

ACROSS THE HILLS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649261956

Across the hills by Frances Mary Owen

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH & CO.

1883

1489 $\frac{1}{2}$ 75.

PREFACE.

"ACROSS the Hills " was written by its author very rapidly, under the influence of a strong impulse. Shortly after it was finished, she herself saw "whatever it is that death has to reveal."

Those who knew and loved her will recognize the unconscious portrait of herself which the story gives, of the richly gifted nature consecrated to high and unselfish ends ; they will also feel mournfully the prophetic foreshadowing of the sudden close of a life lavishly spent in the loving service of others.

To such as accompanied her for a while through her life's brief day, it will seem as if they too were transformed by the vision of that Christ-like sympathy which ever saw, not the "evil face," but the suffering and sadness beneath it, and stretched out a gentle and helpful hand. And others there may be, that knew her not, who will be helped and stimulated by this tale, imaginary yet true.

The author was willing that the story should be offered for publication in some magazine ; it is now perhaps fittest that it should appear, as it here does, alone.

ACROSS THE HILLS.

THE train had broken down at an out-of-the-way station in Wales. Heath-covered hills sloped towards the line, and between them I caught a glimpse of blue moving sea in the distance. It mattered to me very little when I was told that no train would go on for ten hours. I was in search of health, and those heath-covered hills would do for me as well as anything else. There was only one other passenger—a lady, whose quick, springing step and graceful figure told that she was young, and was probably *not* in search of health. The first thing that arrested my attention was the extreme calm of the voice in which she made her inquiries of the solitary porter.

“There is no train till nine o’clock to-night?”

"No."

"How far is Llanfurdy across the hills?"

"Fifteen miles or thereabout."

"There is no conveyance?"

"No, mem, none however."

"Then will you lock up my box in the office here? I must walk to Llanfurdy."

The voice was music itself; no hurry, no agitation, not even a tone of that simple feminine importance assumed in a crisis, which is so amusing to a man accustomed to varied action.

"And the parcel, mem?" said the porter, stretching out his hands for a leathern case which the lady carried—"shall it go with the box?"

"No; I will carry that."

Did she know what she was saying? I wondered. Fifteen miles across steep hills and carrying a leathern despatch-box meant great fatigue. I involuntarily took a step forward; but it was no affair of mine, I thought. Something in that involuntary step, however, vibrated on her sensitive organism, and she turned and looked at me. Never had I seen, never shall

I see, such another face as that. It was calm and pale, with large grey eyes looking out from it. But that tells nothing. The calm of that face was the calm of one who had nothing new left to suffer; the light of those grey eyes was a light which had been lit from within. They were strange magnetic eyes; the sensitive mouth and nose and chin were all dominated by them. The rich hair, which waved low over a broad forehead, was lifted lightly by the breeze which was blowing, and showed the strength of the white brow beneath it. As she looked towards me, a very slight colour rose in her cheeks, and I could see that she recognized me, for my life was a public one.

"Mr. H. S——?" she said, half to herself.

I am a shy man, but some power stronger than my own will impelled me forward. I lifted my hat.

"This is an awkward breakdown, and puts you to much greater inconvenience than it does me," I said.

"Yes," she answered, with a frank, bright smile; "it is very inconvenient indeed to me. I must get to Llanfurdy before nightfall."