and most of all in Sicily, where every one of his countrymen thought he had had a hand in the enterprise, for being born on the same soil. The captain and his crew never came again, for, alas! they had gone off without waiting, as they promised. But Tancred, prince of Salerno, came himself with a knightly train to see Gualtier, who lived with his lady in the same place, all her past sufferings appearing as nothing to her before even a month of love, and even sorrowful habit having endeared it to her. Tancred, and his knights, and learned clerks, came in a noble ship, every oar having a painted scutcheon over the rowlock; and Gualtier and his lady feasted them nobly, and drank to them amidst music in cups of Hippocras,—that knightly liquor afterwards so renowned, which she retained the secret of making from her sage father, whose name it bore. And when king Tancred, with a gentle gravity in the midst of his mirth, expressed a hope that the beautiful lady no longer worshipped Diana, Gualtier said, “No, indeed, sir;” and she looked in Gualtier’s face, as she sat next him, with the sweetest look in the world, as who should say, “No, indeed:— I worship thee and thy kind heart.”