Rhoda Fleming — Volume 5 eBook

Rhoda Fleming — Volume 5 by George Meredith

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CHAPTER XXXIX

Late into the afternoon, Farmer Fleming was occupying a chair in Robert's lodgings, where he had sat since the hour of twelve, without a movement of his limbs or of his mind, and alone. He showed no sign that he expected the approach of any one. As mute and unremonstrant as a fallen tree, nearly as insensible, his eyes half closed, and his hands lying open, the great figure of the old man kept this attitude as of stiff decay through long sunny hours, and the noise of the London suburb. Although the wedding people were strangely late, it was unnoticed by him. When the door opened and Rhoda stepped into the room, he was unaware that he had been waiting, and only knew that the hours had somehow accumulated to a heavy burden upon him.

"She is coming, father; Robert is bringing her up," Rhoda said.

"Let her come," he answered.

Robert's hold was tight under Dahlia's arm as they passed the doorway, and then the farmer stood. Robert closed the door.

For some few painful moments the farmer could not speak, and his hand was raised rejectingly. The return of human animation to his heart made him look more sternly than he felt; but he had to rid himself of one terrible question before he satisfied his gradual desire to take his daughter to his breast. It came at last like a short roll of drums, the words were heard,—

"Is she an honest woman?"

"She is," said Rhoda.

The farmer was looking on Robert.

Robert said it likewise in a murmur, but with steadfast look.

Bending his eyes now upon Dahlia, a mist of affection grew in them. He threw up his head, and with a choking, infantine cry, uttered, "Come."

Robert placed her against her father's bosom.

He moved to the window beside Rhoda, and whispered, and she answered, and they knew not what they said. The joint moans of father and daughter— the unutterable communion of such a meeting—filled their ears. Grief held aloof as much as joy. Neither joy nor grief were in those two hearts of parent and child; but the senseless contentment of hard, of infinite hard human craving.

The old man released her, and Rhoda undid her hands from him, and led the pale Sacrifice to another room.

“Where’s...?” Mr. Fleming asked.

Robert understood him.

“Her husband will not come.”

It was interpreted by the farmer as her husband’s pride. Or, may be, the man who was her husband now had righted her at last, and then flung her off in spite for what he had been made to do.

“I’m not being deceived, Robert?”

“No, sir; upon my soul!”

“I’ve got that here,” the farmer struck his ribs.

Rhoda came back. “Sister is tired,” she said. “Dahlia is going down home with you, for...I hope, for a long stay.”

“All the better, while home we’ve got. We mayn’t lose time, my girl. Gammon’s on ’s way to the station now. He’ll wait. He’ll wait till midnight. You may always reckon on a slow man like Gammon for waitin’. Robert comes too?”

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“Father, we have business to do. Robert gives me his rooms here for a little time; his landlady is a kind woman, and will take care of me. You will trust me to Robert.”

“I’ll bring Rhoda down on Monday evening,” Robert said to the farmer. “You may trust me, Mr. Fleming.”

“That I know. That I’m sure of. That’s a certainty,” said the farmer. “I’d do it for good, if for good was in the girl’s heart, Robert. There seems,” he hesitated; “eh, Robert, there seems a something upon us all. There’s a something to be done, is there? But if I’ve got my flesh and blood, and none can spit on her, why should I be asking ‘whats’ and ‘whys’? I bow my head; and God forgive me, if ever I complained. And you will bring Rhoda to us on Monday?”

“Yes; and try and help to make the farm look up again, if Gammon’ll do the ordering about.”

“Poor old Mas’ Gammon! He’s a rare old man. Is he changed by adversity, Robert? Though he’s awful secret, that old man! Do you consider a bit Gammon’s faithfulness, Robert!”

“Ay, he’s above most men in that,” Robert agreed.

“On with Dahlia’s bonnet—sharp!” the farmer gave command. He felt, now that he was growing accustomed to the common observation of things, that the faces and voices around him were different from such as the day brings in its usual course. “We’re all as slow as Mas’ Gammon, I reckon.”

“Father,” said Rhoda, “she is weak. She has been very unwell. Do not trouble her with any questions. Do not let any questions be asked of her at hone. Any talking fatigues; it may be dangerous to her.”

The farmer stared. “Ay, and about her hair....I’m beginning to remember. She wears a cap, and her hair’s cut off like an oakum-picker’s. That’s more gossip for neighbours!”

“Mad people! will they listen to truth?” Rhoda flamed out in her dark fashion. “We speak truth, nothing but truth. She has had a brain fever. That makes her very weak, and every one must be silent at home. Father, stop the sale of the farm, for Robert will work it into order. He has promised to be our friend, and Dahlia will get her health there, and be near mother’s grave.”

The farmer replied, as from a far thought, “There’s money in my pocket to take down two.”

He continued: “But there’s not money there to feed our family a week on; I leave it to the Lord. I sow; I dig, and I sow, and when bread fails to us the land must go; and let it

go, and no crying about it. I'm astonishing easy at heart, though if I must sell, and do sell, I shan't help thinking of my father, and his father, and the father before him—mayhap, and in most likelihood, artfuller men 'n me—for what they was born to they made to flourish. They'll cry in their graves. A man's heart sticks to land, Robert; that you'll find, some day. I thought I cared none but about land till that poor, weak, white thing put her arms on my neck."

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Rhoda had slipped away from them again.

The farmer stooped to Robert's ear. "Had a bit of a disagreement with her husband, is it?"

Robert cleared his throat. "Ay, that's it," he said.

"Serious, at all?"

"One can't tell, you know."

"And not her fault—not my girl's fault, Robert?"

"No; I can swear to that."

"She's come to the right home, then. She'll be near her mother and me. Let her pray at night, and she'll know she's always near her blessed mother. Perhaps the women 'll want to take refreshment, if we may so far make free with your hospitality; but it must be quick, Robert—or will they? They can't eat, and I can't eat."

Soon afterward Mr. Fleming took his daughter Dahlia from the house and out of London. The deeply-afflicted creature was, as the doctors had said of her, too strong for the ordinary modes of killing. She could walk and still support herself, though the ordeal she had gone through this day was such as few women could have traversed. The terror to follow the deed she had done was yet unseen by her; and for the hour she tasted, if not peace, the pause to suffering which is given by an act accomplished.

Robert and Rhoda sat in different rooms till it was dusk. When she appeared before him in the half light, the ravage of a past storm was visible on her face. She sat down to make tea, and talked with singular self command.

"Mr. Fleming mentioned the gossips down at Wrexby," said Robert: "are they very bad down there?"

"Not worse than in other villages," said Rhoda. "They have not been unkind. They have spoken about us, but not unkindly—I mean, not spitefully."

"And you forgive them?"

"I do: they cannot hurt us now."

Robert was but striving to master some comprehension of her character.

"What are we to resolve, Rhoda?"

“I must get the money promised to this man.”

“When he has flung off his wife at the church door?”

“He married my sister for the money. He said it. Oh! he said it. He shall not say that we have deceived him. I told him he should have it. He married her for money!”

“You should not have told him so, Rhoda.”

“I did, and I will not let my word be broken.”

“Pardon me if I ask you where you will get the money? It’s a large sum.”

“I will get it,” Rhoda said firmly.

“By the sale of the farm?”

“No, not to hurt father.”

“But this man’s a scoundrel. I know him. I’ve known him for years. My fear is that he will be coming to claim his wife. How was it I never insisted on seeing the man before —! I did think of asking, but fancied--a lot of things; that you didn’t wish it and he was shy. Ah, Lord! what miseries happen from our not looking straight at facts! We can’t deny she’s his wife now.”

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“Not if we give him the money.”

Rhoda spoke of “the money” as if she had taken heated metal into her mouth.

“All the more likely,” said Robert. “Let him rest. Had you your eyes on him when he saw me in the vestry? For years that man has considered me his deadly enemy, because I punished him once. What a scene! I’d have given a limb, I’d have given my life, to have saved you from that scene, Rhoda.”

She replied: “If my sister could have been spared! I ought to know what wickedness there is in the world. It’s ignorance that leads to the unhappiness of girls.”

“Do you know that I’m a drunkard?”

“No.”

“He called me something like it; and he said something like the truth. There’s the sting. Set me adrift, and I drink hard. He spoke a fact, and I couldn’t answer him.”

“Yes, it’s the truth that gives such pain,” said Rhoda, shivering. “How can girls know what men are? I could not guess that you had any fault. This man was so respectful; he sat modestly in the room when I saw him last night—last night, was it? I thought, ’he has been brought up with sisters and a mother.’ And he has been kind to my dear—and all we thought love for her, was—shameful! shameful!”

She pressed her eyelids, continuing: “He shall have the money—he shall have it. We will not be in debt to such a man. He has saved my sister from one as bad—who offered it to be rid of her. Oh, men!—you heard that?—and now pretends to love her. I think I dream. How could she ever have looked happily on that hateful face?”

“He would be thought handsome,” said Robert, marvelling how it was that Rhoda could have looked on Sedgett for an instant without reading his villanous nature. “I don’t wish you to regret anything you have done or you may do, Rhoda. But this is what made me cry out when I looked on that man, and knew it was he who had come to be Dahlia’s husband. He’ll be torture to her. The man’s temper, his habits—but you may well say you are ignorant of us men. Keep so. What I do with all my soul entreat of you is—to get a hiding-place for your sister. Never let him take her off. There’s such a thing as hell upon earth. If she goes away with him she’ll know it. His black temper won’t last. He will come for her, and claim her.”

“He shall have money.” Rhoda said no more.

On a side-table in the room stood a remarkable pile, under cover of a shawl. Robert lifted the shawl, and beheld the wooden boxes, one upon the other, containing Master Gammon’s and Mrs. Sumfit’s rival savings, which they had presented to Dahlia, in the

belief that her husband was under a cloud of monetary misfortune that had kept her proud heart from her old friends. The farmer had brought the boxes and left them there, forgetting them.

“I fancy,” said Robert, “we might open these.”

“It may be a little help,” said Rhoda.

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“A very little,” Robert thought; but, to relieve the oppression of the subject they had been discussing, he forthwith set about procuring tools, with which he split first the box which proved to be Mrs. Sumfit’s, for it contained, amid six gold sovereigns and much silver and pence, a slip of paper, whereon was inscribed, in a handwriting identified by Rhoda as peculiar to the loving woman,—

> “And sweetest love to her ever dear.”

Altogether the sum amounted to nine pounds, three shillings, and a farthing.

“Now for Master Gammon—he’s heavy,” said Robert; and he made the savings of that unpretentious veteran bare. Master Gammon had likewise written his word. It was discovered on the blank space of a bit of newspaper, and looked much as if a fat lobworm had plunged himself into a bowl of ink, and in his literary delirium had twisted uneasily to the verge of the paper. With difficulty they deciphered,—

“Complemens.”

Robert sang, “Bravo, Gammon!” and counted the hoard. All was in copper coinage, Lycurgan and severe, and reached the sum of one pound, seventeen shillings. There were a number of farthings of Queen Anne’s reign, and Robert supposed them to be of value. “So that, as yet, we can’t say who’s the winner,” he observed.

Rhoda was in tears.

“Be kind to him, please, when you see him,” she whispered. The smaller gift had touched her heart more tenderly.

“Kind to the old man!” Robert laughed gently, and tied the two hoards in separate papers, which he stowed into one box, and fixed under string. “This amount, put all in one, doesn’t go far, Rhoda.”

“No,” said she: “I hope we may not need it.” She broke out: “Dear, good, humble friends! The poor are God’s own people. Christ has said so. This is good, this is blessed money!” Rhoda’s cheeks flushed to their orange-rounded swarthy red, and her dark eyes had the fervour of an exalted earnestness. “They are my friends for ever. They save me from impiety. They help me, as if God had answered my prayer. Poor pennies! and the old man not knowing where his days may end! He gives all—he must have true faith in Providence. May it come back to him multiplied a thousand fold! While I have strength to work, the bread I earn shall be shared with him. Old man, old man, I love you—how I love you! You drag me out of deep ditches. Oh, good and dear old man, if God takes me first, may I have some power to intercede for you, if you have ever sinned! Everybody in the world is not wicked. There are some who go the ways directed by the Bible. I owe you more than I can ever pay.”

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She sobbed, but told Robert it was not for sorrow. He, longing to catch her in his arms, and punctilious not to overstep the duties of his post of guardian, could merely sit by listening, and reflecting on her as a strange Biblical girl, with Hebrew hardness of resolution, and Hebrew exaltation of soul; beautiful, too, as the dark women of the East. He admitted to himself that he never could have taken it on his conscience to subdue a human creature's struggling will, as Rhoda had not hesitated to do with Dahlia, and to command her actions, and accept all imminent responsibilities; not quailing with any outcry, or abandonment of strength, when the shock of that revelation in the vestry came violently on her. Rhoda, seeing there that it was a brute, and not a man, into whose hand she had perilously forced her sister's, stood steadying her nerves to act promptly with advantage; less like a woman, Robert thought, than a creature born for battle. And she appeared to be still undaunted, full of her scheme, and could cry without fear of floods. Something of the chivalrous restraint he put upon the motions of his heart, sprang from the shadowy awe which overhung that impressible organ. This feeling likewise led him to place a blind reliance on her sagacity and sense of what was just, and what should be performed.

"You promised this money to him," he said, half thinking it incredible.

"On Monday," said Rhoda.

"You must get a promise from him in return."

She answered: "Why? when he could break it the instant he cared to, and a promise would tempt him to it. He does not love her."

"No; he does not love her," said Robert, meditating whether he could possibly convey an idea of the character of men to her innocent mind.

"He flung her off. Thank heaven for it! I should have been punished too much—too much. He has saved her from the perils of temptation. He shall be paid for it. To see her taken away by such a man! Ah!" She shuddered as at sight of a hideous pit.

But Robert said: "I know him, Rhoda. That was his temper. It'll last just four-and-twenty hours, and then we shall need all our strength and cunning. My dear, it would be the death of Dahlia. You've seen the man as he is. Take it for a warning. She belongs to him. That's the law, human and divine."

"Not when he has flung her off, Robert?" Rhoda cried piteously.

"Let us take advantage of that. He did fling her off, spat at us all, and showed the blackest hellish plot I ever in my life heard of. He's not the worst sinner, scoundrel as he is. Poor girl! poor soul! a hard lot for women in this world! Rhoda, I suppose I may

breakfast with you in the morning? I hear Major Waring's knock below. I want a man to talk to."

"Do come, Robert," Rhoda said, and gave him her hand. He strove to comprehend why it was that her hand was merely a hand, and no more to him just then; squeezed the cold fingers, and left her.

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CHAPTER XI

So long as we do not know that we are performing any remarkable feat, we may walk upon the narrowest of planks between precipices with perfect security; but when we suffer our minds to eye the chasm underneath, we begin to be in danger, and we are in very great fear of losing our equal balance the moment we admit the insidious reflection that other men, placed as we are, would probably topple headlong over. Anthony Hackbut, of Boyne's Bank, had been giving himself up latterly to this fatal comparison. The hour when gold was entrusted to his charge found him feverish and irritable. He asked himself whether he was a mere machine to transfer money from spot to spot, and he spurned at the pittance bestowed upon honesty in this life. Where could Boyne's Bank discover again such an honest man as he? And because he was honest he was poor! The consideration that we alone are capable of doing the unparalleled thing may sometimes inspire us with fortitude; but this will depend largely upon the antecedent moral trials of a man. It is a temptation when we look on what we accomplish at all in that light. The temptation being inbred, is commonly a proof of internal corruption. "If I take a step, suppose now, to the right, or to the left," Anthony had got into the habit of saying, while he made his course, and after he had deposited his charge he would wipe his moist forehead, in a state of wretched exultation over his renowned trustworthiness.

He had done the thing for years. And what did the people in the streets know about him? Formerly, he had used to regard the people in the streets, and their opinions, with a voluptuous contempt; but he was no longer wrapped in sweet calculations of his savings, and his chances, and his connection with a mighty Bank. The virtue had gone out of him. Yet he had not the slightest appetite for other men's money; no hunger, nor any definite notion of enjoyment to be derived from money not his own. Imagination misled the old man. There have been spotless reputations gained in the service of virtue before now; and chaste and beautiful persons have walked the narrow plank, envied and admired; and they have ultimately tottered and all but fallen; or they have quite fallen, from no worse an incitement than curiosity. Cold curiosity, as the directors of our human constitution tell us, is, in the colder condition of our blood, a betraying vice, leading to sin at a period when the fruits of sin afford the smallest satisfaction. It is, in fact, our last probation, and one of our latest delusions. If that is passed successfully, we may really be pronounced as of some worth. Anthony wished to give a light indulgence to his curiosity; say, by running away and over London Bridge on one side, and back on the other, hugging the money. For two weeks, he thought of this absurd performance as a comical and agreeable diversion. How would

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he feel when going in the direction of the Surrey hills? And how, when returning, and when there was a prospect of the Bank, where the money was to be paid in, being shut? Supposing that he was a minute behind his time, would the Bank-doors remain open, in expectation of him? And if the money was not paid in, what would be thought? What would be thought at Boyne's, if, the next day, he was late in making his appearance?

"Holloa! Hackbut, how's this?"—"I'm a bit late, sir, morning."—"Late! you were late yesterday evening, weren't you?"—"Why, sir, the way the clerks at that Bank of Mortimer and Pennycuick's rush away from business and close the doors after 'em, as if their day began at four p.m., and business was botheration: it's a disgrace to the City o' London. And I beg pardon for being late, but never sleeping a wink all night for fear about this money, I am late this morning, I humbly confess. When I got to the Bank, the doors were shut. Our clock's correct; that I know. My belief, sir, is, the clerks at Mortimer and Pennycuick's put on the time."—"Oh! we must have this inquired into."

Anthony dramatized the farcical scene which he imagined between himself and Mr. Sequin, the head clerk at Boyne's, with immense relish; and terminated it by establishing his reputation for honesty higher than ever at the Bank, after which violent exercise of his fancy, the old man sank into a dulness during several days. The farmer slept at his lodgings for one night, and talked of money, and of selling his farm; and half hinted that it would be a brotherly proceeding on Anthony's part to buy it, and hold it, so as to keep it in the family. The farmer's deep belief in the existence of his hoards always did Anthony peculiar mischief. Anthony grew conscious of a giddiness, and all the next day he was scarcely fit for his work. But the day following that he was calm and attentive. Two bags of gold were placed in his hands, and he walked with caution down the steps of the Bank, turned the corner, and went straight on to the West, never once hesitating, or casting a thought behind upon Mortimer and Pennycuick's. He had not, in truth, one that was loose to be cast. All his thoughts were boiling in his head, obfuscating him with a prodigious steam, through which he beheld the city surging, and the streets curving like lines in water, and the people mixing and passing into and out of one another in an astonishing manner—no face distinguishable; the whole thick multitude appearing to be stirred like glue in a gallipot. The only distinct thought which he had sprang from a fear that the dishonest ruffians would try to steal his gold, and he hugged it, and groaned to see that villany was abroad. Marvellous, too, that the clocks on the churches, all the way along the Westward thoroughfare, stuck at the hour when Banks are closed to business! It was some time, or a pretence at some time, before the minute-hands surmounted that difficulty. Having done so, they rushed ahead to the ensuing hour with the mad precipitation of pantomimic machinery. The sight of them presently standing on the hour, like a sentinel presenting arms, was startling—-laughable. Anthony could not have flipped with his fingers fifty times in the interval; he was sure of it, "or not much more," he said. So the City was shut to him behind iron bars.

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Up in the West there is not so much to be dreaded from the rapacity of men. You do not hear of such alarming burglaries there every day; every hand is not at another's throat there, or in another's pocket; at least, not until after nightfall; and when the dark should come on, Anthony had determined to make for his own quarter with all speed. Darkness is horrible in foreign places, but foreign places are not so accusing to you by daylight.

The Park was vastly pleasant to the old man.

"Ah!" he sniffed, "country air," and betook himself to a seat. "Extraordinary," he thought, "what little people they look on their horses and in their carriages! That's the aristocracy, is it!" The aristocracy appeared oddly diminutive to him. He sneered at the aristocracy, but, beholding a policeman, became stolid of aspect. The policeman was a connecting link with his City life, the true lord of his fearful soul. Though the moneybags were under his arm, beneath his buttoned coat, it required a deep pause before he understood what he had done; and then the Park began to dance and curve like the streets, and there was a singular curtseying between the heavens and the earth. He had to hold his money-bags tight, to keep them from plunging into monstrous gulfs. "I don't remember that I've taken a drink of any sort," he said, "since I and the old farmer took our turn down in the Docks. How's this?" He seemed to rock. He was near upon indulging in a fit of terror; but the impolicy of it withheld him from any demonstration, save an involuntary spasmodic ague. When this had passed, his eyesight and sensations grew clearer, and he sat in a mental doze, looking at things with quiet animal observation. His recollection of the state, after a lapse of minutes, was pleasurable. The necessity for motion, however, set him on his feet, and off he went, still Westward, out of the Park, and into streets. He trotted at a good pace. Suddenly came a call of his name in his ear, and he threw up one arm in self-defence.

"Uncle Anthony, don't you know me?"

"Eh? I do; to be sure I do," he answered, peering dimly upon Rhoda: "I'm always meeting one of you."

"I've been down in the City, trying to find you all day, uncle. I meet you—I might have missed! It is direction from heaven, for I prayed."

Anthony muttered, "I'm out for a holiday."

"This"—Rhoda pointed to a house—"is where I am lodging."

"Oh!" said Anthony; "and how's your family?"

Rhoda perceived that he was rather distraught. After great persuasion, she got him to go upstairs with her.

“Only for two seconds,” he stipulated. “I can’t sit.”

“You will have a cup of tea with me, uncle?”

“No; I don’t think I’m equal to tea.”

“Not with Rhoda?”

“It’s a name in Scripture,” said Anthony, and he drew nearer to her. “You’re comfortable and dark here, my dear. How did you come here? What’s happened? You won’t surprise me.”

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“I’m only stopping for a day or two in London, uncle.”

“Ah! a wicked place; that it is. No wickeder than other places, I’ll be bound. Well; I must be trotting. I can’t sit, I tell you. You’re as dark here as a gaol.”

“Let me ring for candles, uncle.”

“No; I’m going.”

She tried to touch him, to draw him to a chair. The agile old man bounded away from her, and she had to pacify him submissively before he would consent to be seated. The tea-service was brought, and Rhoda made tea, and filled a cup for him. Anthony began to enjoy the repose of the room. But it made the money-bags’ alien to him, and serpents in his bosom. Fretting—on his chair, he cried: “Well! well! what’s to talk about? We can’t drink tea and not talk!”

Rhoda deliberated, and then said: “Uncle, I think you have always loved me.”

It seemed to him a merit that he should have loved her. He caught at the idea.

“So I have, Rhoda, my dear; I have. I do.”

“You do love me, dear uncle!”

“Now I come to think of it, Rhoda—my Dody, I don’t think ever I’ve loved anybody else. Never loved e’er a young woman in my life. As a young man.”

“Tell me, uncle; are you not very rich?”

“No, I ain’t; not ‘very’; not at all.”

“You must not tell untruths, uncle.”

“I don’t,” said Anthony; only, too doggedly to instil conviction.

“I have always felt, uncle, that you love money too much. What is the value of money, except to give comfort, and help you to be a blessing to others in their trouble? Does not God lend it you for that purpose? It is most true! And if you make a store of it, it will only be unhappiness to yourself. Uncle, you love me. I am in great trouble for money.”

Anthony made a long arm over the projection of his coat, and clasped it securely; sullenly refusing to answer. “Dear uncle; hear me out. I come to you, because I know you are rich. I was on my way to your lodgings when we met; we were thrown together. You have more money than you know what to do with. I am a beggar to you for money. I have never asked before; I never shall ask again. Now I pray for your help. My life,

and the life dearer to me than any other, depend on you. Will you help me, Uncle Anthony? Yes!"

"No!" Anthony shouted.

"Yes! yes!"

"Yes, if I can. No, if I can't. And 'can't' it is. So, it's 'No.'"

Rhoda's bosom sank, but only as a wave in the sea-like energy of her spirit.

"Uncle, you must."

Anthony was restrained from jumping up and running away forthwith by the peace which was in the room, and the dread of being solitary after he had tasted of companionship.

"You have money, uncle. You are rich. You must help me. Don't you ever think what it is to be an old man, and no one to love you and be grateful to you? Why do you cross your arms so close?"

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Anthony denied that he crossed his arms closely.

Rhoda pointed to his arms in evidence; and he snarled out: “There, now; ’cause I’m supposed to have saved a trifle, I ain’t to sit as I like. It’s downright too bad! It’s shocking!”

But, seeing that he did not uncross his arms, and remained bunched up defiantly, Rhoda silently observed him. She felt that money was in the room.

“Don’t let it be a curse to you,” she said. And her voice was hoarse with agitation.

“What?” Anthony asked. “What’s a curse?”

“That.”

Did she know? Had she guessed? Her finger was laid in a line at the bags. Had she smelt the gold?

“It will be a curse to you, uncle. Death is coming. What’s money then? Uncle, uncross your arms. You are afraid; you dare not. You carry it about; you have no confidence anywhere. It eats your heart. Look at me. I have nothing to conceal. Can you imitate me, and throw your hands out —so? Why, uncle, will you let me be ashamed of you? You have the money there.

“You cannot deny it. Me crying to you for help! What have we talked together?—that we would sit in a country house, and I was to look to the flower-beds, and always have dishes of green peas for you-plenty, in June; and you were to let the village boys know what a tongue you have, if they made a clatter of their sticks along the garden-rails; and you were to drink your tea, looking on a green and the sunset. Uncle! Poor old, good old soul! You mean kindly. You must be kind. A day will make it too late. You have the money there. You get older and older every minute with trying to refuse me. You know that I can make you happy. I have the power, and I have the will. Help me, I say, in my great trouble. That money is a burden. You are forced to carry it about, for fear. You look guilty as you go running in the streets, because you fear everybody. Do good with it. Let it be money with a blessing on it! It will save us from horrid misery! from death! from torture and death! Think, uncle! look, uncle! You with the money—me wanting it. I pray to heaven, and I meet you, and you have it. Will you say that you refuse to give it, when I see—when I show you, you are led to meet me and help me? Open;—put down that arm.”

Against this storm of mingled supplication and shadowy menace, Anthony held out with all outward firmness until, when bidding him to put down his arm, she touched the arm commandingly, and it fell paralyzed.

Rhoda's eyes were not beautiful as they fixed on the object of her quest. In this they were of the character of her mission. She was dealing with an evil thing, and had chosen to act according to her light, and by the counsel of her combative and forceful temper. At each step new difficulties had to be encountered by fresh contrivances; and money now— money alone had become the specific for present use. There was a limitation of her spiritual vision to aught save to money; and the money being bared to her eyes, a frightful gleam of eagerness shot from them. Her hands met Anthony's in a common grasp of the money-bags.

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“It’s not mine!” Anthony cried, in desperation.

“Whose money is it?” said Rhoda, and caught up her hands as from fire.

“My Lord!” Anthony moaned, “if you don’t speak like a Court o’ Justice. Hear yourself!”

“Is the money yours, uncle?”

“It—is,” and “isn’t” hung in the balance.

“It is not?” Rhoda dressed the question for him in the terror of contemptuous horror.

“It is. I—of course it is; how could it help being mine? My money? Yes. What sort o’ thing’s that to ask—whether what I’ve got’s mine or yours, or somebody else’s? Ha!”

“And you say you are not rich, uncle?”

A charming congratulatory smile was addressed to him, and a shake of the head of tender reproach irresistible to his vanity.

“Rich! with a lot o’ calls on me; everybody wantin’ to borrow—I’m rich! And now you coming to me! You women can’t bring a guess to bear upon the right nature o’ money.”

“Uncle, you will decide to help me, I know.”

She said it with a staggering assurance of manner.

“How do you know?” cried Anthony.

“Why do you carry so much money about with you in bags, uncle?”

“Hear it, my dear.” He simulated miser’s joy.

“Ain’t that music? Talk of operas! Hear that; don’t it talk? don’t it chink? don’t it sing?” He groaned “Oh, Lord!” and fell back.

This transition from a state of intensest rapture to the depths of pain alarmed her.

“Nothing; it’s nothing.” Anthony anticipated her inquiries. “They bags is so heavy.”

“Then why do you carry them about?”

“Perhaps it’s heart disease,” said Anthony, and grinned, for he knew the soundness of his health.

“You are very pale, uncle.”

“Eh? you don’t say that?”

“You are awfully white, dear uncle.”

“I’ll look in the glass,” said Anthony. “No, I won’t.” He sank back in his chair. “Rhoda, we’re all sinners, ain’t we? All—every man and woman of us, and baby, too. That’s a comfort; yes, it is a comfort. It’s a tremendous comfort—shuts mouths. I know what you’re going to say—some bigger sinners than others. If they’re sorry for it, though, what then? They can repent, can’t they?”

“They must undo any harm they may have done. Sinners are not to repent only in words, uncle.”

“I’ve been feeling lately,” he murmured.

Rhoda expected a miser’s confession.

“I’ve been feeling, the last two or three days,” he resumed.

“What, uncle?”

“Sort of taste of a tremendous nice lemon in my mouth, my dear, and liked it, till all of a sudden I swallowed it whole—such a gulp! I felt it just now. I’m all right.”

“No, uncle,” said Rhoda: “you are not all right: this money makes you miserable. It does; I can see that it does. Now, put those bags in my hands. For a minute, try; it will do you good. Attend to me; it will. Or, let me have them. They are poison to you. You don’t want them.”

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“I don’t,” cried Anthony. “Upon my soul, I don’t. I don’t want ’em. I’d give—it is true, my dear, I don’t want ’em. They’re poison.”

“They’re poison to you,” said Rhoda; “they’re health, they’re life to me. I said, ’My uncle Anthony will help me. He is not—I know his heart—he is not a miser.’ Are you a miser, uncle?”

Her hand was on one of his bags. It was strenuously withheld: but while she continued speaking, reiterating the word “miser,” the hold relaxed. She caught the heavy bag away, startled by its weight.

He perceived the effect produced on her, and cried; “Aha! and I’ve been carrying two of ’em—two!”

Rhoda panted in her excitement.

“Now, give it up,” said he. She returned it. He got it against his breast joylessly, and then bade her to try the weight of the two. She did try them, and Anthony doated on the wonder of her face.

“Uncle, see what riches do! You fear everybody—you think there is no secure place—-you have more? Do you carry about all your money?”

“No,” he chuckled at her astonishment. “I’ve...Yes. I’ve got more of my own.” Her widened eyes intoxicated him. “More. I’ve saved. I’ve put by. Say, I’m an old sinner. What’d th’ old farmer say now? Do you love your uncle Tony? ‘Old Ant,’ they call me down at—” “The Bank,” he was on the point of uttering; but the vision of the Bank lay terrific in his recollection, and, summoned at last, would not be wiped away. The unbearable picture swam blinking through accumulating clouds; remote and minute as the chief scene of our infancy, but commanding him with the present touch of a mighty arm thrown out. “I’m honest,” he cried. “I always have been honest. I’m known to be honest. I want no man’s money. I’ve got money of my own. I hate sin. I hate sinners. I’m an honest man. Ask them, down at—Rhoda, my dear! I say, don’t you hear me? Rhoda, you think I’ve a turn for misering. It’s a beastly mistake: poor savings, and such a trouble to keep honest when you’re poor; and I’ve done it for years, spite o’ temptation ’t ‘d send lots o’ men to the hulks. Safe into my hand, safe out o’ my hands! Slip once, and there ain’t mercy in men. And you say, ’I had a whirl of my head, and went round, and didn’t know where I was for a minute, and forgot the place I’d to go to, and come away to think in a quiet part.’...” He stopped abruptly in his ravings. “You give me the money, Rhoda!”

She handed him the money-bags.

He seized them, and dashed them to the ground with the force of madness. Kneeling, he drew out his penknife, and slit the sides of the bags, and held them aloft, and let the gold pour out in torrents, insufferable to the sight; and uttering laughter that clamoured fierily in her ears for long minutes afterwards, the old man brandished the empty bags, and sprang out of the room.

She sat dismayed in the centre of a heap of gold.

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CHAPTER XLI

On the Monday evening, Master Gammon was at the station with the cart. Robert and Rhoda were a train later, but the old man seemed to be unaware of any delay, and mildly staring, received their apologies, and nodded. They asked him more than once whether all was well at the Farm; to which he replied that all was quite well, and that he was never otherwise. About half-an-hour after, on the road, a gradual dumb chuckle overcame his lower features. He flicked the horse dubitatively, and turned his head, first to Robert, next to Rhoda; and then he chuckled aloud:

“The last o’ they mel’ns rotted yest’day afternoon!”

“Did they?” said Robert. “You’ll have to get fresh seed, that’s all.”

Master Gammon merely showed his spirit to be negative.

“You’ve been playing the fool with the sheep,” Robert accused him.

It hit the old man in a very tender part.

“I play the fool wi’ ne’er a sheep alive, Mr. Robert. Animals likes their ’customed food, and don’t like no other. I never changes my food, nor’d e’er a sheep, nor’d a cow, nor’d a bullock, if animals was masters. I’d as lief give a sheep beer, as offer him, free-handed—of my own will, that’s to say—a mel’n. They rots.”

Robert smiled, though he was angry. The delicious unvexed country-talk soothed Rhoda, and she looked fondly on the old man, believing that he could not talk on in his sedate way, if all were not well at home.

The hills of the beacon-ridge beyond her home, and the line of stunted firs, which she had named “the old bent beggarmen,” were visible in the twilight. Her eyes flew thoughtfully far over them, with the feeling that they had long known what would come to her and to those dear to her, and the intense hope that they knew no more, inasmuch as they bounded her sight.

“If the sheep thrive,” she ventured to remark, so that the comforting old themes might be kept up.

“That’s the particular ‘if!’” said Robert, signifying something that had to be leaped over.

Master Gammon performed the feat with agility.

“Sheep never was heartier,” he pronounced emphatically.

“Lots of applications for melon-seed, Gammon?”

To this the veteran’s tardy answer was: “More fools ’n one about, I reckon”; and Robert allowed him the victory implied by silence.

“And there’s no news in Wrexby? none at all?” said Rhoda.

A direct question inevitably plunged Master Gammon so deep amid the soundings of his reflectiveness, that it was the surest way of precluding a response from him; but on this occasion his honest deliberation bore fruit.

“Squire Blancove, he’s dead.”

The name caused Rhoda to shudder.

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“Found dead in ’s bed, Sat’day morning,” Master Gammon added, and, warmed upon the subject, went on: “He’s that stiff, folks say, that stiff he is, he’ll have to get into a rounded coffin: he’s just like half a hoop. He was all of a heap, like. Had a fight with ‘s bolster, and got th’ wust of it. But, be ’t the seizure, or be ’t gout in ’s belly, he’s gone clean dead. And he wunt buy th’ Farm, nether. Shutters is all shut up at the Hall. He’ll go burying about Wednesday. Men that drinks don’t keep.”

Rhoda struck at her brain to think in what way this death could work and show like a punishment of the heavens upon that one wrong-doer; but it was not manifest as a flame of wrath, and she laid herself open to the peace of the fields and the hedgeways stepping by. The farm-house came in sight, and friendly old Adam and Eve turning from the moon. She heard the sound of water. Every sign of peace was around the farm. The cows had been milked long since; the geese were quiet. There was nothing but the white board above the garden-gate to speak of the history lying in her heart.

They found the farmer sitting alone, shading his forehead. Rhoda kissed his cheeks and whispered for tidings of Dahlia.

“Go up to her,” the farmer said.

Rhoda grew very chill. She went upstairs with apprehensive feet, and recognizing Mrs. Sumfit outside the door of Dahlia’s room, embraced her, and heard her say that Dahlia had turned the key, and had been crying from mornings to nights. “It can’t last,” Mrs. Sumfit sobbed: “lonesome hysterics, they’s death to come. She’s falling into the trance. I’ll go, for the sight o’ me shocks her.”

Rhoda knocked, waited patiently till her persistent repetition of her name gained her admission. She beheld her sister indeed, but not the broken Dahlia from whom she had parted. Dahlia was hard to her caress, and crying, “Has he come?” stood at bay, white-eyed, and looking like a thing strung with wires.

“No, dearest; he will not trouble you. Have no fear.”

“Are you full of deceit?” said Dahlia, stamping her foot.

“I hope not, my sister.”

Dahlia let fall a long quivering breath. She went to her bed, upon which her mother’s Bible was lying, and taking it in her two hands, held it under Rhoda’s lips.

“Swear upon that?”

“What am I to swear to, dearest?”

“Swear that he is not in the house.”

“He is not, my own sister; believe me. It is no deceit. He is not. He will not trouble you. See; I kiss the Book, and swear to you, my beloved! I speak truth. Come to me, dear.” Rhoda put her arms up entreatingly, but Dahlia stepped back.

“You are not deceitful? You are not cold? You are not inhuman? Inhuman! You are not? You are not? Oh, my God! Look at her!”

The toneless voice was as bitter for Rhoda to hear as the accusations. She replied, with a poor smile: “I am only not deceitful. Come, and see. You will not be disturbed.”

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“What am I tied to?” Dahlia struggled feebly as against a weight of chains. “Oh! what am I tied to? It’s on me, tight like teeth. I can’t escape. I can’t breathe for it. I was like a stone when he asked me— marry him!—loved me! Some one preached—my duty! I am lost, I am lost! Why? you girl!—why?—What did you do? Why did you take my hand when I was asleep and hurry me so fast? What have I done to you? Why did you push me along?—I couldn’t see where. I heard the Church babble. For you—inhuman! inhuman! What have I done to you? What have you to do with punishing sin? It’s not sin. Let me be sinful, then. I am. I am sinful. Hear me. I love him; I love my lover, and,” she screamed out, “he loves me!”

Rhoda now thought her mad.

She looked once at the rigid figure of her transformed sister, and sitting down, covered her eyes and wept.

To Dahlia, the tears were at first an acrid joy; but being weak, she fell to the bed, and leaned against it, forgetting her frenzy for a time.

“You deceived me,” she murmured; and again, “You deceived me.” Rhoda did not answer. In trying to understand why her sister should imagine it, she began to know that she had in truth deceived Dahlia. The temptation to drive a frail human creature to do the thing which was right, had led her to speak falsely for a good purpose. Was it not righteously executed? Away from the tragic figure in the room, she might have thought so, but the horror in the eyes and voice of this awakened Sacrifice, struck away the support of theoretic justification. Great pity for the poor enmeshed life, helpless there, and in a woman’s worst peril,—looking either to madness, or to death, for an escape—-drowned her reason in a heavy cloud of tears. Long on toward the stroke of the hour, Dahlia heard her weep, and she murmured on, “You deceived me;” but it was no more to reproach; rather, it was an exculpation of her reproaches. “You did deceive me, Rhoda.” Rhoda half lifted her head; the slight tone of a change to tenderness swelled the gulfs of pity, and she wept aloud. Dahlia untwisted her feet, and staggered up to her, fell upon her shoulder, and called her, “My love!—good sister!” For a great mute space they clung together. Their lips met and they kissed convulsively. But when Dahlia had close view of Rhoda’s face, she drew back, saying in an under-breath,—

“Don’t cry. I see my misery when you cry.”

Rhoda promised that she would check her tears, and they sat quietly, side by side, hand in hand. Mrs. Sumfit, outside, had to be dismissed twice with her fresh brews of supplicating tea and toast, and the cakes which, when eaten warm with good country butter and a sprinkle of salt, reanimate (as she did her utmost to assure the sisters through the closed door) humanity’s distressed spirit. At times their hands interchanged a fervent pressure, their eyes were drawn to an equal gaze.

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In the middle of the night Dahlia said: “I found a letter from Edward when I came here.”

“Written—Oh, base man that he is!” Rhoda could not control the impulse to cry it out.

“Written before,” said Dahlia, divining her at once. “I read it; did not cry. I have no tears. Will you see it? It is very short-enough; it said enough, and written before—” She crumpled her fingers in Rhoda’s; Rhoda, to please her, saying “Yes,” she went to the pillow of the bed, and drew the letter from underneath.

“I know every word,” she said; “I should die if I repeated it. ’My wife before heaven,’ it begins. So, I was his wife. I must have broken his heart—broken my husband’s.” Dahlia cast a fearful eye about her; her eyelids fluttered as from a savage sudden blow. Hardening her mouth to utter defiant spite: “My lover’s,” she cried. “He is. If he loves me and I love him, he is my lover, my lover, my lover! Nothing shall stop me from saying it—lover! and there is none to claim me but he. Oh, loathsome! What a serpent it is I’ve got round me! And you tell me God put it. Do you? Answer that; for I want to know, and I don’t know where I am. I am lost! I am lost! I want to get to my lover. Tell me, Rhoda, you would curse me if I did. And listen to me. Let him open his arms to me, I go; I follow him as far as my feet will bear me. I would go if it lightened from heaven. If I saw up there the warning, ’You shall not!’ I would go. But, look on me!” she smote contempt upon her bosom. “He would not call to such a thing as me. Me, now? My skin is like a toad’s to him. I’ve become like something in the dust. I could hiss like adders. I am quite impenitent. I pray by my bedside, my head on my Bible, but I only say, ’Yes, yes; that’s done; that’s deserved, if there’s no mercy.’ Oh, if there is no mercy, that’s deserved! I say so now. But this is what I say, Rhoda (I see nothing but blackness when I pray), and I say, ‘Permit no worse!’ I say, ’Permit no worse, or take the consequences.’ He calls me his wife. I am his wife. And if—” Dahlia fell to speechless panting; her mouth was open; she made motion with her hands; horror, as of a blasphemy struggling to her lips, kept her dumb, but the prompting passion was indomitable.... “Read it,” said her struggling voice; and Rhoda bent over the letter, reading and losing thought of each sentence as it passed. To Dahlia, the vital words were visible like evanescent blue gravelights. She saw them rolling through her sister’s mind; and just upon the conclusion, she gave out, as in a chaunt: “And I who have sinned against my innocent darling, will ask her to pray with me that our future may be one, so that may make good to her what she has suffered, and to the God whom we worship, the offence I have committed.”

Rhoda looked up at the pale penetrating eyes.

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“Read. Have you read to the last?” said Dahlia. “Speak it. Let me hear you. He writes it.... Yes? you will not? ‘Husband,’ he says,” and then she took up the sentences of the letter backwards to the beginning, pausing upon each one with a short moan, and smiting her bosom. “I found it here, Rhoda. I found his letter here when I came.. I came a dead thing, and it made me spring up alive. Oh, what bliss to be dead! I’ve felt nothing...nothing, for months.” She flung herself on the bed, thrusting her handkerchief to her mouth to deaden the outcry. “I’m punished. I’m punished, because I did not trust to my darling. No, not for one year! Is it that since we parted? I am an impatient creature, and he does not reproach me. I tormented my own, my love, my dear, and he thought I—I was tired of our life together. No; he does not accuse me,” Dahlia replied to her sister’s unspoken feeling, with the shrewd divination which is passion’s breathing space. “He accuses himself. He says it—utters it—speaks it ‘I sold my beloved.’ There is no guile in him. Oh, be just to us, Rhoda! Dearest,” she came to Rhoda’s side, “you did deceive me, did you not? You are a deceiver, my love?”

Rhoda trembled, and raising her eyelids, answered, “Yes.”

“You saw him in the street that morning?”

Dahlia smiled a glittering tenderness too evidently deceitful in part, but quite subduing.

“You saw him, my Rhoda, and he said he was true to me, and sorrowful; and you told him, dear one, that I had no heart for him, and wished to go to hell—did you not, gbod Rhoda? Forgive me; I mean ‘good;’ my true, good Rhoda. Yes, you hate sin; it is dreadful; but you should never speak falsely to sinners, for that does not teach them to repent. Mind you never lie again. Look at me. I am chained, and I have no repentance in me. See me. I am nearer it...the other—sin, I mean. If that man comes...will he?”

“No—no!” Rhoda cried.

“If that man comes—”

“He will not come!”

“He cast me off at the church door, and said he had been cheated. Money! Oh, Edward!”

Dahlia drooped her head.

“He will keep away. You are safe,” said Rhoda.

“Because, if no help comes, I am lost—I am lost for ever!”

“But help will come. I mean peace will come. We will read; we will work in the garden. You have lifted poor father up, my dear.”

“Ah! that old man!” Dahlia sighed.

“He is our father.”

“Yes, poor old man!” and Dahlia whispered: “I have no pity for him. If I am dragged away, I’m afraid I shall curse him. He seems a stony old man. I don’t understand fathers. He would make me go away. He talks the Scriptures when he is excited. I’m afraid he would shut my Bible for me. Those old men know nothing of the hearts of women. Now, darling, go to your room.”

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Rhoda begged earnestly for permission to stay with her, but Dahlia said:
“My nights are fevers. I can’t have arms about me.”

They shook hands when they separated, not kissing.

CHAPTER XLII

Three days passed quietly at the Farm, and each morning Dahlia came down to breakfast, and sat with the family at their meals; pale, with the mournful rim about her eyelids, but a patient figure. No questions were asked. The house was guarded from visitors, and on the surface the home was peaceful. On the Wednesday Squire Blancove was buried, when Master Gammon, who seldom claimed a holiday or specified an enjoyment of which he would desire to partake, asked leave to be spared for a couple of hours, that he might attend the ceremonious interment of one to whom a sort of vagrant human sentiment of clanship had made him look up, as to the chief gentleman of the district, and therefore one having claims on his respect. A burial had great interest for the old man.

“I’ll be home for dinner; it’ll gi’e me an appetite,” Master Gammon said solemnly, and he marched away in his serious Sunday hat and careful coat, blither than usual.

After his departure, Mrs. Sumfit sat and discoursed on deaths and burials, the certain end of all: at least, she corrected herself, the deaths were. The burials were not so certain. Consequently, we might take the burials, as they were a favour, to be a blessing, except in the event of persons being buried alive. She tried to make her hearers understand that the idea of this calamity had always seemed intolerable to her, and told of numerous cases which, the coffin having been opened, showed by the convulsed aspect of the corpse, or by spots of blood upon the shroud, that the poor creature had wakened up forlorn, “and not a kick allowed to him, my dears.”

“It happens to women, too, does it not, mother?” said Dahlia.

“They’re most subject to trances, my sweet. From always imitatin’ they imitates their deaths at last; and, oh!” Mrs. Sumfit was taken with nervous chokings of alarm at the thought. “Alone—all dark! and hard wood upon your chest, your elbows, your nose, your toes, and you under heaps o’ gravel! Not a breath for you, though you snap and catch for one—worse than a fish on land.”

“It’s over very soon, mother,” said Dahlia.

“The coldness of you young women! Yes; but it’s the time—you feeling, trying for air; it’s the horrid ‘Oh, dear me!’ You set your mind on it!”

“I do,” said Dahlia. “You see coffin-nails instead of stars. You’d give the world to turn upon one side. You can’t think. You can only hate those who put you there. You see them taking tea, saying prayers, sleeping in bed, putting on bonnets, walking to church, kneading dough, eating—all at once, like the firing of a gun. They’re in one world; you’re in another.”

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“Why, my goodness, one’d say she’d gone through it herself,” ejaculated Mrs. Sumfit, terrified.

Dahlia sent her eyes at Rhoda.

“I must go and see that poor man covered.” Mrs. Sumfit succumbed to a fit of resolution much under the pretence that it had long been forming.

“Well, and mother,” said Dahlia, checking her, “promise me. Put a feather on my mouth; put a glass to my face, before you let them carry me out. Will you? Rhoda promises. I have asked her.”

“Oh! the ideas of this girl!” Mrs. Sumfit burst out. “And looking so, as she says it. My love, you didn’t mean to die?”

Dahlia soothed her, and sent her off.

“I am buried alive!” she said. “I feel it all—the stifling! the hopeless cramp! Let us go and garden. Rhoda, have you got laudanum in the house?”

Rhoda shook her head, too sick at heart to speak. They went into the garden, which was Dahlia’s healthfullest place. It seemed to her that her dead mother talked to her there. That was not a figure of speech, when she said she felt buried alive. She was in the state of sensational delusion. There were times when she watched her own power of motion curiously: curiously stretched out her hands, and touched things, and moved them. The sight was convincing, but the shudder came again. In a frame less robust the brain would have given way. It was the very soundness of the brain which, when her blood was a simple tide of life in her veins, and no vital force, had condemned her to see the wisdom and the righteousness of the act of sacrifice committed by her, and had urged her even up to the altar. Then the sudden throwing off of the mask by that man to whom she had bound herself, and the reading of Edward’s letter of penitence and love, thwarted reason, but without blinding or unsettling it. Passion grew dominant; yet against such deadly matters on all sides had passion to strive, that, under a darkened sky, visibly chained, bound down, and hopeless, she felt between-whiles veritably that she was a living body buried. Her senses had become semi-lunatic.

She talked reasonably; and Rhoda, hearing her question and answer at meal-times like a sane woman, was in doubt whether her sister wilfully simulated a partial insanity when they were alone together. Now, in the garden, Dahlia said: “All those flowers, my dear, have roots in mother and me. She can’t feel them, for her soul’s in heaven. But mine is down there. The pain is the trying to get your soul loose. It’s the edge of a knife that won’t cut through. Do you know that?”

Rhoda said, as acquiescingly as she could, “Yes.”

“Do you?” Dahlia whispered. “It’s what they call the ‘agony.’ Only, to go through it in the dark, when you are all alone! boarded round! you will never know that. And there’s an angel brings me one of mother’s roses, and I smell it. I see fields of snow; and it’s warm there, and no labour for breath. I see great beds of flowers; I pass them like a breeze. I’m shot, and knock on the ground, and they bury me for dead again. Indeed, dearest, it’s true.”

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She meant, true as regarded her sensations. Rhoda could barely give a smile for response; and Dahlia's intelligence being supernaturally active, she read her sister's doubt, and cried out,—

"Then let me talk of him!"

It was the fiery sequence to her foregone speech, signifying that if her passion had liberty to express itself, she could clear understandings. But even a moment's free wing to passion renewed the blinding terror within her. Rhoda steadied her along the walks, praying for the time to come when her friends, the rector and his wife, might help in the task of comforting this poor sister. Detestation of the idea of love made her sympathy almost deficient, and when there was no active work to do in aid, she was nearly valueless, knowing that she also stood guilty of a wrong.

The day was very soft and still. The flowers gave light for light. They heard through the noise of the mill-water the funeral bell sound. It sank in Rhoda like the preaching of an end that was promise of a beginning, and girdled a distancing land of trouble. The breeze that blew seemed mercy. To live here in forgetfulness with Dahlia was the limit of her desires. Perhaps, if Robert worked among them, she would gratefully give him her hand. That is, if he said not a word of love.

Master Gammon and Mrs. Sumfit were punctual in their return near the dinnerhour; and the business of releasing the dumplings and potatoes, and spreading out the cold meat and lettuces, restrained for some period the narrative of proceedings at the funeral. Chief among the incidents was, that Mrs. Sumfit had really seen, and only wanted, by corroboration of Master Gammon, to be sure she had positively seen, Anthony Hackbut on the skirts of the funeral procession. Master Gammon, however, was no supporter of conjecture. What he had thought he had thought; but that was neither here nor there. He would swear to nothing that he had not touched;—eyes deceived;—he was never a guesser. He left Mrs. Sumfit to pledge herself in perturbation of spirit to an oath that her eyes had seen Anthony Hackbut; and more, which was, that after the close of the funeral service, the young squire had caught sight of Anthony crouching in a corner of the churchyard, and had sent a man to him, and they had disappeared together. Mrs. Sumfit was heartily laughed at and rallied both by Robert and the farmer. "Tony at a funeral! and train expenses!" the farmer interjected. "D'ye think, mother, Tony'd come to Wrexby churchyard 'fore he come Queen Anne's Farm? And where's he now, mayhap?"

Mrs. Sumfit appealed in despair to Master Gammon, with entreaties, and a ready dumpling.

"There, Mas' Gammon; and why you sh'd play at 'do believe' and at 'don't believe,' after that awesome scene, the solem'est of life's, when you did declare to me, sayin', it was a stride for boots out o' London this morning. Your words, Mas' Gammon! and 'boots'-=it's

true, if by that alone! For, ‘boots,’ I says to myself—he thinks by ‘boots,’ there being a cord’er in his family on the mother’s side; which you yourself told to me, as you did, Mas’ Gammon, and now holds back, you did, like a bad horse.”

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“Hey! does Gammon jib?” said the farmer, with the ghost of old laughter twinkling in his eyes.

“He told me this tale,” Mrs. Sumfit continued, daring her irresponsive enemy to contradict her, with a threatening gaze. “He told me this tale, he did; and my belief’s, his game ’s, he gets me into a corner—there to be laughed at! Mas’ Gammon, if you’re not a sly old man, you said, you did, he was drownded; your mother’s brother’s wife’s brother; and he had a brother, and what he was to you—that brother—” Mrs. Sumfit smote her hands—“Oh, my goodness, my poor head! but you shan’t slip away, Mas’ Gammon; no, try you ever so much. Drownded he was, and eight days in the sea, which you told me over a warm mug of ale by the fire years back. And I do believe them dumplings makes ye obstinate; for worse you get, and that fond of ’em, I sh’ll soon not have enough in our biggest pot. Yes, you said he was eight days in the sea, and as for face, you said, poor thing! he was like a rag of towel dipped in starch, was your own words, and all his likeness wiped out; and Joe, the other brother, a cord’er—bootmaker, you call ’em—looked down him, as he was stretched out on the shore of the sea, all along, and didn’t know him till he come to the boots, and he says, ‘It’s Abner;’ for there was his boots to know him by. Now, will you deny, Mas’ Gammon, you said, Mr. Hackbut’s boots, and a long stride it was for ’em from London? And I won’t be laughed at through arts of any sly old man!”

The circumstantial charge made no impression on Master Gammon, who was heard to mumble, as from the inmost recesses of tight-packed dumpling; but he left the vindication of his case to the farmer’s laughter. The mention of her uncle had started a growing agitation in Rhoda, to whom the indication of his eccentric behaviour was a stronger confirmation of his visit to the neighbourhood. And wherefore had he journeyed down? Had he come to haunt her on account of the money he had poured into her lap? Rhoda knew in a moment that she was near a great trial of her strength and truth. She had more than once, I cannot tell you how distantly, conceived that the money had been money upon which the mildest word for “stolen” should be put to express the feeling she had got about it, after she had parted with the bulk of it to the man Sedgett. Not “stolen,” not “appropriated,” but money that had perhaps been entrusted, and of which Anthony had forgotten the rightful ownership. This idea of hers had burned with no intolerable fire; but, under a weight of all discountenancing appearances, feeble though it was, it had distressed her. The dealing with money, and the necessity for it, had given Rhoda a better comprehension of its nature and value. She had taught herself to think that her suspicion sprang from her uncle’s wild demeanour, and the scene of the gold pieces scattered on the floor, as if a heart had burst at her feet.

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No sooner did she hear that Anthony had been, by supposition, seen, than the little light of secret dread flamed a panic through her veins. She left the table before Master Gammon had finished, and went out of the house to look about for her uncle. He was nowhere in the fields, nor in the graveyard. She walked over the neighbourhood desolately, until her quickened apprehension was extinguished, and she returned home relieved, thinking it folly to have imagined her uncle was other than a man of hoarded wealth, and that he was here. But, in the interval, she had experienced emotions which warned her of a struggle to come. Who would be friendly to her, and an arm of might? The thought of the storm she had sown upon all sides made her tremble foolishly. When she placed her hand in Robert's, she gave his fingers a confiding pressure, and all but dropped her head upon his bosom, so sick she was with weakness. It would have been a deceit toward him, and that restrained her; perhaps, yet more, she was restrained by the gloomy prospect of having to reply to any words of love, without an idea of what to say, and with a loathing of caresses. She saw herself condemned to stand alone, and at a season when she was not strengthened by pure self-support.

Rhoda had not surrendered the stern belief that she had done well by forcing Dahlia's hand to the marriage, though it had resulted evilly. In reflecting on it, she had still a feeling of the harsh joy peculiar to those who have exercised command with a conscious righteousness upon wilful, sinful, and erring spirits, and have thwarted the wrongdoer. She could only admit that there was sadness in the issue; hitherto, at least, nothing worse than sad disappointment. The man who was her sister's husband could no longer complain that he had been the victim of an imposition. She had bought his promise that he would leave the country, and she had rescued the honour of the family by paying him. At what cost? She asked herself that now, and then her self-support became uneven. Could her uncle have parted with the great sum—have shed it upon her, merely beneficently, and because he loved her? Was it possible that he had the habit of carrying his own riches through the streets of London? She had to silence all questions imperiously, recalling exactly her ideas of him, and the value of money in the moment when money was an object of hunger—when she had seized it like a wolf, and its value was quite unknown, unguessed at.

Rhoda threw up her window before she slept, that she might breathe the cool night air; and, as she leaned out, she heard steps moving away, and knew them to be Robert's, in whom that pressure of her hand had cruelly resuscitated his longing for her. She drew back, wondering at the idleness of men—slaves while they want a woman's love, savages when they have won it. She tried to pity him, but she had not an emotion to spare, save perhaps one of dull exultation, that she, alone of women, was free from that wretched mess called love; and upon it she slept.

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It was between the breakfast and dinner hours, at the farm, next day, when the young squire, accompanied by Anthony Hackbut, met farmer Fleming in the lane bordering one of the outermost fields of wheat. Anthony gave little more than a blunt nod to his relative, and slouched on, leaving the farmer in amazement, while the young squire stopped him to speak with him. Anthony made his way on to the house. Shortly after, he was seen passing through the gates of the garden, accompanied by Rhoda. At the dinner-hour, Robert was taken aside by the farmer. Neither Rhoda nor Anthony presented themselves. They did not appear till nightfall. When Anthony came into the room, he took no greetings and gave none. He sat down on the first chair by the door, shaking his head, with vacant eyes. Rhoda took off her bonnet, and sat as strangely silent. In vain Mrs. Sumfit asked her; “Shall it be tea, dear, and a little cold meat?” The two dumb figures were separately interrogated, but they had no answer.

“Come! brother Tony?” the farmer tried to rally him.

Dahlia was knitting some article of feminine gear. Robert stood by the musk-pots at the window, looking at Rhoda fixedly. Of this gaze she became conscious, and glanced from him to the clock.

“It’s late,” she said, rising.

“But you’re empty, my dear. And to think o’ going to bed without a dinner, or your tea, and no supper! You’ll never say prayers, if you do,” said Mrs. Sumfit.

The remark engendered a notion in the farmer’s head, that Anthony promised to be particularly prayerless.

“You’ve been and spent a night at the young squire’s, I hear, brother Tony. All right and well. No complaints on my part, I do assure ye. If you’re mixed up with that family, I won’t bring it in you’re anyways mixed up with this family; not so as to clash, do you see. Only, man, now you are here, a word’d be civil, if you don’t want a doctor.”

“I was right,” murmured Mrs. Sumfit. “At the funeral, he was; and Lord be thanked! I thought my eyes was failin’. Mas’ Gammon, you’d ha’ lost no character by sidin’ wi’ me.”

“Here’s Dahlia, too,” said the farmer. “Brother Tony, don’t you see her? She’s beginning to be recognizable, if her hair’d grow a bit faster. She’s...well, there she is.”

A quavering, tiny voice, that came from Anthony, said: “How d’ ye do—how d’ ye do;” sounding like the first effort of a fife. But Anthony did not cast eye on Dahlia.

“Will you eat, man?—will you smoke a pipe?—won’t you talk a word?—will you go to bed?”

These several questions, coming between pauses, elicited nothing from the staring oldman.

“Is there a matter wrong at the Bank?” the farmer called out, and Anthony jumped in a heap.

“Eh?” persisted the farmer.

Rhoda interposed: “Uncle is tired; he is unwell. Tomorrow he will talk to you.”

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“No, but is there anything wrong up there, though?” the farmer asked with eager curiosity, and a fresh smile at the thought that those Banks and city folk were mortal, and could upset, notwithstanding their crashing wheels. “Brother Tony, you speak out; has anybody been and broke? Never mind a blow, so long, o’ course, as they haven’t swallowed your money. How is it? Why, I never saw such a sight as you. You come down from London; you play hide and seek about your relation’s house; and here, when you do condescend to step in—eh? how is it? You ain’t, I hope, ruined, Tony, are ye?”

Rhoda stood over her uncle to conceal him.

“He shall not speak till he has had some rest. And yes, mother, he shall have some warm tea upstairs in bed. Boil some water. Now, uncle, come with me.”

“Anybody broke?” Anthony rolled the words over, as Rhoda raised his arm. “I’m asked such a lot, my dear, I ain’t equal to it. You said here ’d be a quiet place. I don’t know about money. Try my pockets. Yes, mum, if you was forty policemen, I’m empty; you’d find it. And no objection to nod to prayers; but never was taught one of my own. Where am I going, my dear?”

“Upstairs with me, uncle.”

Rhoda had succeeded in getting him on his feet.

The farmer tapped at his forehead, as a signification to the others that Anthony had gone wrong in the head, which reminded him that he had prophesied as much. He stiffened out his legs, and gave a manful spring, crying, “Hulloa, brother Tony! why, man, eh? Look here. What, goin’ to bed? What, you, Tony? I say—I say—dear me!” And during these exclamations intricate visions of tripping by means of gold wires danced before him.

Rhoda hurried Anthony out.

After the door had shut, the farmer said: “That comes of it; sooner or later, there it is! You give your heart to money—you insure in a ship, and as much as say, here’s a ship, and, blow and lighten, I defy you. Whereas we day-by-day people, if it do blow and if it do lighten, and the waves are avilanches, we’ve nothing to lose. Poor old Tony—a smash, to a certainty. There’s been a smash, and he’s gone under the harrow. Any o’ you here might ha’ heard me say, things can’t last for ever. Ha’n’t you, now?”

The persons present meekly acquiesced in his prophetic spirit to this extent. Mrs. Sumfit dolorously said, “Often, William dear,” and accepted the incontestable truth in deep humiliation of mind.

“Save,” the farmer continued, “save and store, only don’t put your heart in the box.”

“It’s true, William;” Mrs. Sumfit acted clerk to the sermon.

Dahlia took her softly by the neck, and kissed her.

“Is it love for the old woman?” Mrs. Sumfit murmured fondly; and Dahlia kissed her again.

The farmer had by this time rounded to the thought of how he personally might be affected by Anthony’s ill-luck, supposing; perchance, that Anthony was suffering from something more than a sentimental attachment to the Bank of his predilection: and such a reflection instantly diverted his tendency to moralize.

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“We shall hear to-morrow,” he observed in conclusion; which, as it caused a desire for the morrow to spring within his bosom, sent his eyes at Master Gammon, who was half an hour behind his time for bed, and had dropped asleep in his chair. This unusual display of public somnolence on Master Gammon’s part, together with the veteran’s reputation for slowness, made the farmer fret at him as being in some way an obstruction to the lively progress of the hours.

“Hoy, Gammon!” he sang out, awakeningly to ordinary ears; but Master Gammon was not one who took the ordinary plunge into the gulf of sleep, and it was required to shake him and to bellow at him—to administer at once earthquake and thunder—before his lizard eyelids would lift over the great, old-world eyes; upon which, like a clayey monster refusing to be informed with heavenly fire, he rolled to the right of his chair and to the left, and pitched forward, and insisted upon being inanimate. Brought at last to a condition of stale consciousness, he looked at his master long, and uttered surprisingly “Farmer, there’s queer things going on in this house,” and then relapsed to a combat with Mrs. Sumfit, regarding the candle; she saying that it was not to be entrusted to him, and he sullenly contending that it was.

“Here, we’ll all go to bed,” said the farmer. “What with one person queer, and another person queer, I shall be in for a headache, if I take to thinking. Gammon’s a man sees in ’s sleep what he misses awake. Did you ever know,” he addressed anybody, “such a thing as Tony Hackbut coming into a relation’s house, and sitting there, and not a word for any of us? It’s, I call it, dumbfoundering. And that’s me: why didn’t I go up and shake his hand, you ask. Well, why not? If he don’t know he’s welcome, without ceremony, he’s no good. Why, I’ve got matters t’ occupy my mind, too, haven’t I? Every man has, and some more’n others, let alone crosses. There’s something wrong with my brother-in-law, Tony, that’s settled. Odd that we country people, who bide, and take the Lord’s gifts—” The farmer did not follow out this reflection, but raising his arms, shepherd-wise, he puffed as if blowing the two women before him to their beds, and then gave a shy look at Robert, and nodded good-night to him. Robert nodded in reply. He knew the cause of the farmer’s uncommon blitheness. Algernon Blancove, the young squire, had proposed for Rhoda’s hand.

CHAPTER XLIII

Anthony had robbed the Bank. The young squire was aware of the fact, and had offered to interpose for him, and to make good the money to the Bank, upon one condition. So much, Rhoda had gathered from her uncle’s babbling interjections throughout the day. The farmer knew only of the young squire’s proposal, which had been made direct to him; and he had left it to Robert to state the case to Rhoda, and plead for himself. She believed fully, when

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she came downstairs into the room where Robert was awaiting her, that she had but to speak and a mine would be sprung; and shrinking from it, hoping for it, she entered, and tried to fasten her eyes upon Robert distinctly, telling him the tale. Robert listened with a calculating seriousness of manner that quieted her physical dread of his passion. She finished; and he said “It will, perhaps, save your uncle: I’m sure it will please your father.”

She sat down, feeling that a warmth had gone, and that she was very bare.

“Must I consent, then?”

“If you can, I suppose.”

Both being spirits formed for action, a perplexity found them weak as babes. He, moreover, was stung to see her debating at all upon such a question; and he was in despair before complicated events which gave nothing for his hands and heart to do. Stiff endurance seemed to him to be his lesson; and he made a show of having learnt it.

“Were you going out, Robert?”

“I usually make the rounds of the house, to be sure all’s safe.”

His walking about the garden at night was not, then, for the purpose of looking at her window. Rhoda coloured in all her dark crimson with shame for thinking that it had been so.

“I must decide to-morrow morning.”

“They say, the pillow’s the best counsellor.”

A reply that presumed she would sleep appeared to her as bitterly unfriendly.

“Did father wish it?”

“Not by what he spoke.”

“You suppose he does wish it?”

“Where’s the father who wouldn’t? Of course, he wishes it. He’s kind enough, but you may be certain he wishes it.”

“Oh! Dahlia, Dahlia!” Rhoda moaned, under a rush of new sensations, unfilial, akin to those which her sister had distressed her by speaking shamelessly out.

“Ah! poor soul!” added Robert.

“My darling must be brave: she must have great courage. Dahlia cannot be a coward. I begin to see.”

Rhoda threw up her face, and sat awhile as one who was reading old matters by a fresh light.

“I can’t think,” she said, with a start. “Have I been dreadfully cruel? Was I unsisterly? I have such a horror of some things—disgrace. And men are so hard on women; and father—I felt for him. And I hated that base man. It’s his cousin and his name! I could almost fancy this trial is brought round to me for punishment.”

An ironic devil prompted Robert to say, “You can’t let harm come to your uncle.”

The thing implied was the farthest in his idea of any woman’s possible duty.

“Are you of that opinion?” Rhoda questioned with her eyes, but uttered nothing.

Now, he had spoken almost in the ironical tone. She should have noted that. And how could a true-hearted girl suppose him capable of giving such counsel to her whom he loved? It smote him with horror and anger; but he was much too manly to betray these actual sentiments, and continued to dissemble. You see, he had not forgiven her for her indifference to him.

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“You are no longer your own mistress,” he said, meaning exactly the reverse.

This—that she was bound in generosity to sacrifice herself—was what Rhoda feared. There was no forceful passion in her bosom to burst through the crowd of weak reasonings and vanities, to bid her be a woman, not a puppet; and the passion in him, for which she craved, that she might be taken up by it and whirled into forgetfulness, with a seal of betrothal upon her lips, was absent so that she thought herself loved no more by Robert. She was weary of thinking and acting on her own responsibility, and would gladly have abandoned her will; yet her judgement, if she was still to exercise it, told her that the step she was bidden to take was one, the direct consequence and the fruit of her other resolute steps. Pride whispered, “You could compel your sister to do that which she abhorred;” and Pity pleaded for her poor old uncle Anthony. She looked back in imagination at that scene with him in London, amazed at her frenzy of power, and again, from that contemplation, amazed at her present nervelessness.

“I am not fit to be my own mistress,” she said.

“Then, the sooner you decide the better,” observed Robert, and the room became hot and narrow to him.

“Very little time is given me,” she murmured. The sound was like a whimper; exasperating to one who had witnessed her remorseless energy.

“I dare say you won’t find the hardship so great,” said he.

“Because,” she looked up quickly, “I went out one day to meet him? Do you mean that, Robert? I went to hear news of my sister. I had received no letters from her. And he wrote to say that he could tell me about her. My uncle took me once to the Bank. I saw him there first. He spoke of Wrexby, and of my sister. It is pleasant to inexperienced girls to hear themselves praised. Since the day when you told me to turn back I have always respected you.”

Her eyelids lowered softly.

Could she have humbled herself more? But she had, at the same time, touched his old wound: and his rival then was the wooer now, rich, and a gentleman. And this room, Robert thought as he looked about it, was the room in which she had refused him, when he first asked her to be his.

“I think,” he said, “I’ve never begged your pardon for the last occasion of our being alone here together. I’ve had my arm round you. Don’t be frightened. That’s my marriage, and there was my wife. And there’s an end of my likings and my misconduct. Forgive me for calling it to mind.”

“No, no, Robert,” Rhoda lifted her hands, and, startled by the impulse, dropped them, saying: “What forgiveness? Was I ever angry with you?”

A look of tenderness accompanied the words, and grew into a dusky crimson rose under his eyes.

“When you went into the wood, I saw you going: I knew it was for some good object,” he said, and flushed equally.

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But, by the recurrence to that scene, he had checked her sensitive developing emotion. She hung a moment in languor, and that oriental warmth of colour ebbed away from her cheeks.

“You are very kind,” said she.

Then he perceived in dimmest fashion that possibly a chance had come to ripeness, withered, and fallen, within the late scoffing seconds of time. Enraged at his blindness, and careful, lest he had wrongly guessed, not to expose his regret (the man was a lover), he remarked, both truthfully and hypocritically: “I’ve always thought you were born to be a lady.” (You had that ambition, young madam.)

She answered: “That’s what I don’t understand.” (Your saying it, O my friend!)

“You will soon take to your new duties.” (You have small objection to them even now.)

“Yes, or my life won’t be worth much.” (Know, that you are driving me to it.)

“And I wish you happiness, Rhoda.” (You are madly imperilling the prospect thereof.)

To each of them the second meaning stood shadowy behind the utterances. And further,—

“Thank you, Robert.” (I shall have to thank you for the issue.)

“Now it’s time to part.” (Do you not see that there’s a danger for me in remaining?)

“Good night.” (Behold, I am submissive.)

“Good night, Rhoda.” (You were the first to give the signal of parting.)

“Good night.” (I am simply submissive.)

“Why not my name? Are you hurt with me?”

Rhoda choked. The indirectness of speech had been a shelter to her, permitting her to hint at more than she dared clothe in words.

Again the delicious dusky rose glowed beneath his eyes.

But he had put his hand out to her, and she had not taken it.

“What have I done to offend you? I really don’t know, Rhoda.”

“Nothing.” The flower had closed.

He determined to believe that she was gladdened at heart by the prospect of a fine marriage, and now began to discourse of Anthony's delinquency, saying,—

"It was not money taken for money's sake: any one can see that. It was half clear to me, when you told me about it, that the money was not his to give, but I've got the habit of trusting you to be always correct."

"And I never am," said Rhoda, vexed at him and at herself.

"Women can't judge so well about money matters. Has your uncle no account of his own at the Bank? He was thought to be a bit of a miser."

"What he is, or what he was, I can't guess. He has not been near the Bank since that day; nor to his home. He has wandered down on his way here, sleeping in cottages. His heart seems broken. I have still a great deal of the money. I kept it, thinking it might be a protection for Dahlia. Oh! my thoughts and what I have done! Of course, I imagined him to be rich. A thousand pounds seemed a great deal to me, and very little for one who was rich. If I had reflected at all, I must have seen that Uncle Anthony would never have carried so much through the streets. I was like a fiend for money. I must have been acting wrongly. Such a craving as that is a sign of evil."

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“What evil there is, you’re going to mend, Rhoda.”

“I sell myself, then.”

“Hardly so bad as that. The money will come from you instead of from your uncle.”

Rhoda bent forward in her chair, with her elbows on her knees, like a man brooding. Perhaps, it was right that the money should come from her. And how could she have hoped to get the money by any other means? Here at least was a positive escape from perplexity. It came at the right moment; was it a help divine? What cowardice had been prompting her to evade it? After all, could it be a dreadful step that she was required to take?

Her eyes met Robert’s, and he said startlingly: “Just like a woman!”

“Why?” but she had caught the significance, and blushed with spite.

“He was the first to praise you.”

“You are brutal to me, Robert.”

“My name at last! You accused me of that sort of thing before, in this room.”

Rhoda stood up. “I will wish you good night.”

“And now you take my hand.”

“Good night,” they uttered simultaneously; but Robert did not give up the hand he had got in his own. His eyes grew sharp, and he squeezed the fingers.

“I’m bound,” she cried.

“Once!” Robert drew her nearer to him.

“Let me go.”

“Once!” he reiterated. “Rhoda, as I’ve never kissed you—once!”

“No: don’t anger me.”

“No one has ever kissed you?”

“Never.”

“Then, I—” His force was compelling the straightened figure.

Had he said, “Be mine!” she might have softened to his embrace; but there was no fire of divining love in her bosom to perceive her lover’s meaning. She read all his words as a placard on a board, and revolted from the outrage of submitting her lips to one who was not to be her husband. His jealousy demanded that gratification foremost. The “Be mine!” was ready enough to follow.

“Let me go, Robert.”

She was released. The cause for it was the opening of the door. Anthony stood there.

A more astounding resemblance to the phantasm of a dream was never presented. He was clad in a manner to show forth the condition of his wits, in partial night and day attire: one of the farmer’s nightcaps was on his head, surmounted by his hat. A confused recollection of the necessity for trousers, had made him draw on those garments sufficiently to permit of the movement of his short legs, at which point their subserviency to the uses ended. Wrinkled with incongruous clothing from head to foot, and dazed by the light, he peered on them, like a mouse magnified and petrified.

“Dearest uncle!” Rhoda went to him.

Anthony nodded, pointing to the door leading out of the house.

“I just want to go off—go off. Never you mind me. I’m only going off.”

“You must go to your bed, uncle.”

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“Oh, Lord! no. I’m going off, my dear. I’ve had sleep enough for forty. I—” he turned his mouth to Rhoda’s ear, “I don’t want t’ see th’ old farmer.” And, as if he had given a conclusive reason for his departure, he bored towards the door, repeating it, and bawling additionally, “in the morning.”

“You have seen him, uncle. You have seen him. It’s over,” said Rhoda.

Anthony whispered: “I don’t want t’ see th’ old farmer.”

“But, you have seen him, uncle.”

“In the morning, my dear. Not in the morning. He’ll be looking and asking, ‘Where away, brother Tony?’ ’Where’s your banker’s book, brother Tony?’ ‘How’s money-market, brother Tony?’ I can’t see th’ old farmer.”

It was impossible to avoid smiling: his imitation of the farmer’s country style was exact.

She took his hands, and used every persuasion she could think of to induce him to return to his bed; nor was he insensible to argument, or superior to explanation.

“Th’ old farmer thinks I’ve got millions, my dear. You can’t satisfy him. He... I don’t want t’ see him in the morning. He thinks I’ve got millions. His mouth’ll go down. I don’t want... You don’t want him to look... And I can’t count now; I can’t count a bit. And every post I see ’s a policeman. I ain’t hiding. Let ’em take the old man. And he was a faithful servant, till one day he got up on a regular whirly-go-round, and ever since...such a little boy! I’m frightened o’ you, Rhoda.”

“I will do everything for you,” said Rhoda, crying wretchedly.

“Because, the young squire says,” Anthony made his voice mysterious.

“Yes, yes,” Rhoda stopped him; “and I consent:” she gave a hurried half-glance behind her. “Come, uncle. Oh! pity! don’t let me think your reason’s gone. I can get you the money, but if you go foolish, I cannot help you.”

Her energy had returned to her with the sense of sacrifice. Anthony eyed her tears. “We’ve sat on a bank and cried together, haven’t we?” he said. “And counted ants, we have. Shall we sit in the sun together to-morrow? Say, we shall. Shall we? A good long day in the sun and nobody looking at me ’s my pleasure.”

Rhoda gave him the assurance, and he turned and went upstairs with her, docile at the prospect of hours to be passed in the sunlight.

Yet, when morning came, he had disappeared. Robert also was absent from the breakfast-table. The farmer made no remarks, save that he reckoned Master Gammon

was right—in allusion to the veteran's somnolent observation overnight; and strange things were acted before his eyes.

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There came by the morning delivery of letters one addressed to “Miss Fleming.” He beheld his daughters rise, put their hands out, and claim it, in a breath; and they gazed upon one another like the two women demanding the babe from the justice of the Wise King. The letter was placed in Rhoda’s hand; Dahlia laid hers on it. Their mouths were shut; any one not looking at them would have been unaware that a supreme conflict was going on in the room. It was a strenuous wrestle of their eyeballs, like the “give way” of athletes pausing. But the delirious beat down the constitutional strength. A hard bright smile ridged the hollow of Dahlia’s cheeks. Rhoda’s dark eyes shut; she let go her hold, and Dahlia thrust the letter in against her bosom, snatched it out again, and dipped her face to roses in a jug, and kissing Mrs. Sumfit, ran from the room for a single minute; after which she came back smiling with gravely joyful eyes and showing a sedate readiness to eat and conclude the morning meal.

What did this mean? The farmer could have made allowance for Rhoda’s behaving so, seeing that she notoriously possessed intellect; and he had the habit of charging all freaks and vagaries of manner upon intellect.

But Dahlia was a soft creature, without this apology for extravagance, and what right had she to letters addressed to “Miss Fleming?” The farmer prepared to ask a question, and was further instigated to it by seeing Mrs. Sumfit’s eyes roll sympathetic under a burden of overpowering curiosity and bewilderment. On the point of speaking, he remembered that he had pledged his word to ask no questions; he feared to—that was the secret; he had put his trust in Rhoda’s assurance, and shrank from a spoken suspicion. So, checking himself, he broke out upon Mrs. Sumfit: “Now, then, mother!” which caused her to fluster guiltily, she having likewise given her oath to be totally unquestioning, even as was Master Gammon, whom she watched with a deep envy. Mrs. Sumfit excused the anxious expression of her face by saying that she was thinking of her dairy, whither, followed by the veteran, she retired.

Rhoda stood eyeing Dahlia, nerved to battle against the contents of that letter, though in the first conflict she had been beaten. “Oh, this curse of love!” she thought in her heart; and as Dahlia left the room, flushed, stupefied, and conscienceless, Rhoda the more readily told her father the determination which was the result of her interview with Robert.

No sooner had she done so, than a strange fluttering desire to look on Robert awoke within her bosom. She left the house, believing that she went abroad to seek her uncle, and walked up a small grass-knoll, a little beyond the farm-yard, from which she could see green corn-tracts and the pastures by the river, the river flowing oily under summer light, and the slow-footed cows, with their heads bent to the herbage; far-away sheep, and white hawthorn bushes, and deep hedge-ways bursting out of the trimness of the earlier season; and a nightingale sang among the hazels near by.

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This scene of unthrobbing peacefulness was beheld by Rhoda with her first conscious delight in it. She gazed round on the farm, under a quick new impulse of affection for her old home. And whose hand was it that could alone sustain the working of the farm, and had done so, without reward? Her eyes travelled up to Wrexby Hall, perfectly barren of any feeling that she was to enter the place, aware only that it was full of pain for her. She accused herself, but could not accept the charge of her having ever hoped for transforming events that should twist and throw the dear old farm-life long back into the fields of memory. Nor could she understand the reason of her continued coolness to Robert. Enough of accurate reflection was given her to perceive that discontent with her station was the original cause of her discontent now. What she had sown she was reaping:—and wretchedly colourless are these harvests of our dream! The sun has not shone on them. They may have a tragic blood-hue, as with Dahlia's; but they will never have any warm, and fresh, and nourishing sweetness—the juice which is in a single blade of grass.

A longing came upon Rhoda to go and handle butter. She wished to smell it as Mrs. Sumfit drubbed and patted and flattened and rounded it in the dairy; and she ran down the slope, meeting her father at the gate. He was dressed in his brushed suit, going she knew whither, and when he asked if she had seen her uncle, she gave for answer a plain negative, and longed more keenly to be at work with her hands, and to smell the homely creamy air under the dairy-shed.

CHAPTER XLIV

She watched her father as he went across the field and into the lane. Her breathing was suppressed till he appeared in view at different points, more and more distant, and then she sighed heavily, stopped her breathing, and hoped her unshaped hope again. The last time he was in sight, she found herself calling to him with a voice like that of a burdened sleeper: her thought being, "How can you act so cruelly to Robert!" He passed up Wrexby Heath, and over the black burnt patch where the fire had caught the furzes on a dry Maynight, and sank on the side of the Hall.

When we have looked upon a picture of still green life with a troubled soul, and the blow falls on us, we accuse Nature of our own treachery to her. Rhoda hurried from the dairy-door to shut herself up in her room and darken the light surrounding her. She had turned the lock, and was about systematically to pull down the blind, when the marvel of beholding Dahlia stepping out of the garden made her for a moment less the creature of her sickened senses. Dahlia was dressed for a walk, and she went very fast. The same paralysis of motion afflicted Rhoda as when she was gazing after her father; but her hand stretched out instinctively for her bonnet when Dahlia had crossed the green and the mill-bridge, and was no more visible. Rhoda drew her bonnet on, and caught her black silk mantle in her hand, and without strength to throw it across her shoulders,

dropped before her bed, and uttered a strange prayer. “Let her die rather than go back to disgrace, my God! my God!”

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She tried to rise, and failed in the effort, and superstitiously renewed her prayer. “Send death to her rather!”—and Rhoda’s vision under her shut eyes conjured up clouds and lightnings, and spheres in conflagration.

There is nothing so indicative of fevered or of bad blood as the tendency to counsel the Almighty how he shall deal with his creatures. The strain of a long uncertainty, and the late feverish weeks had distempered the fine blood of the girl, and her acts and words were becoming remoter exponents of her character.

She bent her head in a blind doze that gave her strength to rise. As swiftly as she could she went in the track of her sister.

That morning, Robert had likewise received a letter. It was from Major Waring, and contained a bank-note, and a summons to London, as also an enclosure from Mrs. Boulby of Warbeach; the nature of which was an advertisement cut out of the county paper, notifying to one Robert Eccles that his aunt Anne had died, and that there was a legacy for him, to be paid over upon application. Robert crossed the fields, laughing madly at the ironical fate which favoured him a little and a little, and never enough, save just to keep him swimming.

The letter from Major Waring said:—

“I must see you immediately. Be quick and come. I begin to be of your opinion—there are some things which we must take into our own hands and deal summarily with.”

“Ay!—ay!” Robert gave tongue in the clear morning air, scenting excitement and eager for it as a hound.

More was written, which he read subsequently

“I wrong,” Percy’s letter continued, “the best of women. She was driven to my door. There is, it seems, some hope that Dahlia will find herself free. At any rate, keep guard over her, and don’t leave her. Mrs. Lovell has herself been moving to make discoveries down at Warbeach. Mr. Blancove has nearly quitted this sphere. She nursed him—I was jealous!—the word’s out. Truth, courage, and suffering touch Margaret’s heart.

“Yours,

“Percy.”

Jumping over a bank, Robert came upon Anthony, who was unsteadily gazing at a donkey that cropped the grass by a gate.

“Here you are,” said Robert, and took his arm.

Anthony struggled, though he knew the grasp was friendly; but he was led along: nor did Robert stop until they reached Greatham, five miles beyond Wrexby, where he entered the principal inn and called for wine.

“You want spirit: you want life,” said Robert.

Anthony knew that he wanted no wine, whatever his needs might be. Yet the tender ecstacy of being paid for was irresistible, and he drank, saying, “Just one glass, then.”

Robert pledged him. They were in a private room, of which, having ordered up three bottles of sherry, Robert locked the door. The devil was in him. He compelled Anthony to drink an equal portion with himself, alternately frightening and cajoling the old man.

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“Drink, I tell you. You’ve robbed me, and you shall drink!”

“I haven’t, I haven’t,” Anthony whined.

“Drink, and be silent. You’ve robbed me, and you shall drink! and by heaven! if you resist, I’ll hand you over to bluer imps than you’ve ever dreamed of, old gentleman! You’ve robbed me, Mr. Hackbut. Drink! I tell you.”

Anthony wept into his glass.

“That’s a trick I could never do,” said Robert, eyeing the drip of the trembling old tear pitilessly. “Your health, Mr. Hackbut. You’ve robbed me of my sweetheart. Never mind. Life’s but the pop of a gun. Some of us flash in the pan, and they’re the only ones that do no mischief. You’re not one of them, sir; so you must drink, and let me see you cheerful.”

By degrees, the wine stirred Anthony’s blood, and he chirped feebly, as one who half remembered that he ought to be miserable. Robert listened to his maundering account of his adventure with the Bank money, sternly replenishing his glass. His attention was taken by the sight of Dahlia stepping forth from a chemist’s shop in the street nearly opposite to the inn. “This is my medicine,” said Robert; “and yours too,” he addressed Anthony.

The sun had passed its meridian when they went into the streets again. Robert’s head was high as a cock’s, and Anthony leaned on his arm; performing short half-circles headlong to the front, until the mighty arm checked and uplifted him. They were soon in the fields leading to Wrexby. Robert saw two female figures far ahead. A man was hastening to join them. The women started and turned suddenly: one threw up her hands, and darkened her face. It was in the pathway of a broad meadow, deep with grass, wherein the red sorrel topped the yellow buttercup, like rust upon the season’s gold. Robert hastened on. He scarce at the moment knew the man whose shoulder he seized, but he had recognised Dahlia and Rhoda, and he found himself face to face with Sedgett.

“It’s you!”

“Perhaps you’ll keep your hands off; before you make sure, another time.”

Robert said: “I really beg your pardon. Step aside with me.”

“Not while I’ve a ha’p’orth o’ brains in my noddle,” replied Sedgett, drawling an imitation of his enemy’s courteous tone. “I’ve come for my wife. I’m just down by train, and a bit out of my way, I reckon. I’m come, and I’m in a hurry. She shall get home, and have on her things— boxes packed, and we go.”

Robert waved Dahlia and Rhoda to speed homeward. Anthony had fallen against the roots of a banking elm, and surveyed the scene with philosophic abstractedness. Rhoda moved, taking Dahlia's hand.

"Stop," cried Sedgett. "Do you people here think me a fool? Eccles, you know me better 'n that. That young woman's my wife. I've come for her, I tell ye."

"You've no claim on her," Rhoda burst forth weakly, and quivered, and turned her eyes supplicatingly on Robert. Dahlia was a statue of icy fright.

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“You’ve thrown her off, man, and sold what rights you had,” said Robert, spying for the point of his person where he might grasp the wretch and keep him off.

“That don’t hold in law,” Sedgett nodded. “A man may get in a passion, when he finds he’s been cheated, mayn’t he?”

“I have your word of honour,” said Rhoda; muttering, “Oh! devil come to wrong us!”

“Then, you shouldn’t ha’ run ferreting down in my part o’ the country. You, or Eccles—I don’t care who ’tis—you’ve been at my servants to get at my secrets. Some of you have. You’ve declared war. You’ve been trying to undermine me. That’s a breach, I call it. Anyhow, I’ve come for my wife. I’ll have her.”

“None of us, none of us; no one has been to your house,” said Rhoda, vehemently. “You live in Hampshire, sir, I think; I don’t know any more. I don’t know where. I have not asked my sister. Oh! spare us, and go.”

“No one has been down into your part of the country,” said Robert, with perfect mildness.

To which Sedgett answered bluffly, “There ye lie, Bob Eccles;” and he was immediately felled by a tremendous blow. Robert strode over him, and taking Dahlia by the elbow, walked three paces on, as to set her in motion. “Off!” he cried to Rhoda, whose eyelids cowered under the blaze of his face.

It was best that her sister should be away, and she turned and walked swiftly, hurrying Dahlia, and touching her. “Oh! don’t touch my arm,” Dahlia said, quailing in the fall of her breath. They footed together, speechless; taking the woman’s quickest gliding step. At the last stile of the fields, Rhoda saw that they were not followed. She stopped, panting: her heart and eyes were so full of that flaming creature who was her lover. Dahlia took from her bosom the letter she had won in the morning, and held it open in both hands to read it. The pause was short. Dahlia struck the letter into her bosom again, and her starved features had some of the bloom of life. She kept her right hand in her pocket, and Rhoda presently asked,—

“What have you there?”

“You are my enemy, dear, in some things,” Dahlia replied, a muscular shiver passing over her.

“I think,” said Rhoda, “I could get a little money to send you away. Will you go? I am full of grief for what I have done. God forgive me.”

“Pray, don’t speak so; don’t let us talk,” said Dahlia.

Scorched as she felt both in soul and body, a touch or a word was a wound to her. Yet she was the first to resume: “I think I shall be saved. I can’t quite feel I am lost. I have not been so wicked as that.”

Rhoda gave a loving answer, and again Dahlia shrank from the miserable comfort of words.

As they came upon the green fronting the iron gateway, Rhoda perceived that the board proclaiming the sale of Queen Anne’s Farm had been removed, and now she understood her father’s readiness to go up to Wrexby Hall. “He would sell me to save the farm.” She reproached herself for the thought, but she could not be just; she had the image of her father plodding relentlessly over the burnt heath to the Hall, as conceived by her agonized sensations in the morning, too vividly to be just, though still she knew that her own indecision was to blame.

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Master Gammon met them in the garden.

Pointing aloft, over the gateway, “That’s down,” he remarked, and the three green front teeth of his quiet grin were stamped on the impressionable vision of the girls in such a way that they looked at one another with a bare bitter smile. Once it would have been mirth.

“Tell father,” Dahlia said, when they were at the back doorway, and her eyes sparkled piteously, and she bit on her underlip. Rhoda tried to detain her; but Dahlia repeated, “Tell father,” and in strength and in will had become more than a match for her sister.

CHAPTER XLV

Rhoda spoke to her father from the doorway, with her hand upon the lock of the door.

At first he paid little attention to her, and, when he did so, began by saying that he hoped she knew that she was bound to have the young squire, and did not intend to be prankish and wilful; because the young squire was eager to settle affairs, that he might be settled himself. “I don’t deny it’s honour to us, and it’s a comfort,” said the farmer. “This is the first morning I’ve thought easily in my chair for years. I’m sorry about Robert, who’s a twice unlucky ’un; but you aimed at something higher, I suppose.”

Rhoda was prompted to say a word in self-defence, but refrained, and again she told Dahlia’s story, wondering that her father showed no excitement of any kind. On the contrary, there was the dimple of one of his voiceless chuckles moving about the hollow of one cheek, indicating some slow contemplative action that was not unpleasant within. He said: “Ah! well, it’s very sad;—that is, if ’tis so,” and no more, for a time.

She discovered that he was referring to her uncle Anthony, concerning whose fortunate position in the world, he was beginning to entertain some doubts. “Or else,” said the farmer, with a tap on his forehead, “he’s going here. It ’d be odd after all, if commercially, as he ’d call it, his despised brother-in-law—and I say it in all kindness—-should turn out worth, not exactly millions, but worth a trifle.”

The farmer nodded with an air of deprecating satisfaction.

Rhoda did not gain his ear until, as by an instinct, she perceived what interest the story of her uncle and the money-bags would have for him. She related it, and he was roused. Then, for the third time, she told him of Dahlia.

Rhoda saw her father’s chest grow large, while his eyes quickened with light. He looked on her with quite a strange face. Wrath, and a revived apprehension, and a fixed will were expressed in it, and as he catechized her for each particular of the truth

which had been concealed from him, she felt a respectfulness that was new in her personal sensations toward her father, but it was at the expense of her love.

When he had heard and comprehended all, he said, “Send the girl down to me.”

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But Rhoda pleaded, “She is too worn, she is tottering. She cannot endure a word on this; not even of kindness and help.”

“Then, you,” said the farmer, “you tell her she’s got a duty’s her first duty now. Obedience to her husband! Do you hear? Then, let her hear it. Obedience to her husband! And welcome’s the man when he calls on me. He’s welcome. My doors are open to him. I thank him. I honour him. I bless his name. It’s to him I owe—You go up to her and say, her father owes it to the young man who’s married her that he can lift up his head. Go aloft. Ay! for years I’ve been suspecting something of this. I tell ye, girl, I don’t understand about church doors and castin’ of her off—he’s come for her, hasn’t he? Then, he shall have her. I tell ye, I don’t understand about money: he’s married her. Well, then, she’s his wife; and how can he bargain not to see her?”

“The base wretch!” cried Rhoda.

“Hasn’t he married her?” the farmer retorted. “Hasn’t he given the poor creature a name? I’m not for abusing her, but him I do thank, and I say, when he calls, here’s my hand for him. Here, it’s out and waiting for him.”

“Father, if you let me see it—” Rhoda checked the intemperate outburst. “Father, this is a bad—a bad man. He is a very wicked man. We were all deceived by him. Robert knows him. He has known him for years, and knows that he is very wicked. This man married our Dahlia to get—” Rhoda gasped, and could not speak it. “He flung her off with horrible words at the church door. After this, how can he claim her? I paid him all he had to expect with uncle’s money, for his promise by his sacred oath never, never to disturb or come near my sister. After that he can’t, can’t claim her. If he does—”

“He’s her husband,” interrupted the farmer; “when he comes here, he’s welcome. I say he’s welcome. My hand’s out to him:—If it’s alone that he’s saved the name of Fleming from disgrace! I thank him, and my daughter belongs to him. Where is he now? You talk of a scuffle with Robert. I do hope Robert will not forget his proper behaviour. Go you up to your sister, and say from me—All’s forgotten and forgiven; say, It’s all underfoot; but she must learn to be a good girl from this day. And, if she’s at the gate to welcome her husband, so much the better ’ll her father be pleased;—say that. I want to see the man. It’ll gratify me to feel her husband’s flesh and blood. His being out of sight so long’s been a sore at my heart; and when I see him I’ll welcome him, and so must all in my house.”

This was how William Fleming received the confession of his daughter’s unhappy plight.

Rhoda might have pleaded Dahlia’s case better, but that she was too shocked and outraged by the selfishness she saw in her father, and the partial desire to scourge which she was too intuitively keen at the moment not to perceive in the paternal forgiveness, and in the stipulation of the forgiveness.

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She went upstairs to Dahlia, simply stating that their father was aware of all the circumstances.

Dahlia looked at her, but dared ask nothing.

So the day passed. Neither Robert nor Anthony appeared. The night came: all doors were locked. The sisters that night slept together, feeling the very pulses of the hours; yet neither of them absolutely hopelessly, although in a great anguish.

Rhoda was dressed by daylight. The old familiar country about the house lay still as if it knew no expectation. She observed Master Gammon tramping forth afield, and presently heard her father's voice below. All the machinery of the daily life got into motion; but it was evident that Robert and Anthony continued to be absent. A thought struck her that Robert had killed the man. It came with a flash of joy that was speedily terror, and she fell to praying vehemently and vaguely. Dahlia lay exhausted on the bed, but nigh the hour when letters were delivered, she sat up, saying, "There is one for me; get it."

There was in truth a letter for her below, and it was in her father's hand and open.

"Come out," said the farmer, as Rhoda entered to him. When they were in the garden, he commanded her to read and tell him the meaning of it. The letter was addressed to Dahlia Fleming.

"It's for my sister," Rhoda murmured, in anger, but more in fear.

She was sternly bidden to read, and she read,—

> Dahlia,—There is mercy for us. You are not lost to me.

"Edward."

After this, was appended in a feminine hand:—

"There is really hope. A few hours will tell us. But keep firm. If he comes near you, keep from him. You are not his. Run, hide, go anywhere, if you have reason to think he is near. I dare not write what it is we expect. Yesterday I told you to hope; to-day I can say, believe that you will be saved. You are not lost. Everything depends on your firmness.

"Margaret L."

Rhoda lifted up her eyes.

The farmer seized the letter, and laid his finger on the first signature.

“Is that the christian name of my girl’s seducer?”

He did not wait for an answer, but turned and went into the breakfast-table, when he ordered a tray with breakfast for Dahlia to betaken up to her bed-room; and that done, he himself turned the key of the door, and secured her. Mute woe was on Mrs. Sumfit’s face at all these strange doings, but none heeded her, and she smothered her lamentations. The farmer spoke nothing either of Robert or of Anthony. He sat in his chair till the dinner hour, without book or pipe, without occupation for eyes or hands; silent, but acute in his hearing.

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The afternoon brought relief to Rhoda's apprehensions. A messenger ran up to the farm bearing a pencilled note to her from Robert, which said that he, in company with her uncle, was holding Sedgett at a distance by force of arm, and that there was no fear. Rhoda kissed the words, hurrying away to the fields for a few minutes to thank and bless and dream of him who had said that there was no fear. She knew that Dahlia was unconscious of her imprisonment, and had less compunction in counting the minutes of her absence. The sun spread in yellow and fell in red before she thought of returning, so sweet it had become to her to let her mind dwell with Robert; and she was half a stranger to the mournfulness of the house when she set her steps homeward. But when she lifted the latch of the gate, a sensation, prompted by some unwitting self-accusal, struck her with alarm. She passed into the room, and beheld her father, and Mrs. Sumfit, who was sitting rolling, with her apron over her head.

The man Sedgett was between them.

CHAPTER XLVI

No sooner had Rhoda appeared than her father held up the key of Dahlia's bed-room, and said, "Unlock your sister, and fetch her down to her husband."

Mechanically Rhoda took the key.

"And leave our door open," he added.

She went up to Dahlia, sick with a sudden fright lest evil had come to Robert, seeing that his enemy was here; but that was swept from her by Dahlia's aspect.

"He is in the house," Dahlia said; and asked, "Was there no letter—no letter; none, this morning?"

Rhoda clasped her in her arms, seeking to check the convulsions of her trembling.

"No letter! no letter! none? not any? Oh! no letter for me!"

The strange varying tones of musical interjection and interrogation were pitiful to hear.

"Did you look for a letter?" said Rhoda, despising herself for so speaking.

"He is in the house! Where is my letter?"

"What was it you hoped? what was it you expected, darling?"

Dahlia moaned: "I don't know. I'm blind. I was told to hope. Yesterday I had my letter, and it told me to hope. He is in the house!"

“Oh, my dear, my love!” cried Rhoda; “come down a minute. See him. It is father’s wish. Come only for a minute. Come, to gain time, if there is hope.”

“But there was no letter for me this morning, Rhoda. I can’t hope. I am lost. He is in the house!”

“Dearest, there was a letter,” said Rhoda, doubting that she did well in revealing it.

Dahlia put out her hands dumb for the letter.

“Father opened it, and read it, and keeps it,” said Rhoda, clinging tight to the stricken form.

“Then, he is against me? Oh, my letter!” Dahlia wrung her hands.

While they were speaking, their father’s voice was heard below calling for Dahlia to descend. He came thrice to the foot of the stairs, and shouted for her.

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The third time he uttered a threat that sprang an answer from her bosom in shrieks.

Rhoda went out on the landing and said softly, “Come up to her, father.”

After a little hesitation, he ascended the stairs.

“Why, girl, I only ask you to come down and see your husband,” he remarked with an attempt at kindliness of tone. “What’s the harm, then? Come and see him; that’s all; come and see him.”

Dahlia was shrinking out of her father’s sight as he stood in the doorway. “Say,” she communicated to Rhoda, “say, I want my letter.”

“Come!” William Fleming grew impatient.

“Let her have her letter, father,” said Rhoda. “You have no right to withhold it.”

“That letter, my girl” (he touched Rhoda’s shoulder as to satisfy her that he was not angry), “that letter’s where it ought to be. I’ve puzzled out the meaning of it. That letter’s in her husband’s possession.”

Dahlia, with her ears stretching for all that might be uttered, heard this. Passing round the door, she fronted her father.

“My letter gone to him!” she cried. “Shameful old man! Can you look on me? Father, could you give it? I’m a dead woman.”

She smote her bosom, stumbling backward upon Rhoda’s arm.

“You have been a wicked girl,” the ordinarily unmoved old man retorted. “Your husband has come for you, and you go with him. Know that, and let me hear no threats. He’s a modest-minded, quiet young man, and a farmer like myself, and needn’t be better than he is. Come you down to him at once. I’ll tell you: he comes to take you away, and his cart’s at the gate. To the gate you go with him. When next I see you—you visiting me or I visiting you—I shall see a respected creature, and not what you have been and want to be. You have racked the household with fear and shame for years. Now come, and carry out what you’ve begun in the contrary direction. You’ve got my word o’ command, dead woman or live woman. Rhoda, take one elbow of your sister. Your aunt’s coming up to pack her box. I say I’m determined, and no one stops me when I say that. Come out, Dahlia, and let our parting be like between parent and child. Here’s the dark falling, and your husband’s anxious to be away. He has business, and ’ll hardly get you to the station for the last train to town. Hark at him below! He’s naturally astonished, he is, and you’re trying his temper, as you’d try any man’s. He wants to be off. Come, and when next we meet I shall see you a happy wife.”

He might as well have spoken to a corpse.

“Speak to her still, father,” said Rhoda, as she drew a chair upon which she leaned her sister’s body, and ran down full of the power of hate and loathing to confront Sedgett; but great as was that power within her, it was overmatched by his brutal resolution to take his wife away. No argument, no irony, no appeals, can long withstand the iteration of a dogged phrase. “I’ve come for my wife,” Sedgett said to all her instances. His voice was waxing loud and insolent, and, as it sounded, Mrs. Sumfit moaned and flapped her apron.

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“Then, how could you have married him?”

They heard the farmer’s roar of this unanswerable thing, aloft.

“Yes—how! how!” cried Rhoda below, utterly forgetting the part she had played in the marriage.

“It’s too late to hate a man when you’ve married him, my girl.”

Sedgett went out to the foot of the stairs.

“Mr. Fleming—she’s my wife. I’ll teach her about hating and loving. I’ll behave well to her, I swear. I’m in the midst of enemies; but I say I do love my wife, and I’ve come for her, and have her I will. Now, in two minutes’ time. Mr. Fleming, my cart’s at the gate, and I’ve got business, and she’s my wife.”

The farmer called for Mrs. Sumfit to come up and pack Dahlia’s box, and the forlorn woman made her way to the bedroom. All the house was silent. Rhoda closed her sight, and she thought: “Does God totally abandon us?”

She let her father hear: “Father, you know that you are killing your child.”

“I hear ye, my lass,” said he.

“She will die, father.”

“I hear ye, I hear ye.”

“She will die, father.”

He stamped furiously, exclaiming: “Who’s got the law of her better and above a husband? Hear reason, and come and help and fetch down your sister. She goes!”

“Father!” Rhoda cried, looking at her open hands, as if she marvelled to see them helpless.

There was for a time that silence which reigns in a sickchamber when the man of medicine takes the patient’s wrist. And in the silence came a blessed sound—the lifting of a latch. Rhoda saw Robert’s face.

“So,” said Robert, as she neared him, “you needn’t tell me what’s happened. Here’s the man, I see. He dodged me cleverly. The hound wants practice; the fox is born with his cunning.”

Few words were required to make him understand the position of things in the house. Rhoda spoke out all without hesitation in Sedgett's hearing.

But the farmer respected Robert enough to come down to him and explain his views of his duty and his daughter's duty. By the kitchen firelight he and Robert and Sedgett read one another's countenances.

"He has a proper claim to take his wife, Robert," said the farmer. "He's righted her before the world, and I thank him; and if he asks for her of me he must have her, and he shall."

"All right, sir," replied Robert, "and I say too, shall, when I'm stiff as log-wood."

"Oh! Robert, Robert!" Rhoda cried in great joy.

"Do you mean that you step 'twixt me and my own?" said Mr. Fleming.

"I won't let you nod at downright murder—that's all," said Robert. "She—Dahlia, take the hand of that creature!"

"Why did she marry me?" thundered Sedgett.

"There's one o' the wonders!" Robert rejoined. "Except that you're an amazingly clever hypocrite with women; and she was just half dead and had no will of her own; and some one set you to hunt her down. I tell you, Mr. Fleming, you might as well send your daughter to the hangman as put her in this fellow's hands."

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“She’s his wife, man.”

“May be,” Robert assented.

“You, Robert Eccles!” said Sedgett hoarsely; “I’ve come for my wife—do you hear?”

“You have, I dare say,” returned Robert. “You dodged me cleverly, that you did. I’d like to know how it was done. I see you’ve got a cart outside and a boy at the horse’s head. The horse steps well, does he? I’m about three hours behind him, I reckon:—not too late, though!”

He let fall a great breath of weariness.

Rhoda went to the cupboard and drew forth a rarely touched bottle of spirits, with which she filled a small glass, and handing the glass to him, said, “Drink.” He smiled kindly and drank it off.

“The man’s in your house, Mr. Fleming,” he said.

“And he’s my guest, and my daughter’s husband, remember that,” said the farmer.

“And mean to wait not half a minute longer till I’ve taken her off—mark that,” Sedgett struck in. “Now, Mr. Fleming, you see you keep good your word to me.”

“I’ll do no less,” said the farmer. He went into the passage shouting for Mrs. Sumfit to bring down the box.

“She begs,” Mrs. Sumfit answered to him—“She begs, William, on’y a short five minutes to pray by herself, which you will grant unto her, dear, you will. Lord! what’s come upon us?”

“Quick, and down with the box, then, mother,” he rejoined.

The box was dragged out, and Dahlia’s door was shut, that she might have her last minutes alone.

Rhoda kissed her sister before leaving her alone: and so cold were Dahlia’s lips, so tight the clutch of her hands, that she said: “Dearest, think of God:” and Dahlia replied: “I do.”

“He will not forsake you,” Rhoda said.

Dahlia nodded, with shut eyes, and Rhoda went forth.

“And now, Robert, you and I’ll see who’s master on these premises,” said the farmer. “Hear, all! I’m bounders under a sacred obligation to the husband of my child, and the Lord’s wrath on him who interferes and lifts his hand against me when I perform my sacred duty as a father. Place there! I’m going to open the door. Rhoda, see to your sister’s bonnet and things. Robert, stand out of my way. There’s no refreshment of any sort you’ll accept of before starting, Mr. Sedgett? None at all! That’s no fault of my hospitality. Stand out of my way, Robert.”

He was obeyed. Robert looked at Rhoda, but had no reply for her gaze of despair.

The farmer threw the door wide open.

There were people in the garden—strangers. His name was inquired for out of the dusk. Then whisperings were heard passing among the ill-discerned forms, and the farmer went out to them. Robert listened keenly, but the touch of Rhoda’s hand upon his own distracted his hearing. “Yet it must be!” he said. “Why does she come here?”

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Both he and Rhoda followed the farmer's steps, drawn forth by the ever-credulous eagerness which arises from an interruption to excited wretchedness. Near and nearer to the group, they heard a quaint old woman exclaim: "Come here to you for a wife, when he has one of his own at home; a poor thing he shipped off to America, thinking himself more cunning than devils or angels: and she got put out at a port, owing to stress of weather, to defeat the man's wickedness! Can't I prove it to you, sir, he's a married man, which none of us in our village knew till the poor tricked thing crawled back penniless to find him;—and there she is now with such a story of his cunning to tell to anybody as will listen; and why he kept it secret to get her pension paid him still on. It's all such a tale for you to hear by-and-by."

Robert burst into a glorious laugh.

"Why, mother! Mrs. Boulby! haven't you got a word for me?"

"My blessedest Robert!" the good woman cried, as she rushed up to kiss him. "Though it wasn't to see you I came exactly." She whispered: "The Major and the good gentleman—they're behind. I travelled down with them. Dear,—you'd like to know:—-Mrs. Lovell sent her little cunning groom down to Warbeach just two weeks back to make inquiries about that villain; and the groom left me her address, in case, my dear, when the poor creature—his true wife—crawled home, and we knew of her at Three-Tree Farm and knew her story. I wrote word at once, I did, to Mrs. Lovell, and the sweet good lady sent down her groom to fetch me to you to make things clear here. You shall understand them soon. It's Providence at work. I do believe that now there's a chance o' punishing the wicked ones."

The figure of Rhoda with two lights in her hand was seen in the porch, and by the shadowy rays she beheld old Anthony leaning against the house, and Major Waring with a gentleman beside him close upon the gate.

At the same time a sound of wheels was heard.

Robert rushed back into the great parlour-kitchen, and finding it empty, stamped with vexation. His prey had escaped.

But there was no relapse to give spare thoughts to that pollution of the house. It had passed. Major Waring was talking earnestly to Mr. Fleming, who held his head low, stupefied, and aware only of the fact that it was a gentleman imparting to him strange matters. By degrees all were beneath the farmer's roof—all, save one, who stood with bowed head by the threshold.

There is a sort of hero, and a sort of villain, to this story: they are but instruments. Hero and villain are combined in the person of Edward, who was now here to abase himself before the old man and the family he had injured, and to kneel penitently at the feet of

the woman who had just reason to spurn him. He had sold her as a slave is sold; he had seen her plunged into the blackest pit; yet was she miraculously kept pure for him, and if she could give him her pardon, might still be his. The grief for which he could ask no compassion had at least purified him to meet her embrace. The great agony he had passed through of late had killed his meaner pride. He stood there ready to come forward and ask forgiveness from unfriendly faces, and beg that he might be in Dahlia's eyes once—that he might see her once.

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He had grown to love her with the fullest force of a selfish, though not a common, nature. Or rather he had always loved her, and much of the selfishness had fallen away from his love. It was not the highest form of love, but the love was his highest development. He had heard that Dahlia, lost to him, was free. Something like the mortal yearning to look upon the dead risen to life, made it impossible for him to remain absent and in doubt. He was ready to submit to every humiliation that he might see the rescued features; he was willing to pay all his penalties. Believing, too, that he was forgiven, he knew that Dahlia's heart would throb for him to be near her, and he had come.

The miraculous agencies which had brought him and Major Waring and Mrs. Boulby to the farm, that exalted woman was relating to Mrs. Sumfit in another part of the house.

The farmer, and Percy, and Robert were in the family sitting-room, when, after an interval, William Fleming said aloud, "Come in, sir," and Edward stepped in among them.

Rhoda was above, seeking admittance to her sisters door, and she heard her father utter that welcome. It froze her limbs, for still she hated the evil-doer. Her hatred of him was a passion. She crouched over the stairs, listening to a low and long-toned voice monotonously telling what seemed to be one sole thing over and over, without variation, in the room where the men were. Words were indistinguishable. Thrice, after calling to Dahlia and getting no response, she listened again, and awe took her soul at last, for, abhorred as he was by her, his power was felt: she comprehended something of that earnestness which made the offender speak of his wrongful deeds, and his shame, and his remorse, before his fellow-men, straight out and calmly, like one who has been plunged up to the middle in the fires of the abyss, and is thereafter insensible to meaner pains. The voice ended. She was then aware that it had put a charm upon her ears. The other voices following it sounded dull.

"Has he—can he have confessed in words all his wicked baseness?" she thought, and in her soul the magnitude of his crime threw a gleam of splendour on his courage, even at the bare thought that he might have done this. Feeling that Dahlia was saved, and thenceforth at liberty to despise him and torture him, Rhoda the more readily acknowledged that it might be a true love for her sister animating him. From the height of a possible vengeance it was perceptible.

She turned to her sister's door and knocked at it, calling to her, "Safe, safe!" but there came no answer; and she was half glad, for she had a fear that in the quick revulsion of her sister's feelings, mere earthly love would act like heavenly charity, and Edward would find himself forgiven only too instantly and heartily.

In the small musk-scented guest's parlour, Mrs. Boulby was giving Mrs. Sumfit and poor old sleepy Anthony the account of the miraculous discovery of Sedgett's wickedness,

which had vindicated all one hoped for from Above; as also the narration of the stabbing of her boy, and the heroism and great-heartedness of Robert. Rhoda listened to her for a space, and went to her sister's door again; but when she stood outside the kitchen she found all voices silent within.

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It was, in truth, not only very difficult for William Fleming to change his view of the complexion of circumstances as rapidly as circumstances themselves changed, but it was very bitter for him to look upon Edward, and to see him in the place of Sedgett.

He had been struck dumb by the sudden revolution of affairs in his house; and he had been deferentially convinced by Major Waring's tone that he ought rightly to give his hearing to an unknown young gentleman against whom anger was due. He had listened to Edward without one particle of comprehension, except of the fact that his behaviour was extraordinary. He understood that every admission made by Edward with such grave and strange directness, would justly have condemned him to punishment which the culprit's odd, and upright, and even-toned self-denunciation rendered it impossible to think of inflicting. He knew likewise that a whole history was being narrated to him, and that, although the other two listeners manifestly did not approve it, they expected him to show some tolerance to the speaker.

He said once, "Robert, do me the favour to look about outside for t' other." Robert answered him, that the man was far away by this time.

The farmer suggested that he might be waiting to say his word presently.

"Don't you know you've been dealing with a villain, sir?" cried Robert. "Throw ever so little light upon one of that breed, and they skulk in a hurry. Mr. Fleming, for the sake of your honour, don't mention him again. What you're asked to do now, is to bury the thoughts of him."

"He righted my daughter when there was shame on her," the farmer replied.

That was the idea printed simply on his understanding.

For Edward to hear it was worse than a scourging with rods. He bore it, telling the last vitality of his pride to sleep, and comforting himself with the drowsy sensuous expectation that he was soon to press the hand of his lost one, his beloved, who was in the house, breathing the same air with him; was perhaps in the room above, perhaps sitting impatiently with clasped fingers, waiting for the signal to unlock them and fling them open. He could imagine the damp touch of very expectant fingers; the dying look of life-drinking eyes; and, oh! the helplessness of her limbs as she sat buoying a heart drowned in bliss.

It was unknown to him that the peril of her uttermost misery had been so imminent, and the picture conjured of her in his mind was that of a gentle but troubled face—a soul afflicted, yet hoping because it had been told to hope, and half conscious that a rescue, almost divine in its suddenness and unexpectedness, and its perfect clearing away of all shadows, approached.

Manifestly, by the pallid cast of his visage, he had tasted shrewd and wasting grief of late. Robert's heart melted as he beheld the change in Edward.

"I believe, Mr. Blancove, I'm a little to blame," he said. "Perhaps when I behaved so badly down at Fairly, you may have thought she sent me, and it set your heart against her for a time. I can just understand how it might."

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Edward thought for a moment, and conscientiously accepted the suggestion; for, standing under that roof, with her whom he loved near him, it was absolutely out of his power for him to comprehend that his wish to break from Dahlia, and the measures he had taken or consented to, had sprung from his own unassisted temporary baseness.

Then Robert spoke to the farmer.

Rhoda could hear Robert's words. Her fear was that Dahlia might hear them too, his pleading for Edward was so hearty. "Yet why should I always think differently from Robert?" she asked herself, and with that excuse for changeing, partially thawed.

She was very anxious for her father's reply; and it was late in coming. She felt that he was unconvinced. But suddenly the door opened, and the farmer called into the darkness,—

"Dahlia down here!"

Previously emotionless, an emotion was started in Rhoda's bosom by the command, and it was gladness. She ran up and knocked, and found herself crying out: "He is here—Edward."

But there came no answer.

"Edward is here. Come, come and see him."

Still not one faint reply.

"Dahlia! Dahlia!"

The call of Dahlia's name seemed to travel endlessly on. Rhoda knelt, and putting her mouth to the door, said,—

"My darling, I know you will reply to me. I know you do not doubt me now. Listen. You are to come down to happiness."

The silence grew heavier; and now a doubt came shrieking through her soul.

"Father!" rang her outcry.

The father came; and then the lover came, and neither to father nor to lover was there any word from Dahlia's voice.

She was found by the side of the bed, inanimate, and pale as a sister of death.

But you who may have cared for her through her many tribulations, have no fear for this gentle heart. It was near the worst; yet not the worst.

CHAPTER XLVII

Up to the black gates, but not beyond them. The dawn following such a night will seem more like a daughter of the night than promise of day. It is day that follows, notwithstanding: The sad fair girl survived, and her flickering life was the sole light of the household; at times burying its members in dusk, to shine on them again more like a prolonged farewell than a gladsome restoration.

She was saved by what we call chance; for it had not been in her design to save herself. The hand was firm to help her to the deadly draught. As far as could be conjectured, she had drunk it between hurried readings from her mother's Bible; the one true companion to which she had often clung, always half-availingly. The Bible was found by her side, as if it had fallen from the chair before which she knelt to read her last quickening verses, and had fallen with her. One arm was about it; one grasped the broken phial with its hideous label.

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It was uncomplainingly registered among the few facts very distinctly legible in Master Gammon's memory, that for three entire weeks he had no dumplings for dinner at the farm; and although, upon a computation, articles of that description, amounting probably to sixty-three (if there is any need for our being precise), were due to him, and would necessarily be for evermore due to him, seeing that it is beyond all human and even spiritual agency to make good unto man the dinner he has lost, Master Gammon uttered no word to show that he was sensible of a slight, which was the only indication given by him of his knowledge of a calamity having changed the order of things at the farm. On the day when dumplings reappeared, he remarked, with a glance at the ceiling: "Goin' on better—eh, marm?"

"Oh! Mas' Gammon," Mrs. Sumfit burst out; "if I was only certain you said your prayers faithful every night!" The observation was apparently taken by Master Gammon to express one of the mere emotions within her bosom, for he did not reply to it.

She watched him feeding in his steady way, with the patient bent back, and slowly chopping old grey jaws, and struck by a pathos in the sight, exclaimed,—

"We've all been searched so, Mas' Gammon! I feel I know everything that's in me. I'd say, I couldn't ha' given you dumplin's and tears; but think of our wickedness, when I confess to you I did feel spiteful at you to think that you were wiltin' to eat the dumplin's while all of us mourned and rocked as in a quake, expecting the worst to befall; and that made me refuse them to you. It was cruel of me, and well may you shake your head. If I was only sure you said your prayers!"

The meaning in her aroused heart was, that if she could be sure Master Gammon said his prayers, so as to be searched all through by them, as she was herself, and to feel thereby, as she did, that he knew everything that was within him, she would then, in admiration of his profound equanimity, acknowledge him to be a superior Christian.

Naturally enough, Master Gammon allowed the interjection to pass, regarding it as simply a vagrant action of the engine of speech; while Mrs. Sumfit, with an interjector's consciousness of prodigious things implied which were not in any degree comprehended, left his presence in kindness, and with a shade less of the sense that he was a superior Christian.

Nevertheless, the sight of Master Gammon was like a comforting medicine to all who were in the house. He was Mrs. Sumfit's clock; he was balm and blessedness in Rhoda's eyes; Anthony was jealous of him; the farmer held to him as to a stake in the ground: even Robert, who rallied and tormented, and was vexed by him, admitted that he stood some way between an example and a warning, and was a study. The grand primaeval quality of unchangeableness, as exhibited by this old man, affected them singularly in their recovery from the storm and the wreck of the

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hours gone by; so much so that they could not divest themselves of the idea that it was a manifestation of power in Master Gammon to show forth undisturbed while they were feeling their life shaken in them to the depths. I have never had the opportunity of examining the idol-worshipping mind of a savage; but it seems possible that the immutability of aspect of his little wooden God may sometimes touch him with a similar astounded awe;—even when, and indeed especially after, he has thrashed it. Had the old man betrayed his mortality in a sign of curiosity to know why the hubbub of trouble had arisen, and who was to blame, and what was the story, the effect on them would have been diminished. He really seemed granite among the turbulent waves. "Give me Gammon's life!" was Farmer Fleming's prayerful interjection; seeing him come and go, sit at his meals, and sleep and wake in season, all through those tragic hours of suspense, without a question to anybody. Once or twice, when his eye fell upon the doctor, Master Gammon appeared to meditate. He observed that the doctor had never been called in to one of his family, and it was evident that he did not understand the complication of things which rendered the doctor's visit necessary.

"You'll never live so long as that old man," the farmer said to Robert.

"No; but when he goes, all of him's gone," Robert answered.

"But Gammon's got the wisdom to keep himself safe, Robert; there's no one to blame for his wrinkles."

"Gammon's a sheepskin old Time writes his nothings on," said Robert. "He's safe—safe enough. An old hulk doesn't very easily manage to founder in the mud, and Gammon's been lying on the mud all his life."

"Let that be how 't will," returned the farmer; "I've had days o' mortal envy of that old man."

"Well, it's whether you prefer being the fiddle or the fiddle-case," quoth Robert.

Of Anthony the farmer no longer had any envy. In him, though he was as passive as Master Gammon, the farmer beheld merely a stupefied old man, and not a steady machine. He knew that some queer misfortune had befallen Anthony.

"He'll find I'm brotherly," said Mr. Fleming; but Anthony had darkened his golden horizon for him, and was no longer an attractive object to his vision.

Upon an Autumn afternoon; Dahlia, looking like a pale Spring flower, came down among them. She told her sister that it was her wish to see Edward. Rhoda had lost all power of will, even if she had desired to keep them asunder. She mentioned Dahlia's wish to her father, who at once went for his hat, and said: "Dress yourself neat, my lass." She knew what was meant by that remark. Messages daily had been coming down from the

Hall, but the rule of a discerning lady was then established there, and Rhoda had been spared a visit from either Edward or Algernon, though she knew them to be at hand. During Dahlia's convalescence, the farmer had not spoken to Rhoda of her engagement to the young squire. The great misery intervening, seemed in her mind to have cancelled all earthly engagements; and when he said that she must use care in her attire he suddenly revived a dread within her bosom, as if he had plucked her to the verge of a chasm.

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But Mrs. Lovell's delicacy was still manifest: Edward came alone, and he and Dahlia were left apart.

There was no need to ask for pardon from those gentle eyes. They joined hands. She was wasted and very weak, but she did not tremble. Passion was extinguished. He refrained from speaking of their union, feeling sure that they were united. It required that he should see her to know fully the sinner he had been. Wasted though she was, he was ready to make her his own, if only for the sake of making amends to this dear fair soul, whose picture of Saint was impressed on him, first as a response to the world wondering at his sacrifice of himself, and next, by degrees, as an absolute visible fleshly fact. She had come out of her martyrdom stamped with the heavenly sign-mark.

"Those are the old trees I used to speak of," she said, pointing to the two pines in the miller's grounds. "They always look like Adam and Eve turning away."

"They do not make you unhappy to see them, Dahlia?"

"I hope to see them till I am gone."

Edward pressed her fingers. He thought that warmer hopes would soon flow into her.

"The neighbours are kind?" he asked.

"Very kind. They, inquire after me daily."

His cheeks reddened; he had spoken at random, and he wondered that Dahlia should feel it pleasurable to be inquired after, she who was so sensitive.

"The clergyman sits with me every day, and knows my heart," she added.

"The clergyman is a comfort to women," said Edward.

Dahlia looked at him gently. The round of her thin eyelids dwelt on him. She wished. She dared not speak her wish to one whose remembered mastery in words forbade her poor speechlessness. But God would hear her prayers for him.

Edward begged that he might come to her often, and she said,—

"Come."

He misinterpreted the readiness of the invitation.

When he had left her, he reflected on the absence of all endearing epithets in her speech, and missed them. Having himself suffered, he required them. For what had she wrestled so sharply with death, if not to fall upon his bosom and be his in a great

outpouring of gladness? In fact he craved the immediate reward for his public acknowledgement of his misdeeds. He walked in this neighbourhood known by what he had done, and his desire was to take his wife away, never more to be seen there. Following so deep a darkness, he wanted at least a cheerful dawn: not one of a penitential grey—not a hooded dawn, as if the paths of life were to be under cloistral arches. And he wanted a rose of womanhood in his hand like that he had parted with, and to recover which he had endured every earthly mortification, even to absolute abasement. The frail bent lily seemed a stranger to him.

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Can a man go farther than his nature? Never, when he takes passion on board. By other means his nature may be enlarged and nerved, but passion will find his weakness, and, while urging him on, will constantly betray him at that point. Edward had three interviews with Dahlia; he wrote to her as many times. There was but one answer for him; and when he ceased to charge her with unforgivingness, he came to the strange conclusion that beyond our calling of a woman a Saint for rhetorical purposes, and esteeming her as one for pictorial, it is indeed possible, as he had slightly discerned in this woman's presence, both to think her saintly and to have the sentiments inspired by the overearthly in her person. Her voice, her simple words of writing, her gentle resolve, all issuing of a capacity to suffer evil, and pardon it, conveyed that character to a mind not soft for receiving such impressions.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Major Waring came to Wrexby Hall at the close of the October month. He came to plead his own cause with Mrs. Lovell; but she stopped him by telling him that his friend Robert was in some danger of losing his love.

"She is a woman, Percy; I anticipate your observation. But, more than that, she believes she is obliged to give her hand to my cousin, the squire. It's an intricate story relating to money. She does not care for Algy a bit, which is not a matter that greatly influences him. He has served her in some mysterious way; by relieving an old uncle of hers. Algy has got him the office of village postman for this district, I believe; if it's that; but I think it should be more, to justify her. At all events, she seems to consider that her hand is pledged. You know the kind of girl your friend fancies. Besides, her father insists she is to marry "the squire," which is certainly the most natural thing of all. So, don't you think, dear Percy, you had better take your friend on the Continent for some weeks? I never, I confess, exactly understood the intimacy existing between you, but it must be sincere."

"Are you?" said Percy.

"Yes, perfectly; but always in a roundabout way. Why do you ask me in this instance?"

"Because you could stop this silly business in a day."

"I know I could."

"Then, why do you not?"

"Because of a wish to be sincere. Percy, I have been that throughout, if you could read me. I tried to deliver my cousin Edward from what I thought was a wretched entanglement. His selfish falseness offended me, and I let him know that I despised him. When I found that he was a man who had courage, and some heart, he gained my

friendship once more, and I served him as far as I could—happily, as it chanced. I tell you all this, because I don't care to forfeit your esteem, and heaven knows, I may want it in the days to come. I believe I am the best friend in the world—and

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bad anything else. No one perfectly pleases me, not even you: you are too studious of character, and, like myself, exacting of perfection in one or two points. But now hear what I have done, and approve it if you think fit. I have flirted—abominable word!—I am compelled to use the language of the Misses—yes, I have flirted with my cousin Algy. I do it too well, I know—by nature! and I hate it. He has this morning sent a letter down to the farm saying, that, as he believes he has failed in securing Rhoda's affections, he renounces all pretensions, *etc*., subject to her wishes, *etc*. The courting, I imagine, can scarcely have been pleasant to him. My delightful manner with him during the last fortnight has been infinitely pleasanter. So, your friend Robert may be made happy by-and-by; that is to say, if his Rhoda is not too like her sex."

"You're an enchantress," exclaimed Percy.

"Stop," said she, and drifted into seriousness. "Before you praise me you must know more. Percy, that duel in India—"

He put out his hand to her.

"Yes, I forgive," she resumed. "You were cruel then. Remember that, and try to be just now. The poor boy would go to his doom. I could have arrested it. I partly caused it. I thought the honour of the army at stake. I was to blame on that day, and I am to blame again, but I feel that I am almost excuseable, if you are not too harsh a judge. No, I am not; I am execrable; but forgive me."

Percy's face lighted up in horrified amazement as Margaret Lovell unfastened the brooch at her neck and took out the dull-red handkerchief.

"It was the bond between us," she pursued, "that I was to return this to you when I no longer remained my own mistress. Count me a miserably heartless woman. I do my best. You brought this handkerchief to me dipped in the blood of the poor boy who was slain. I have worn it. It was a safeguard. Did you mean it to serve as such? Oh, Percy! I felt continually that blood was on my bosom. I felt it fighting with me. It has saved me from much. And now I return it to you."

He could barely articulate "Why?"

"Dear friend, by the reading of the bond you should know. I asked you when I was leaving India, how long I was to keep it by me. You said, "Till you marry." Do not be vehement, Percy. This is a thing that could not have been averted."

"Is it possible," Percy cried, "that you carried the play out so far as to promise him to marry him?"

"Your forehead is thunder, Percy. I know that look."

“Margaret, I think I could bear to see our army suffer another defeat rather than you should be contemptible.”

“Your chastisement is not given in half measures, Percy.”

“Speak on,” said he; “there is more to come. You are engaged to marry him?”

“I engaged that I would take the name of Blancove.”

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“If he would cease to persecute Rhoda Fleming!”

“The stipulation was exactly in those words.”

“You mean to carry it out?”

“To be sincere? I do, Percy!

“You mean to marry Algernon Blancove?”

“I should be contemptible indeed if I did, Percy!

“You do not?”

“I do not.”

“And you are sincere? By all the powers of earth and heaven, there’s no madness like dealing with an animated enigma! What is it you do mean?”

“As I said—to be sincere. But I was also bound to be of service to your friend. It is easy to be sincere and passive.”

Percy struck his brows. “Can you mean that Edward Blancove is the man?”

“Oh! no. Edward will never marry any one. I do him the justice to say that his vice is not that of unfaithfulness. He had but one love, and her heart is quite dead. There is no marriage for him—she refuses. You may not understand the why of that, but women will. She would marry him if she could bring herself to it;—the truth is, he killed her pride. Her taste for life has gone. She is bent on her sister’s marrying your friend. She has no other thought of marriage, and never will have. I know the state. It is not much unlike mine.”

Waring fixed her eyes. “There is a man?”

“Yes,” she answered bluntly.

“It is somebody, then, whose banker’s account is, I hope, satisfactory.”

“Yes, Percy;” she looked eagerly forward, as thanking him for releasing her from a difficulty. “You still can use the whip, but I do not feel the sting. I marry a banker’s account. Do you bear in mind the day I sent after you in the park? I had just heard that I was ruined. You know my mania for betting. I heard it, and knew when I let my heart warm to you that I could never marry you. That is one reason, perhaps, why I have been an enigma. I am sincere in telling Algy I shall take the name of Blancove. I marry the banker. Now take this old gift of yours.”

Percy grasped the handkerchief, and quitted her presence forthwith, feeling that he had swallowed a dose of the sex to serve him for a lifetime. Yet he lived to reflect on her having decided practically, perhaps wisely for all parties. Her debts expunged, she became an old gentleman's demure young wife, a sweet hostess, and, as ever, a true friend: something of a miracle to one who had inclined to make a heroine of her while imagining himself to accurately estimate her deficiencies. Honourably by this marriage the lady paid for such wild oats as she had sown in youth.

There were joy-bells for Robert and Rhoda, but none for Dahlia and Edward.

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Dahlia lived seven years her sister's housemate, nurse of the growing swarm. She had gone through fire, as few women have done in like manner, to leave their hearts among the ashes; but with that human heart she left regrets behind her. The soul of this young creature filled its place. It shone in her eyes and in her work, a lamp to her little neighbourhood; and not less a lamp of cheerful beams for one day being as another to her. In truth, she sat above the clouds. When she died she relinquished nothing. Others knew the loss. Between her and Robert there was deeper community on one subject than she let Rhoda share. Almost her last words to him, spoken calmly, but with the quaver of breath resembling sobs, were: "Help poor girls."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

You who may have cared for her through her many tribulations, have no fear
Can a man go farther than his nature?
Cold curiosity
Found by the side of the bed, inanimate, and pale as a sister of death
Sinners are not to repent only in words
So long as we do not know that we are performing any remarkable feat
There were joy-bells for Robert and Rhoda, but none for Dahlia