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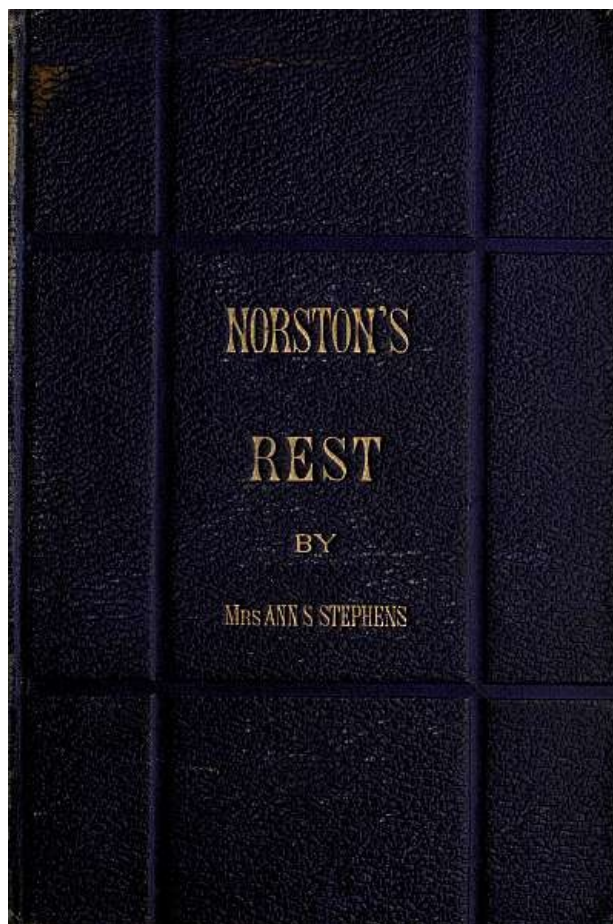
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**NORSTON'S REST.**

**BY**

**MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.**

AUTHOR of "BERTHA'S ENGAGEMENT," "FASHION AND FAMINE," "MABEL'S MISTAKE,"  
"THE OLD COUNTESS," "RUBY GRAY'S STRATEGY," "THE REIGNING BELLE,"  
"LORD HOPE'S CHOICE," "MARRIED IN HASTE," "THE SOLDIER'S ORPHANS,"  
"WIVES AND WIDOWS; OR, THE BROKEN LIFE," "MARY DERWENT,"  
"THE OLD HOMESTEAD," "A NOBLE WOMAN," "THE CURSE OF GOLD,"  
"THE GOLD BRICK," "DOUBLY FALSE," "PALACES AND PRISONS,"  
"THE HEIRESS," "SILENT STRUGGLES," "REJECTED WIFE,"  
"BELLEHOOD AND BONDAGE," "WIFE'S SECRET."

*Why did he love her? Ask the passing breeze  
Why it has left the lilies in their bloom—  
The great white blossoms of magnolia trees,  
And jasmine flowers, that kindle up the gloom  
Of Southern woods, where the vast live oak grows,  
And mocking birds sing love notes to the rose.  
Ask why it turned from these and lowly flew  
To kiss the purple violets in their dew.*

*Yes, ask the breezes;—love is like to them  
In the free poising of his restless wing.  
Sometimes he searches for a priceless gem,  
But often takes a pebble from the spring.  
To his veiled eyes the humble pebble shines  
Bright as a jewel from Golconda's mines.  
Expect no answer why love chooses so—  
His reasons are as vague as winds that blow.*

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**TO**  
**MRS. GEN. WILLIAM LESLIE CAZNEAU,**  
**OF**  
**KEITH HALL, JAMAICA, W. I.**  
**ONE OF**  
**THE OLDEST AND DEAREST FRIENDS THAT I**  
**HAVE,**  
**THIS BOOK**  
**IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.**

ANN S. STEPHENS.

NEW YORK, *May 31, 1877.*

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# NORSTON'S REST.

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## CHAPTER I.

[25]

### GATHERING OF THE HUNT.

**I**N the highest grounds of a park, almost an estate in itself, stood one of those noble old mansions that are so interwoven with the history of mother England, that their architecture alone is a record of national stability and ever-increasing civilization, written out in the strength of stone and the beauty of sculpture. This building, however grand in historical associations, was more especially the monument of one proud race, the Hursts of "Norston's Rest."

Generation after generation the Hursts had succeeded in unbroken descent to "The Rest" and its vast estates since the first foundation stone was laid, and that was so long ago that its present incumbent, Sir Noel Hurst, would have smiled in derision had the Queen offered to exchange his title for that of a modern duke.

Sir Noel might well be proud of his residence, which, like its owners, had kept pace with the progress of art and the discoveries of science known to the passing generations; for each had contributed something to its gradual construction, since the first rough tower was built with the drawbridge and battlements of feudal times, to the present imposing structure, where sheets of plate glass took the place of arrow slits, and the lace-work of sculpture was frozen into stone upon its walls.

[26]

This glorious old park, like the mansion it surrounded, brought much of its antique beauty from the dead ages. Druid stones were to be found beneath its hoary old oaks. Its outer verge was wild as an American forest, and there one small lake of deep and inky blackness scarcely felt a gleam of sunshine from month to month. But nearer the old mansion this wilderness was turned into an Eden: lawns of velvet grass—groves where the sunshine shone through the bolls of the trees, turning the grass under them to gold—lakes starred half the summer with the snow of water-lilies—rose gardens that gave a rare sweetness to the passing wind—shadowy bridle-paths and crystal streams spanned by stone bridges—all might be seen or guessed at from the broad terrace that fronted the mansion.

Here all was light gayety and pleasant confusion. Sir Noel had many guests in the house, and they were all out upon the terrace, forming a picture of English life such as no country on earth can exhibit with equal perfection.

It was the first day of the hunt, and the gay inmates of the house were out in the bright freshness of the morning, prepared for a glorious run with the hounds. The gentlemen brilliant in scarlet, the ladies half rivalling them in masculine hats, but softening the effect with gossamer veils wound scarf-like around them, and a graceful flow of dark drapery.

Beneath, breaking up the gravel of the carriage road with many an impatient hoof, was a crowd of grooms holding slender-limbed horses, whose coats shone like satin, when the sun touched them, while their hoofs smote the gravel like the restless feet of gipsy dancing-girls when a thrill of music stirs the blood.

[27]

Further on keepers were scattered about, some looking admiringly at the brilliant picture before them, others holding back fiery young dogs, wild for a run with their companions of the kennel.

Gradually the light laughter and cheerful badinage passing on the terrace died into the silence of expectation. The party was evidently incomplete. Sir Noel was there in his usual dress, speaking with polite composure, but casting an anxious look now and then into the open doors of the hall.

Some fair lady was evidently waited for who was to ride the chestnut horse drawn up nearest the steps, where he was tossing his head with an impatience that half lifted the groom from his feet when he attempted to restrain the reckless action.

It was the Lady Rose, a distant relative of Sir Noel's, who had been her guardian from childhood, and now delighted to consider her mistress of "The Rest," a position he fondly hoped she might fill for life.

Sir Noel came forward as she appeared, and for a moment the two stood together, contrasted by years, but alike in the embodiment of patrician elegance. She in the bloom and loveliness of her youth: he in that exquisite refinement which had been his inheritance through a long line of cultivated and honorable ancestry. Turning from Sir Noel, Lady Rose apologized to his guests, and with a winning smile, besought their forgiveness for her tardy appearance.

[28]

That moment a young man, who had been giving some orders to the grooms, came up the steps and approached the lady.

"Have you become impatient?" she said, blushing a little. "I am so grieved!"

The young man smiled, as he gave her a fitting answer. Then you saw at once the relationship that he held with Sir Noel. It was evident, not only in the finely cut features, but in the dignified quietude of manner that marked them both.

"Mack has no idea of good breeding, and is getting fiercely impatient," he said, glancing down at the chestnut horse.

Lady Rose cast a bright smile upon her guests.

"Ladies, do not let me keep you waiting."

There was a general movement toward the steps, but the young lady turned to Sir Noel again.

"Dear uncle, I wish you were going. I remember you in hunting-dress when I was a little girl."

"But I have grown old since then," answered the baronet, with a faint smile.

"This is my first day, and I shall be almost afraid without you," she pleaded.

The baronet smiled, shook his head, and glanced at his son.

"You will have younger and better care," he said.

The young man understood this as a request that he should take especial care of his cousin, for such the lady was in a remote degree, and for an instant seemed to hesitate. Lady Rose saw this, and, with a hot flush on her face, ran down the steps.

Young Hurst was by her side in a second, but she sprang to the saddle, scarcely touching his proffered hand with her foot; then wheeled the chestnut on one side, and waited for the rest to mount.

[29]

Down came the party, filling the broad stairway with shifting colors, chatting, laughing, and occasionally giving out little affected screams, as one fell short of the saddle, or endangered her seat by a too vigorous leap; but all this only added glee to the occasion, and a gayer party than that never left the portal of "Norston's Rest" even in the good old hawking days of long ago.

Young Hurst took his place by the side of Lady Rose, and was about to lead the cavalcade down the broad avenue, which swept through more than a mile of the park before it reached the principal entrance gate, but instantly there arose a clamor of feminine opposition.

"Not that way! It would lead them in the wrong direction; let them take a run through the park. They would have rougher riding than that before the day was over."

Young Hurst seemed disturbed by this proposal; he even ventured to expostulate with his father's guests. "The park was rough in places," he said, "and the side entrance narrow for so large a party."

His argument was answered by a merry laugh. The ladies turned their horses defiantly, and a cloud of red coats followed them. Away to the right the whole cavalcade took its way where the sun poured its golden streams on the turf under the trees, or scattered itself among the leaves of the hoary old oaks that in places grew dangerously close together.

As they drew toward that portion of the park known as "The Wilderness," a wonderfully pretty picture arrested the swift progress of the party, and the whole cavalcade moved more slowly as it came opposite a small rustic cottage of stone, old, moss-grown, and picturesque, wherever its hoary walls could be seen, through masses of ivy and climbing roses. One oriel window was discovered through the white jasmine that clustered around it, and the verbenas, heliotrope, and scarlet geraniums that crept beneath it from the ground.

[30]

The vast park, in whose deepest and coolest verdure this little dwelling stood, was like a world in itself; but through the noble old trees the stately mansion-house they had left could be seen in glimpses from this more humble dwelling. This stood on the edge of a ravine, left in all its ferny wildness, through which a stream of crystal water leaped and sparkled, and sent back soft liquid murmurs, as it flowed down in shadows, or leaped in bright cascades to a lake that lay in the wildest and lowest depths of the park, as yet invisible. Young Hurst had urged his horse forward when he came in sight of this wood-nest, and an angry flush swept over his face when the party slackened its speed to a walk, and for an instant stopped altogether, as it came in front of the rustic porch; for there, as if startled by the sudden rush of hoofs, stood a young girl, framed in by the ivy and jasmine. She had one foot on the threshold of the door, and was looking back over her left shoulder, as if held in that charming attitude by a sudden impulse of curiosity while she was retreating. Two or three exclamations broke from the gentlemen, who were taken by surprise by this beautiful picture; for in her pose, in the dark frightened eyes, and the warm coloring of face and garments, the girl was a wonder of picturesque beauty.

"Who is she? Where did the pretty gipsy come from?" questioned one of the gentlemen nearest to Hurst. "Upon my word, she hardly seems real."

[31]

"She is the daughter of my father's gardener," said Hurst, lifting his hunting-cap as the girl's eyes sought him out in her sudden panic. "Shall we ride on, gentlemen? Our presence seems to disturb her."

"Is it true? Is the pretty thing only a gardener's child?" questioned one of the ladies, drawing close to Lady Rose.

"She certainly is only that," was the low, almost forced answer. "We have always thought her pretty, and she is certainly good."

Hurst heard this and turned a grateful look upon the fair girl. She saw it, and for an instant the color left her face. Then she touched her horse, and the cavalcade dashed after her through the depths of the park and into the open country, where the hounds were to meet, all feeling in a

different way that there was some mystery in the living picture they had admired.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE HILL-SIDE HOUSE.

**A**T the grand entrance of the park a young man had been waiting with a desperate determination to take some part in the hunt, though he was well aware that his presence in such company must be an intrusion; for he was the only son of a farmer on the estate, and had just received education enough to unfit him for usefulness in his own sphere of life and render his presumption intolerable to those above him.

He had not ventured on a full hunting-suit, but wore the cap, boots, and gloves with an air that should, he was determined, distinguish him from any of the grooms, and perhaps admit him into the outskirts of the hunt, if audacity could accomplish nothing more. The horse, which he sat with some uneasiness, had been purchased for the occasion unknown to his father, who had intrusted the selection of a farm-horse to his judgment, and was quite ignorant that the beast had been taken out for any other purpose. As the young man rode this horse up and down in sight of the gate, a groom came through and answered, when questioned about the hunting party, that it had started half an hour before across the park.

[32]

With an oath at the time he had lost, young Storms put the horse to his speed and was soon in the open country, but the animal, though a good one, was no match for the full-blooded action for which Sir Noel's stables were famous. After riding across the country for an hour, as it seemed to him, wondering what course the hunt would take, the horse suddenly lifted his ears, gathered up his limbs, and, before his rider could guide the movement, leaped a low wall into a corn-field and was scouring toward some broken land beyond, when a flash of darkness shot athwart his path, and the fox, routed from his covert, dashed across the field. After it came the dogs, red-mouthed with yelping, clearing the hedges with scattered leaps, and darting swiftly, as shot arrows, in the track of the fox.

After them came the hunt, storming across the field, over walls and ditches, and winding up the long slope of the hill, scattering rays of scarlet flame as it went.

The rush of the dogs, the desperate speed of the fox, maddened Storms, as the first bay of the hounds had inspired his horse. He plunged on like the rest, eager and cruel as the hounds. For once he would be in at the death.

[33]

Storms had done some rough riding in preparation for this event, but he lacked the cool courage that aids a horse in a swift race or dangerous leap. In wild excitement he wheeled and made a dash at the wall. The horse took his leap bravely, but a ditch lay on the other side, and he fell short, hurling his rider among the weeds and brambles that had concealed its depths.

The young man was stunned by the sudden shock, and lay for a time motionless among the weeds that had probably saved his life, but he gathered himself up at last and looked around. The hunt was just sweeping over the crest of the hill, and half-way up its face his horse was following, true to its instincts.

The young man felt too giddy for anger, and for a time his mind was confused; still no absolute injury had happened to him, and after gathering up his cap and dusting his garments, he would have been quite ready to mount again, and saw his horse go over the hill with an oath which might have been changed to blows had the beast been within his control.

The scenery around him was in some respects familiar, but he could not recognize it from that standpoint or determine how far he was from home. In order to make himself sure of this he mounted the hill, from whence he could command a view of the country.

A lovely prospect broke upon the young man when he paused to survey it: below him lay a broad valley, composed of a fine expanse of forest and farming land, through which a considerable stream sparkled and wound and sent its huddling crystal through green hollows and shady places till its course was lost in the distance.

[34]

This river Storms knew well. It passed through the "Norston's Rest" estate, but that was so broad and covered so many miles in extent that his position was still in doubt.

Storms was not a man to occupy himself with scenery for its own sake, however beautiful or grand; so, after a hurried glance around him, he proceeded to mount higher up the hill. The declivity where he stood sank down to the river so gradually that several houses were built on its slope, and most of the land was under some sort of cultivation. The nearest of these houses was a low structure, old and dilapidated, on which the sunshine was lying with pleasant brightness. If nature had not been so bountiful to this lovely spot, the house might have been set down as absolutely poverty-stricken, but, years before, some training hand had so guided nature in behalf of the beautiful, that Time, in destroying, made it also picturesque.

Storms observed this without any great interest, but he had attained some idea of thrift on his

father's farm, and saw, with contempt, that no sign of plenty, or even comfort, was discernible about the place. It was a broken picture—nothing more; but an artist would have longed to sketch the old place, for a giant walnut-tree flung its great canopy of branches over the roof, and, farther down the slope of the hill, a moss-grown old apple orchard, whose gnarled limbs and quivering leaves would have driven him wild, had yielded up its autumnal fruit.

There was a low, wide porch in front of the house, over which vines of scant leafiness and bristling with dead twigs crept toward the thatched roof. The walls about the house were broken in many places, and left in gaps, through which currant and gooseberry-bushes wound themselves outward in green masses.

[35]

At the end of this enclosure there had been some attempts at gardening; but plenty of weeds were springing up side by side with the vegetables, and both were richly overtopped in irregular spaces by clusters of thyme that had found root at random among the general neglect.

All this might have given joy to a man of æsthetic taste, but Storms would never have looked at it a second time but for some object that he saw flitting through the garden, that brightened everything around, as a tropical bird kindles up the dense foliage of a jungle.

It was a young girl, with a good deal of scarlet in her dress and a silk handkerchief of many colors knotted about her neck. She was bareheaded, and the sunshine striking down on her abundant black hair, sifted a gleam of purple through it, rich beyond description.

The young man was bewildered by this sudden appearance, and stood a while gazing upon it. Then his face flushed and a vivid light came into his eyes.

"By Jove, there's something worth looking after here," he said. "The creature moves like a leopard, and jumps—goodness, how she does jump across the beds! I must get a nearer view."

From that distance it was difficult to judge accurately of the girl's face; but there was no mistaking the easy sway of her movements or the picturesque contrast of her warmly hued garments with the leafy shadows around her.

She was evidently a reckless gardener, for half the time she leaped directly into the vegetable beds, treading down the shoots that were tinging them with departing greenness. All at once she dropped on her knees and began to pull up some beets, from which she vigorously shook the clinging soil.

[36]

When she arose with her handful of green leaves and roots, Storms became conscious that the old house, with all its proofs of neglect, made an attractive picture.

"I will ask for a cup of milk or a drink of water," he thought; "that will give me a good look at her face."

The old house was half-way down the hill, along which the young man strolled. The gate scraped a semicircle in the earth as he opened it and made for the porch, from which he could see a bare hallway and a vista through the back door, which stood open.

A gleam of color which now and then fluttered in view led the young man on. The boards creaked under his tread as he went down the hall and stood upon the threshold of the door, watching the girl as she stooped by the well, holding her garments back with one hand while she dashed her vegetables up and down in a pail of water which she had just poured from the bucket.

She looked up suddenly, and something that lay in those large black eyes, the mobile mouth, the bright expression fascinated him. She was picturesque, and just a little awkward the moment she became conscious that a stranger was so near her.

"I have had a long walk, and am thirsty. Will you give me a glass of water or a cup of milk?" he said, moving toward the well. The girl dropped her beets into the pail, and stood gazing on her strange visitor, half shy, half belligerent. At last she spoke:

"The cow has not been milked this morning," she said, "and yesterday's cream has not been skimmed; but here is water in the bucket, and I will bring a cup from the house."

"Thank you."

She was gone in an instant, and came back with a tumbler of thick, greenish glass in her hand, which she dipped into the bucket and drew out with the water sparkling like diamonds as it overflowed the glass.

[37]

As the young man drank, a cow that had been pasturing in the orchard thrust its head over the wall and lowed piteously.

The young man smiled as he took the glass from his lips.

"I think the cow yonder would be much happier if I had a cup of her milk," he said.

"Well, if you must have it!" answered the girl, dashing some water left in the glass on the stones around the well, and, with a careless toss of the head, she went into the kitchen and came out carrying a pail in one hand and an earthen mug in the other.

"Shall I go with you?" questioned Storms, holding out his hand for the pail, but she swung it out of his reach and went down the empty hall, laughing the encouragement she would not give in words.

The young man followed her. In pushing open the gate their hands met. The girl started, and a hot blush swept her face.

"You should be a gentleman," she said, regarding his dress with some curiosity.

Storms blushed crimson. The suggestion flattered him intensely.

"Why should you think so?" he questioned.

"Because working people in these parts never dress like that, gloves and all!" she answered,



surveying him from head to foot with evident admiration. "A whole crowd of them—ladies too—went by just now with a swarm of yelping dogs ahead, and a little fox, scared half to death, running for its life. Are you one of them?"

[38]

"I might have been, only the brute of a horse made a bolt and left me behind," said Storms, with rising anger.

"A horse! oh, yes, I saw one limping over the hill after the rest went out of sight. Poor fellow, he was lamed."

"I hope so, the brute, for he has given me a long walk home, and no end of trouble after, I dare say; but if it hadn't happened, I should have missed seeing you."

Again the girl blushed, but carried her confusion off with a toss of the head.

That moment the cow, impatient for notice, came up to her, lowing softly, and dropping foamy grass from her mouth. Usually it had been the girl's habit to plant her foot upon the grass and sit upon the heel as she milked; but all at once she became ashamed of this rough method, and looked around for something to sit upon. The garden wall had broken loose in places. The young man brought a fragment of rock from it and dropped it on the ground.

As she seated herself, slanting the pail down before her, he took up the mug from the grass where she had dropped it.

"I must have my pay first," he said, stooping down, and holding the mug to be filled.

The soft sound of the milk, as it frothed into the mug, was overpowered by the laughter of the girl, who saucily turned the white stream on his hand.

He laughed also, and shook off the drops, while the foam trembled on his lips; then he bent down again, asking for more. Thus, with his eyes meeting hers if she looked up, and his breath floating across her cheek, this girl went on with her task, wondering in her heart why work could all at once have become so pleasant.

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"There," she said at last, starting up from her hard seat, "that is done. Now she may go back to her pasture."

As if she understood the words, that mild cow walked slowly away, cropping a tuft of violets that grew by the stone fence as she went.

Storms reached out his hand for the pail.

"Shall I help you?"

"No, thank you," she answered, turning her black eyes, full of mischief, upon him. "I can do very well without."

If this was intended for a rebuff, the young man would not understand it as such. He followed her into the house, without waiting for an invitation, and remained there for more than an hour, chatting familiarly with the girl, whose rude good-humor had particular charms for him.

In a crafty but careless way he questioned her of her history and domestic life. She answered him freely enough; but there was not much to learn. Her father had come into that part of the country when she was quite a child. A mother?—Of course she had a mother once, but that was before she could remember—long before the old man came to that house, which she had kept for him from that day out.

Storms looked around the room in which they sat, and a faint, derisive smile came across his lips, for there was dust on everything, and venerable cobwebs hung in the corners.

"Wonderful housekeeping it must have been!" he thought, while the girl went on.

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Did her father own the house? Of course he did; she had seen the lease—a long one—which gave it to him for almost nothing, with her own eyes. Still, that did not make him very rich, and he had to go out to day's work for a living when farmers wanted help, and not having much strength to give, got poor wages, and sometimes no work at all.

"Was her father an old man?"

Yes, old enough to be her grandfather. Good as gold, too, for he never scolded her, and was sure to make believe he wasn't hungry when she had no supper ready after a hard day's work, which was often enough, for if there was anything she hated it was washing dishes and setting out tables.

"Isn't that rather hard on your father?" questioned the young man.

Judith answered, with a heavy shrug of the shoulders, that she did not think it was, for he never did more than heave a little sigh, then take up the Bible or some other book, if he could find one, and read till bedtime.

"A book! Does he read much?" asked Storms, really surprised.

Read! Judith rather thought he did! Nothing seemed to pacify him when he was tired and hungry like a book. Where did he get the books? Why, folks were always lending them to him; especially the clergyman. She herself might never have learned to read or write if it had not been for her father; and then, what would she have done all alone in the old house from morning till night? What did she read? Why, everything that she could lay her hands on. The girls about had plenty of paper-covered books, and she always managed to get hold of them somehow. It was when she had promised to read them through in no time that her father had to go without his supper oftenest.

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Storms asked to look at some of these volumes, if she had any on hand.

After a little hesitation, Judith went into the kitchen and brought a soiled novel, with half the paper cover torn off, which had been hidden under the bread-tray.

The smile deepened on the young man's lips as he turned over the dingy pages and read a passage here and there. After a while he lifted his eyes, full of sinister light, to hers, and asked if her father knew that she read these books so much.

The girl laughed, and said that she wasn't likely to tell him, when he thought she was busy with the tracts and history books that he left for her. Then she gave a little start, and looked anxiously out of the window, saying, with awkward hesitation, that her father was working for the clergyman that day, and might come home early.

Storms arose at once. He had no wish to extend the pleasant acquaintance he was making to the old man, if he was "good as gold."

As he passed into the lane, the cow, that was daintily cropping the grass on one side, lifted her head and followed him with her great, earnest eyes, that seemed to question his presence there as if she had been human.

He took a step out of the way and patted her on the neck, at which she tossed her head and wheeled up a bank, evidently not liking the caresses of a stranger.

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## CHAPTER III.

### WAITING AND WATCHING.

**T**HAT night, long after the party at "Norston's Rest" had returned from the hunt, John Storms, a farmer on the estate, who stood at the door of his house chafing and annoyed by the disappearance of his son with the new horse that had just been purchased, heard an unequal tramping of hoofs and a strange sound of pain from the neighboring stable-yard. Taking a lantern, for it was after dark, he went out and was startled by the limping approach of the poor hunter, that had found its way home and was wandering about the enclosure with the bridle dragging under his feet, and empty stirrups swinging from the torn saddle.

The old man had been made sullen and angry enough by the unauthorized disappearance of his son with the new purchase; but when he saw the empty saddle and disabled condition of the lamed animal, a sudden panic seized upon him. He hurried into the house with strange pallor on his sunburned face and a tremor of the knees, which made him glad to drop into a chair when he reached the kitchen, where his wife was moving about her work with the same feverish restlessness that had ended so painfully with him.

The woman, startled by his appearance, came up to him in subdued agitation.

"It is only that the new beast has come home lamed, and with the saddle empty," he said, in reply to her look. "I must go to the village, or find some of the grooms. Keep up a good heart, dame, till I come back."

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"Is he hurt? Oh, John! is there any sign that our lad has come to harm?" questioned the poor woman, shaking from head to foot, as she supported herself by the back of the chair from which her husband started in haste to be off.

"I will soon know—I will soon know"—was his answer. "God help us!"

"God help us!" repeated the woman, dropping helplessly down into the chair, as her husband put on his hat and went hurriedly through the door; and there she sat trembling until another sound of pain, that seemed mournfully human, reached her from the stable-yard.

This appeal to her compassion divided somewhat the agony of her fears, and strengthened her for kindly exertion. "Poor beast," she thought, "no one is taking care of him."

She looked around; no aid was near. The tired farm-hands had gone to bed, or wandered off to the village. She was rather glad of that. It was something that she could appease her own anxiety by giving help to anything in distress. Taking up the lantern, which was still alight, she went toward the stable, and there limping out of the darkness met the wounded horse. An active housewife like Mrs. Storms required no help in relieving the animal of its trappings. She unbuckled the girth, took off the saddle, and passed her hand gently down the fore leg, that shrunk and quivered even under that slight touch.

"It is a sprain, and a bad one," she thought, leading the poor beast into his stall, where he lay down wearily; "but no bones are broken. Oh, if he could only speak now and tell me if my lad is alive—or—or—Oh, my God, have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me!"

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Here the poor woman leaned her shoulder against the side of the stall, and a burning moisture broke into her eyes, filling them with pain; for this woman was given to endurance, and, with such, weeping is seldom a relief; but looking downward at the pathetic and almost human appeal in the great wild eyes of the wounded horse, tears partaking of compassion as well as grief swelled into drops and ran down her face in comforting abundance. So, patting the poor beast on his soiled neck, she went to the house again and heating some decoction of leaves that she gathered from under the garden wall, came back with her lantern and bathed the swollen limb until the horse laid his head upon the straw, and bore the slackened pain with patience.

It was a pity that some other work of mercy did not present itself to assuage the suspense that was becoming almost unendurable to a woman waiting to know of the life or death of her only son. She could not sit down in her accustomed place and wait, but turned from the threshold heart-sick, and, still holding the lantern, wandered up and down a lane that ran half a mile before it reached the highway—up and down until it seemed to her as if unnumbered hours had passed since she had seen her husband go forth to learn whether she was a childless mother or not. "Would he never come?"

She grew weary at last, and went into the house, looking older by ten years than she had done before that shock came, and there she sat, perfectly still, gazing into the fire. Once or twice she turned her eyes drearily on a wicker basketful of work, where a sock, she had been darning before her husband came in, lay uppermost, with a threaded darning needle thrust through the heel, but it seemed ages since she had laid the work down, and she had no will to take it up; for the thought that her son might never need the sock again pierced her like a knife. [45]

Turning from the agony of this thought she would fasten her sad eyes on the smouldering coals as they crumbled into ashes, starting and shivering when some chance noise outside awoke new anguish of expectation.

The sound she dared not listen for came at last. A man's footstep, slow and heavy, turned from the lane and paused at the kitchen door.

She did not move, she could not breathe, but sat there mute and still, waiting.

The door opened, and John Storms entered the kitchen where his wife sat. She was afraid to look on his face, and kept her eyes on the fire, shivering inwardly. He came across the room and laid his hand on her shoulder. Then she gave a start, and looked in her husband's face: it was sullenly dark.

"He is not dead?" she cried out; seeing more anger than grief in the wrathful eyes. "My son is not dead?"

"No, not dead; keep your mind easy about that; but he and I will have a reckoning afore the day breaks, and one he shall remember to his dying day. So I warn you keep out of it for this time: I mean to be master now."

Here Storms seated himself in an empty chair near the fire, and stretching both feet out on the hearth, thrust a hand into each pocket of his corduroy dress. With the inconsistency of a rough nature, he had allowed the anguish and fright that had seized upon him with the first idea of his son's danger to harden into bitterness and wrath against the young man, the moment he learned that all his apprehensions had been groundless. Even the pale, pitiful face of his wife had no softening effect upon him. [46]

"He is alive—but you say nothing more. Tell me is our son maimed—is he hurt?"

"Hurt! He deserves to have his neck broken. I tell you the lad is getting beyond our management—wandering about after the gentry up yonder as if he belonged with them; going after the hunt and almost getting his neck broke on the new horse that fell short of his leap at a wall with a ditch on t'other side, that the best hunter in Sir Noel's stables couldn't'a' cleared."

"Oh, father! you heard that; but was he much hurt? Why didn't they bring him home at once?" cried the mother, with a fever of dread in her eyes.

"Hurt! not half so much as he deserves to be," answered the man, roughly. "Why, that horse may be laid up for a month; besides, at his best, there isn't a day's farm-work under his shining hide. The lad cheated us in the buying of him, a hunter past his prime—that is what has been put upon me, and serves me right for trusting him."

"But you will not tell me, is our Richard hurt?" cried the woman, in a voice naturally mild, but now sharp with anxiety.

"Hurt! not he. Only made a laughing-stock for the grooms and whippers-in who saw him cast head over heels into a ditch, and farther on in the day trudging home afoot."

The woman fell back in her chair with a deep sigh of relief.

"Then he was not hurt. Oh, father! why could ye not tell me this at first?"

"Because ye are aye so foolish o'er the lad, cosseting a strapping grown-up loon as if he was a baby; that is what'll be his ruin in the end." [47]

"He is our only son," pleaded the mother.

"Aye, and thankful I am that we have no more of the same kind."

"Oh, father!"

"There, there; don't anger me, woman. The things I heard down yonder have put me about more than a bit. The lad will be coming home, and a good sound rating he shall have."

Here farmer Storms thrust his feet still farther out on the hearth, and sat watching the fire with a sullen frown growing darker and darker on his face.

As the time wore on, Mrs. Storms saw that he became more and more irritated. His hands worked restlessly in his pockets, and, from time to time, he cast dark looks at the door.

These signs of ill humor made the woman anxious.

"It is going on to twelve," she said, looking at the brazen face of an old upright clock that stood in a corner of the kitchen. "I am tired."

"What keeps ye from bed, then? As for me, I'll not quit this chair till Dick comes home."

Mrs. Storms drew back into her chair and folded both hands on her lap. She was evidently afraid that her husband and son should meet while the former was in that state of mind.

"I wonder where he is stopping," she said, unconsciously speaking aloud.

"At the public. Where else can he harbor at this time of night? When Dick is missing one is safe to look for him there."

"It may be that he has stopped in at Jessup's. I am sure that pretty Ruth could draw him from the public any day."

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"But it'll not be long, as things are going, before Jessup 'll forbid him the house. The girl has high thoughts of herself, with all her soft ways, and will have a good bit of money when her god-mother dies and the old gardener has done with his. If Dick goes on at this pace some one else will be sure to step in, and there isn't such another match for him in the whole county."

"But he may be coming from the gardener's cottage now," suggested the mother. "Young men do not always give it out at home when they visit their sweethearts. You remember—"

Here a smile, full of pleasant memories, softened the old man's face, and his hard hand stole into his wife's lap, searching shyly for hers.

"Maybe I do forget them times more than I ought, wife; but no one can say I ever went by your house to spend a night at the ale-house—now, can they?"

"But Dick may not do it either," pleaded the mother.

"I tell you, wife, there is no use blinding ourselves: the young man spends half his time treating the lazy fellows of the neighborhood, for no one else has so much money."

The old lady sighed heavily.

"Worse than that! he joins in all the low sports of the place. Why, he is training rat-terriers in the stable and game-chickens in the barnyard. I caught him fighting them this very morning."

"Oh, John!" exclaimed the woman, ready to accuse any one rather than her only child; "if you had only listened to me when we took him out of school, and given him a bit more learning."

"He's got more learning by half than I ever had," answered the old man, moodily.

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"But you had your way to make and no time for much study; but we are well-to-do in the world, and our son need not work the farm like us."

"I don't know but you are right, old woman. Dick never will make a good farm-hand. He wants to be master or nothing."

"Hark—he is coming!" answered the wife, brightening up and laying her hand on the old man's arm.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SON'S RETURN.

**W**HEN Richard Storms entered his father's house that night it was with the air of a man who had some just cause of offence against the old people who had been so long waiting for him. His sharp and rather handsome features were clouded with temper as he pushed open the kitchen door and held it while two ugly dogs crowded in, and his first words were insolently aggressive.

"What! up yet, sulking over the fire and waiting for a row, are you? Well, have it out; one of the men told me that brute of a horse had got home with his leg twisted. I wish it had been his neck. Now, what have you got to say about it?"

The elder Storms started up angrily, but his wife laid a hand on his shoulder and besought silence with her beseeching eyes. Then she was about to approach the young man, but one of the dogs snapped fiercely at her, and when the son kicked him, retreated, grinding a piece of her dress in his teeth.

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"You had better take care, mother! The landlord of the 'Two Ravens' has had him in training. He's been in a grand fight over yonder, and killed more rats than you'd want to count. That makes him savage, you know."

Mrs. Storms shrunk away from the danger, and in great terror crouched down by the oaken chair from which her husband had risen. The old man started forward, but before he could shake off the hold of his wife, who seized his garments in a spasm of distress, Richard had kicked both dogs through the door.

"Take that for your impudence," he said, fiercely. "To the kennel with you! it's the only place for such curs. Mother, mother, I say, get up; the whelps are gone. I didn't expect to find you out of bed, or they shouldn't have come in."

Mrs. Storms stood up, still shaking with fear, while Richard dropped into his father's chair and stretched his limbs out upon the hearth. The old man took another seat, frowning darkly.

"We have been talking about you—father and I," said the old woman, with a quiver of the passing fright in her voice.

"No good, I'll be sworn, if the old man had a hand in it," answered the son.

"You are wrong," said the mother, pressing her hand on the young man's shoulder. "No father ever thought more of a son, if you would only do something to please him now and then. He was speaking just now of letting you have more charge of the place."

"Well, that will come when I am my own master."

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"That is, when I am dead!" broke in the old man, with bitter emphasis. "I almost wish for death now. What your mother and I have to live for, God only knows."

"Hush, John, hush! Don't talk so. Richard will forget his idle ways, and be a blessing to us yet. Remember how we have spoiled him."

"There, there, mother, let him have it out. There's no use reasoning with him when his back is up," said the young man, stretching himself more comfortably and turning a belligerent look on the father.

Mrs. Storms bent over her son, greatly troubled.

"Don't anger your father, Dick. He was planning kindly for you."

"Planning what?—to keep me tied down here all my life?"

"If I have tried to do that," said the old man, "it came from more love than I felt like talking about. Your mother and I haven't many pleasures now, and when you are away so much we feel lonesome."

Dick turned in his chair and looked keenly at the old man, amazed by his unusual gentleness. The lines that seemed hard as steel in his young face relaxed a little.

"Why couldn't you have talked like that oftener, and made it a little more pleasant at home? One must have something of life. You know that as well as I do, father."

"Yes; your mother and I have been making allowances for that. Maybe things might have been managed for the better all along; but we must make the best of it now. As your mother says, a well-to-do man's only son should make something better of himself than a farm drudge; so we won't quarrel about it. Only be careful that the lass your mother and I have set our hearts on gets no evil news of you, or we shall have trouble there."

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Richard laughed at this and answered with an air of bravado, "No fear, no fear. The girl is too fond of me."

"But her father is a skittish man to deal with, once his back is up, and you will find it hard managing the lass: let him see you with them terriers at your heels, and he'll soon be off the bargain."

"If you are troubled about that, kick the dogs into the street and sell the game-chickens, if they crowd mother's bantams out. How can a dutiful son do more than that?"

"Ah, now you talk like a sensible lad! Make good time, and when you bring the lass home, mother and I will have a bit of a cottage on the land, and mayhap you will be master here."

"Is he in earnest, mother?"

"I think he is."

"And you, father?"

"For once I mean that your mother shall take her own way: mine has led to this."

The old man looked at the clock, and then on the wet marks of the dogs' feet on the kitchen floor, with grave significance.

Young Storms laughed a low, unpleasant laugh, which had nothing of genuine hilarity in it.

"You are right, father. We should only have gone from bad to worse. I don't take to hard work, but the other thing suits me exactly. You'll see that I shall come up to time in that."

Just then the old clock struck one with a hoarse, angry clang, as if wrathful that the morning should be encroached upon in that house.

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Mrs. Storms took up one of the candles and gave it to her son.

"Good-night, my son," she said, looking from the clock to her husband with pathetic tenderness in her voice. "Dick, you can kiss me good-night as you used to when I went to tuck up your bed in the winter. It'll seem like old times, won't it, husband? Shake hands with your father, too. It isn't many men as would give up as he has."

The young man kissed his mother, with some show of feeling, and shook hands with his father in a hesitating way; but altogether his manner was so conciliatory that it touched those honest hearts with unusual tenderness.

"You see what kindness can do with him," said Mrs. Storms, as she stood on the hearth with the other candlestick in her hand, while her husband raked up the fire. "He has gone up to bed with a smile on his face."

"People are apt to smile when they get their own way," muttered the old man, who was half ashamed of his concession. "But I have no idea of taking anything back. You needn't be afraid of that. The young man shall have his chance."

A sob was the only answer he got. Looking over his shoulder, as he put the shovel in its corner, he saw that tears were streaming down the old woman's face.

"Why, what are you crying about, mother?"

"I am so thankful."

The good woman might have intended to say more, but she broke off suddenly, and the words

died on her lips. The candle she held was darkened, and she saw that the wick was broadening at the top like a tiny mushroom, forming that weird thing called a "corpse-light" in the midst of the blaze.

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"What is the matter? What are you afraid of?" said the farmer, wondering at the paleness in his wife's face.

"Look," she said, pointing to the heavy wick. "It seems to have come all of a sudden."

"Only that?" said the old man, scornfully, snuffing out the corpse-light with his thumb and finger.

A shudder passed over the woman as those horny fingers closed on the corpse-light and flung it smoking into the ashes.

The old man had no sympathy with superstitions, and spoke to his wife more sharply than was kind, after the double fright that had shaken her nerves. Perhaps this thought came over him, for he patted her arm with his rough hand, awkwardly enough, not being given to much display of affection, and told her that she had for once got her own way, and mustn't be frightened out of what sleep was left for them between that and daylight by a smudge of soot in the candle.

"You can't expect candles to burn after midnight without crumpling up their wicks," he said, philosophically: "so come to bed. The lad is sound asleep by this time, I dare say."

These kind arguments did not have the desired effect, for the mother's eyes were full of tears, and her hand quivered under the weight of the candlestick, spite of all her efforts to conceal it from the observation of her husband.

In less than ten minutes the farmer was asleep, but his wife, being of a finer and more sensitive nature, could not rest. Like most countrywomen of her class, she mingled some degree of superstition even with her most religious thoughts. Notwithstanding her terror occasioned by the snarling dog, she might have slept well, for the scene that had threatened to end in rageful assault had subsided in unexpected concession; but the funereal blackness in that candle coming so close upon her fright completely unnerved her. Certain it is no sleep came to those weary eyes. Close them as she would, that unseemly light glared upon them, and to her weird imagination seemed to point out some danger for her son.

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At last the poor woman was seized with a desperate yearning of motherhood, which had often led her to her son's room when the helplessness of infancy or the perils of sickness appealed to her—a yearning that drew her softly from her bed. Folding a shawl over her night dress, she mounted the stairs and entered the chamber where the young man lay in slumber so profound that he was quite unconscious of her presence; for neither conscience nor tenderness ever took growth enough in his nature to disturb an animal want of any kind. But the light of a waning moon lay upon his face, so the woman fell upon her knees, and gazing on those features, which might not have seemed in any degree perfect to another, soothed herself into prayer, and, out of the tranquillity that brings, into the sleep her nature craved so much.

The morning light found her kneeling thus, with her cheek resting on his hand, which, in her tender unconsciousness, she had stolen and hidden away there.

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## CHAPTER V.

### CONFESSING HIS LOVE.

**N**ORSTON'S REST" was now in a state of comparative quiet. The throng of visitors that had made the place so brilliant had departed, and, for the first time in months, Sir Noel could enjoy the company of his son with a feeling of restfulness; for now the discipline of school and college lay behind the young man, and he was ready to begin life in earnest. After travelling a while on the continent he had entered upon the dignity of heir-ship with all the pomp and splendor of a great ovation, into which he had brought so much of kindly memory and generous purpose that his popularity almost rivalled the love and homage with which his father was regarded.

Sir Noel was a proud man—so proud that the keenest critic must have failed to discover one trace of the arrogant self-assumption that so many persons are ready to display as a proof of superiority. With Sir Noel this feeling was a delicate permeation of his whole being, natural to it as the blue blood that flowed in his veins, and as little thought of. Profound self-respect rendered encroachment on the reserve of another simply impossible. During the stay of his son at "The Rest" one fond hope had possessed the baronet, and that grew out of his intense love of two human beings that were dearest to him on earth—the young heir and Lady Rose Hubert.

It could not be asserted that ambition led to this wish; though the lady's rank was of the highest, and she was the inheritor of estates that made her a match even for the heir of "Norston's Rest." The baronet in the isolation of his long widowerhood had found in this fair girl all that he could have desired in a daughter of his own. Her delicacy of bloom and beauty appealed to his æsthetic taste. Her gayety and the spirituelle sadness into which it sometimes merged gave his home life a

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delightful variety. He could not think of her leaving "The Rest" without a pang such as noble-hearted fathers feel when they give away their daughters at the altar. To Sir Noel, Lady Rose was the brightest and most perfect being on earth, and the great desire of his heart was that she should become his daughter in fact, as she already was in his affections.

Filled with this hope he had watched with some anxiety for the influence this young lady's loveliness might produce upon his son, without in any way intruding his wishes into the investigation; for, with regard to the perfect freedom which every heart should have to choose a companionship of love for itself, this old patrician was peculiarly sensitive. Having in his own early years suffered, as few men ever had, by the uprooting of one great hope, he was peculiarly anxious that no such abiding calamity should fall on the only son and heir of his house, but he was not the less interested in the choice that son might make when the hour of decision came. With all his liberality of sentiment it had never entered the thoughts of the baronet that a man of his race could choose ignobly, or look beneath the rank in which he was born. To him perfect liberty of choice was limited, by education and family traditions, to a selection among the highest and the best in his own proud sphere of life. Thus it became possible that his sentiments, uttered under this unexplained limitation, might be honestly misunderstood.

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Some months had passed since the young heir had taken up his home at "The Rest"—pleasant months to the baronet, who had looked forward to this period with the longing affection which centred everything of love and pride on this one human being that man can feel for man. At first it had been enough of happiness that his son was there, honored, content—with an unclouded and brilliant future before him—but human wishes are limitless, and the strong desire that the young man should anchor his heart where his own wishes lay grew into a pleasant belief. How could it be otherwise, when two beings so richly endowed were brought into the close companionship of a common home?

One day, when the father and son chanced to be alone in the grand old library, where Sir Noel spent so much of his time, the conversation seemed naturally to turn upon some future arrangements regarding the estate.

"It has been a pleasant burden to me so far," said the old gentleman, "because every day made the lands a richer inheritance for you and your children; but now I am only waiting for one event to place the heaviest responsibility on your young shoulders."

"You mean," said the young man, flushing a little, "that you would impose two burdens upon me at once—a vast estate and some lady to preside over the old house."

The baronet smiled, and answered with a faint motion of the head.

Then the young man answered, laughingly:

"There is plenty of time for that. I have everything to learn before so great a trust should be given me. As for the house, no one could preside there better than the Lady Rose."

The baronet's face brightened.

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"No," he said, "we could hardly expect that. In all England it would be difficult to find a creature so lovely and so well fitted to the position."

Sir Noel faltered as he concluded this sentence. He had not intended to connect the idea of this lady so broadly with his wishes. To his refined nature it seemed as if her dignity had been sacrificed.

"She is, indeed, a marvel of beauty and goodness," answered the young man, apparently unmindful of the words that had disturbed his father. "I for one am in no haste to disturb her reign at 'Norston's Rest'."

Sir Noel was about to say: "But it might be made perpetual," but the sensitive delicacy natural to the man checked the thought before it formed itself into speech.

"Still it is in youth that the best foundations for domestic happiness are laid. I look upon it as a great misfortune when circumstances forbid a man to follow the first and freshest impulses of his heart—"

Here the baronet broke off, and a deep unconscious sigh completed the sentence.

Young Hurst looked at his father with awakened interest. The expression of sadness that came over those finely-cut features made him thoughtful. He remembered that Sir Noel had entered life a younger son, and that he had not left the army to take possession of his title and estates until after mid-age. He could only guess at the romance of success or disappointment that might have gone before; but even that awoke new sympathy in the young man's heart for his father.

"I can hardly think that there is any time of life for which a man has power to lay down for himself certain rules of action," he said. "To say that any man will or will not marry at any given period is to suppose him capable of great control over his own best feelings."

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"You are right," answered Sir Noel, with more feeling than he usually exhibited. "The time for a man to marry is when he is certainly in love."

"And the person?" questioned the young man, with a strange expression of earnestness in his manner.

"Ah! The person that he does love."

Sir Noel, thinking of his ward, was not surprised to see a flood of crimson rush over the young man's face, nor offended when he arose abruptly and left the library.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CONFESSIONS OF LOVE.

**T**HE baronet might, however, have been surprised had he seen Walton Hurst pass the Lady Rose on the terrace, only lifting his hat in recognition of her presence as he hurried into the park.

"He guesses at my madness, or, at the worst, he will forgive it," ran through his thoughts as he took a near route toward the wilderness, "and she—ah, I have been cruel in this strife to conquer myself. My love, my beautiful wild-bird! It will be sweet to see her eyes brighten and her mouth tremble under a struggle to keep back her smiles."

Thoughts like these occupied the young man until he stood before the gardener's cottage, and looked eagerly into the porch, hoping to see something besides the birds fluttering under the vines. He was disappointed: no one was there; but glancing through the oriel window he saw a gleam of warm color and the dejected droop of a head, that might have grown weary with looking out of the window; for it fell lower and lower, as if two unsteady hands were supporting the face. Hurst trod lightly over the turf, holding his breath, lifted the latch and stole into the little parlor in which the girl, we have once seen in the porch, was sitting disconsolately, as she had done hours each day through a lonely week.

"Ruth!"

The girl sprang to her feet, uttering a little cry of delight. Then an impulse of pride seized upon the heart that was beating so wildly, and she drew back, repudiating her own gladness.

"I hoped to find you here and alone," he said, holding out both hands with a warmth that astonished her; for she shrunk back and looked at him wonderingly.

"I have been away so long, and all the time longing to come; nay, nay, I will not have that proud lift of the head; for, indeed, I deserve a brighter welcome."

The girl had done her best to be reserved and cold, but how could she succeed with those pleading eyes upon her—those two hands searching for hers?

"It is so long, so long," she said, with sweet upbraiding in her eyes; "father has wondered why you did not come. It is very cruel neglecting him so."

Hurst smiled at her pretty attempt at subterfuge; for he really had not spent much of his time in visiting Jessup, though the gardener had been a devoted friend during his boyhood, and truly believed that it was old remembrances that brought the young man so often to his cottage.

"I fancy your father will not have missed me very much," he said.

"But he does; indeed, indeed he does."

"And you cared nothing?"

Ruth dropped her eyelids, and he saw that tears were swelling under them. Selfishly watching her emotion until the long black lashes were wet, he lifted her hands suddenly to his lips and kissed them, with passionate warmth.

She struggled, and wrenched her hands away from him.

"You must not—you must not: father would be *so* angry."

"Not if he knew how much I love you."

She stood before him transfigured; her black eyes opened wide and bright, her frame trembled, her hands were clasped.

"You love me—you?"

"Truly, Ruth, and dearly as ever man loved woman," was the earnest, almost solemn, answer.

The girl turned pale, even her lips grew white.

"I dare not let you," she said, in a voice that was almost a whisper. "I dare not."

"But how can you help it?" said Hurst, smiling at her terror.

"How can I help it?"

The girl lifted her hands as if to ward him away. This announcement of his love frightened her. A sweet unconscious dream that had neither end nor beginning in her young experience had been rudely broken up by it.

"You tremble—you turn pale. Is it because you cannot love me, Ruth?"

"Love you—love you?" repeated the girl, in wild bewilderment. "Oh, God! forgive me—forgive me! I do, I do!"

Her face was one flame of scarlet now, and she covered it with her hands—shame, terror, and a great ecstasy of joy seized upon her.

"Let me go, let me go, I cannot bear it," she pleaded, at length. "I dare not meet my father after this."

"But I dare take your hand in mine and say to him, as one honorable man should say to another: 'I love this girl, and some day she shall become my wife.'"

"Your wife!"

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"I did not know till now the sweetness that lies in a single word. Yes, Ruth, when a Hurst speaks of love he speaks also of marriage."

"No, no, that can never be—Sir Noel, Lady Rose, my father—you forget them all!"

"No, I forget nothing. Sir Noel is generous, and he loves me. You have always been a favorite with Lady Rose. As for your father—"

"He would die rather than drag down the old family like that. My father, in his way, is proud as Sir Noel. Besides—besides—"

"Well, what besides?"

"He has promised. He and John Storms arranged it long ago."

"Arranged what, Ruth?"

"That—that I should some day be mistress of the farm."

"Mistress of the farm—and you?"

"Oh, Mr. Hurst! it breaks my heart to think of it, but father's promise was given when I did not care so much, and I let it go on without rebelling."

Ruth held out her hands, imploringly, as she said this, but Hurst turned away from her, and began to pace up and down the little parlor, while she shrunk into the recess of the window, and watched him timidly through her tears. At last he came up to her, blaming his own anger.

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"This must never be, Ruth!"

"You do not know what a promise is to my father," said the girl, with piteous helplessness.

"Yes, I do know; but this is one he shall not keep."

Once more the young man took the hands she dared not offer him again, and pressed them to his lips. Then he went away full of anger and perplexity.

Ruth watched him through the window till his tall figure was lost in the windings of the path; then she ran up to her own little room, and throwing herself on the bed, wept until tears melted away her trouble, and became an exquisite pleasure. The ivy about the window shed a lovely twilight around her, and the shadows of its trembling leaves tinted the snowy whiteness of the pillow on which her cheek rested, with fairy-like embroidery. The place was like heaven to her. Here this young girl lay, thrilled heart and soul by the first passion of her womanhood. This feeling that burned on her cheek, and swelled in her bosom, was a delicious insanity. There was no hope in it—no chance for reason, but Hurst loved her, and that one thought filled the moment with joy.

With her hands clasped over her bosom, and her eyes closed in the languor of subsiding emotion, she lay as in a dream, save that her lips moved, as red rose-leaves stir when the rain falls on them, but all that they uttered was, "He loves me—he loves me."

If a thought of her father or of Richard Storms came to mar her happiness, she thrust it away, still murmuring, "He loves me. He loves me."

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After a time she began to reason, to wonder that this one man, to whom the giving of her childish admiration had seemed an unpardonable liberty, could have thought of her at all, except as he might give a moment's attention to the birds and butterflies that helped to make the old place pleasant. How could he—so handsome, so much above all other gentlemen of his own class—think of her while Lady Rose was near in all the splendor of her beauty and the grace of a high position!

"Was it that she was also beautiful?"

When this question arose in her mind, Ruth turned upon her pillow, and, half ashamed of the movement, looked into a small mirror that hung on the opposite wall. What she saw there brought a smile to her mouth and the flash of diamonds to the blackness of her eyes.

"Not like the Lady Rose," she thought, "not fair and white like her; but he loves me! He loves me!"

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## CHAPTER VII.

### JUDITH.

**R**UTH JESSUP was indeed more deeply pledged to Richard Storms than she was herself aware of. The old farmer and Jessup had been fast friends for years when these young people were born, and almost from the first it had become an understanding between them that their families should be united in these children. The two fathers had saved money in their hard-working and frugal lives, which was to lift the young people into a better social class than the parents had any wish to occupy, and each had managed to give to his child a degree of education befitting the advancement looked forward to in their future.

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Young Richard had accepted this arrangement with alacrity when he was old enough to

comprehend its advantages, for, of all the maidens in that neighborhood, Ruth Jessup was the most beautiful; and what was equally important to him, even in his boyhood, the most richly endowed. As for the girl herself, the importance of this arrangement had never been a subject of serious consideration.

Bright, gay, and happy in her nest-like home, she accepted this lad as a special playmate in her childhood, and had no repugnance to his society after that, so long as more serious things lay in the distance. Brought up with those habits of strict obedience so commendable in the children of English parents, she accepted without question the future that had seemed most desirable to her father, who loved her, as she well knew, better than anything on earth.

Indeed, there had been a time in her immature youth when the presence of young Storms filled all the girlish requirements of her life. Nay, as will sometimes happen, the very dash and insolence of his character had the charm of power for her; but since then the evil of his nature had developed into action, while her judgment, refined and strengthened, began to revolt from the traits that had seemed so bold and manly in the boy.

Jessup had himself been somewhat displeased by the idle habits of the young man, and had expostulated with the father on the subject so directly that Richard was put on a sort of probation after his escapade at the hunt, and found his presence at the gardener's cottage less welcome than it had been, much to his own disgust.

"I have given up the dogs and nursed that lame brute as if I had been his grandmother—what more can any reasonable man want?" he said one day when Jessup had looked coldly on him.

"If you would win favor with daughter Ruth, my lad, go less with that gang at 'The Two Ravens,' and turn a hand to help the old father. When that is done there will always be a welcome for you; but my lass has no mother to guide her, and I must take extra care that she does not match herself illy. Wait a while, and let us see the upshot of things."

"Is it that you take back your word?" questioned Richard, anxiously.

"Take back my word! Am I a man to ask that question of? No, no; I was glad about the terriers, and shall not be sorry to see you on the back of the horse when he is well, for he is a fair hunter and worth money; but daughter Ruth has heard of these things, and it'll be well to keep away for a bit till they have time to get out of her mind."

"I'll be sure to remember what you say, and do nothing to anger any one," said Storms, with more concession than Jessup expected, and the young man rode away burning with resentment.

"So I am to be put in a corner with a finger in my mouth till this pretty sweetheart of mine thinks fit to call me out of punishment. As if there were no other inn but 'The Two Ravens,' and no other lass worth making love to but her! Now, that the hunter is on his feet again, I'll take care that she'll know little of what I am doing."

This conversation happened a few days after the hunt. Since that time Storms had never been heard of at the "Two Ravens," and his name had begun to be mentioned with respect in the village, much to Jessup's satisfaction.

Occasionally, however, the young man was seen mounted on the hunter, and dressed like a gentleman, riding off into the country on business for his father. The people who met him believed this, and they gave him credit for the change that a few weeks had wrought.

Was it instinct in the animal, or premeditation in his rider that turned the hunter upon the old track the first time he was taken from the stable? Certain it is that Richard Storms rode him leisurely up the long hill and by the lane which led to the dilapidated house he had visited on the day of his misfortune, but without calling at the house.

After he had pursued this course a week or more, riding slowly in full view of the porch, until he was certain that one of its inmates had seen him, he turned from the road one day, left his horse under a chestnut tree that grew in the lane, and sauntered down the weedy path toward the house.

Looking eagerly forward, he saw Judith Hart in the porch. She was standing on a small wooden bench, with both arms uplifted and bare to the shoulders. Evidently the unpruned vines had broken loose, and she was tying them up again.

As she heard the sound of hoofs the girl stooped down and looked through the vines with eager curiosity.

She jumped down from the bench as she recognized the young man, a vivid flush of color coming into her face and a sparkle of gladness in her eyes. If he had forgotten that day when the first cup of milk was given, she had not.

At first a smile parted her red lips; then a sullen cloud came over her, and she turned her back, as if about to enter the house, at which he laughed inly, and walked a little faster until a new mood came over her, and she stood shyly before him on the porch, playing with the vine leaves, a little roughly; yet, under all this affectation, she was deeply agitated.

"I have come," he said, mounting the broken steps of the porch, "for another glass of water. You look cross, and would not give me a cup of milk if I asked for it ever so humbly."

"There is water in the well, if you choose to draw it," answered the girl, turning her face defiantly upon him. "I had forgotten all about the other."

"And about me too, I dare say?"

"You! Ah, now, that I look again, you have been here before. One cannot remember forever."

Storms might have been deceived but for the swift blushes that swept that face, and the smile that would not be suppressed.

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"I have been so busy," he said; "and this is an out-of-the-way place."

Out-of-the-way place! Why, Judith had seen him ride by a dozen times without casting his eyes toward the poor house she lived in, and each time with a swift pang at the heart; but she would have died rather than let him know it, having a fair amount of pride in her nature, crude as it was.

"Will you come in?" she said, after an awkward pause.

The young man lifted his hat and accepted this half-rude invitation.

He did draw water from the well that day, while Judith stood by with a glass in her hand, exulting while she watched him toil at the windlass, as she had done when he asked for a drink. Some vague idea of a woman's dignity had found exaggerated development since that time in Judith's nature, and though she dipped the water from the bucket, and held it sparkling toward him, it was with the air of an Indian princess, scorning toil, but offering hospitality. She was piqued with the man, and would not seem too glad that he had come back again. [70]

"There is no water in all the valley like that in your well," he said, draining the glass and giving it back with a smile; "no view so beautiful as that which strikes the river yonder and looks up the gorge. There must be pleasant walks in that direction."

"There the river is awful deep, and a precipice shelves over it ever so high. I love to sit there sometimes, though it makes most people dizzy."

"Some day you will show me the place?"

"Oh, it is found easy enough. A foot-path is worn through the orchard. Everybody knows the way."

"Still, I shall come to-morrow, and you will show it to me?"

The color rose in Judith's face.

"No," she said; "I shall have work to do."

There was pride, as well as a dash of coquetry, in this. Judith resented the time that had been lost, and the forgetfulness that had wounded her.

Perhaps it was this seeming indifference that inspired new admiration in the young man. Perhaps it was the unusual bloom of beauty dawning upon her that reminded him vividly of Ruth Jessup; for the same richness of complexion was there—the dark eyes and heavy tresses with that remarkable purple tinge that one sees but once or twice in a lifetime. Certain it is, he came again, and from that time the change in Judith, body and soul, grew positive, like the swift development of a tropical plant. [71]

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### WAITING FOR HIM.

**J**UDITH stood within her father's porch once more—this time leaning forward eagerly, shading her eyes with one hand, and looking from under it in an attitude of intense expectation.

As she waited there, with fire on her cheeks and longing in her eyes, the change that a few months had made was marvellous. Those eyes, at first boldly bright, were now like velvet or fire, as tenderness or passion filled them. She had grown taller, more graceful, perhaps a little less vigorous in her movements; but in spirit and person the girl was vividly endowed with all that an artist would have desired for a picture of her own scriptural namesake Judith.

This question was on her lips and in her eyes: "Will he come alone? Oh, will he come alone?"

Was it her father she was watching for, and did she wish him to come alone? If she expected that, why were those scarlet poppies burning in the blackness of her hair? Why had she put on that chintz dress with tufts of wild flowers glowing on a maroon ground?—all cheap in themselves, but giving richness of color to match that of her person. Her father had gone to bed supperless one night because the money for that knot of red ribbon on her bosom had been paid to a pedlar who cajoled her into the purchase. [72]

Evidently some one besides the toiling old man was expected. Judith never in her life had waited so anxiously for him. There was a table set out in the room she had left, on which a white cloth was spread; a glass dish of blackberries stood on this table, and by it a pitcher-full of milk, mantled temptingly with cream.

Does any one suppose that Judith had arranged all this for the father whom she had sent supperless to bed only a few days before, because of her longing for the ribbon that flamed on her bosom?

No, no; Richard Storms had made good use of his opportunities. Riding his blood-horse, or walking leisurely, he had mounted that hill almost every day since his second visit to the old house.

I have said that a great change had taken place in Judith's person. Indeed, there was something in her face that startled you. Until a few months since her deepest feelings had been aroused by some sensational romance; but now all the poetry, all the imagination and rude force of her nature were concentrated in a first grand passion. Females like Judith, left to stray into life untaught and unchecked—through the fervor of youth—inspired by ideas that spring out of their own boundless ignorance, sometimes startle one with a sudden development of character.

As a tropical sun pours its warmth into the bosom of an orange tree, ripening its fruit before the blossoms fall, first love had awakened the strong, even reckless nature of this girl, and inspired all the latent elements of a character formed like the garden in which we first saw her, where fruit, weeds, and flowers struggled for life together. Without method or culture, these elements concentrated to mar or brighten her future life.

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For a while after that second visit of Storms, Judith had held her independence bravely. When the young man came, she was full of quaint devices for his entertainment, bantering him all the time with good-natured audacity, which he liked. She took long rambles with him down the hillside, rather proud that the neighbors should witness her conquest, but without a fear, or even thought, of the scandal it might occasion.

Sometimes they sat hours together under the orchard-trees, where she would weave daisy-chains or impatiently tear up the grass around her as he became tender or tantalizing in his speech.

For a time her voice—a deep, rich contralto—filled the whole house as it went ringing to and fro, like the joyous out-gush of a mocking-bird, for in that way she gave expression to the pride and glory that possessed her.

The girl told her father nothing of this, but kept it hoarded in her heart with the secret of her novel-reading. But he saw that she grew brighter and more cheerful every day, that her curt manner toward himself had become almost caressing, and that the house had never been so well cared for before. So he thanked God for the change, and went to his work more cheerfully.

No, it was not for the old father that worshipped her that Judith stood on the porch that day. The meagre affection she felt for him was as nothing to the one grand passion that had swallowed up everything but the intense self-love that it had warmed into unwholesome vigor.

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She was only watching for her father because of her hope that another and a dearer one was coming with him.

"Dear me, it seems as if the sun would never set!" she exclaimed, stepping impatiently down from the wooden stool. "What shall I do till they come? I wonder, now, if there would be time to run out and pick a few more berries? The dish isn't more than half full, and father hinted that some were getting ripe on the bushes by the lower wall. I've a good mind to go and see. I hate to have them look skimpy in the dish. Anyway I'll just get my sun-bonnet and try. Father seemed to think that I might pick them for our tea. As if I'd a-gone out in the hot sun for the best father that ever lived! But let him think so if he wants to. One may as well please the poor old soul once in a while."

Judith went into the kitchen, took a bowl from the table, and hurried down toward the orchard-fence, where she found some wild bushes clambering up the stonework, laden with fruit. A flock of birds fluttered out from the bushes at her approach, each with his bill stained blood-red and his feathers in commotion.

Judith laughed at their musical protests, and fell to picking the ripe berries, staining her own lips with the largest and juiciest now and then, as if to tantalize the little creatures, who watched her longingly from the boughs of a neighboring apple tree.

All at once a shadow fell upon the girl, who looked up and saw that the golden sunshine was dying out from the orchard.

"Dear me, they may come any minute!" she said, shaking up the berries in her bowl. "A pretty fix I should be in then, with my mouth all stained up and my hair every which way; but it is just like me!"

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Away the girl went, spilling her berries as she ran. Leaving them in the kitchen, she hurried up to her own room and gave herself a rapid survey in the little seven-by-nine looking-glass that hung on the wall.

"Well, if it wasn't me, I should almost think that face was going to be handsome one of these days," she thought, striving to get a better look at herself by a not ungraceful bend of the neck. The mirror took in her head and part of the bust on which the scarlet ribbon flamed. The face was radiant. The eyes full of happy light, smiled upon her until dimples began to quiver about the mouth, and she laughed outright.

The beautiful gipsy in the glass laughed too, at which Judith darted away and ran down-stairs in swift haste, for she heard footsteps on the porch, and her heart leaped to meet them.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## THE NEXT NEIGHBOR.

**P**ANTING for breath, radiant with hope, Judith flung the door open.

A woman stood upon the porch, looking up at a wren that was shooting in and out among the vines, chirping and fluttering till all the blossoms seemed alive.

Judith fell back with a hostile gesture, holding the door in her hand. "Is it you?" she asked, curtly enough.

"Just me, and nobody else," answered the woman, quite indifferent to the frowns on that young face. "Hurried through my work early, and thought I'd just run over and see how you got along."

"Oh, I am doing well enough."

"But you never come round to see us now. Neighbors like us ought to be a little more sociable."

"I've had a great deal to attend to," answered Judith, still holding on to the door.

"Nothing particular just now, is there? Got nobody inside that you'd rather a next-door neighbor shouldn't see—have you?" questioned the woman, with a keen flash of displeasure in her eyes.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Parsons?"

"Oh, nothing; only I ought to know that chintz dresses of the best, and red ribbons fluttering around one like butterflies, ain't, as a general thing, put on for run-in callers such as I am. I begin to think, Judith, that what everybody is saying has more truth in it than I, as an old friend, would ever allow."

Judith turned as if to close the door and shut the intruder out; for the girl was so angry and disappointed that she did not even attempt to govern her actions. The woman had more patience.

"Don't do that, Judith; don't, now; for you will be shutting that door in the face of the best friend you've got—one that comes kindly to say her say to your face, but stands up for you through thick and thin behind your back!"

"Stands up for me! What for?" questioned the girl, haughtily, but checking a swift movement to cover the knot of ribbon with her hand. "What is it to you or any one else what I wear?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing; of course not; only, having no mother to look after you, some of the neighbors feel anxious, and the rest talk dreadfully. I have eyes as well as other people, but I never told a mortal how often I have seen you and—you know who—sitting in the orchard, hours on hours, when the old man was out to work. That isn't my way; but other people have eyes, and the best of 'em will talk."

Judith's face was crimson now, and her black eyes shot fire; but she forced herself to laugh.

"Well, let them talk; little I care about it!"

"But you ought to care, Judith Hart, if it's only for your father's sake. Somebody'll be telling him, next."

A look of affright broke through the fire in Judith's eyes, and her voice was somewhat subdued as she answered:

"But what can they tell him or any one else? Come in and tell me what they say; not that I care, only for the fun of laughing at it. Come in, Mrs. Parsons!"

Mrs. Parsons stepped within the hall and sat down in the only chair it contained, when she took off her sun-bonnet and commenced to fan herself with it, for the good woman was heated both by her walk across the fields and the curbed anger which Judith's rudeness had inspired.

"Laugh!" she said, at last. "I reckon you'll laugh out of the other side of your mouth one of these days! Talk like this isn't a thing that you or your father can afford to put up with."

"People had better let my father alone! He is as good a man as ever lived, every inch of him, if he does go out to days' work for a living!"

"That he is!" rejoined Mrs. Parsons; "which is the reason why no one has told him what was going on."

"But what *is* going on?" questioned Judith, with an air that would have been disdainful but for the keen anxiety that broke through all her efforts.

"That which I have seen with my own eyes I will speak of. The young man who stops each week at the public-house yonder comes up the hill too often; people have begun to watch for him, and the talk grows stronger every day. I don't join in; but most of the neighbors seem to think that you are on the highway to destruction, and are bound to break your father's heart."

"Indeed!" sneered Judith, white with wrath.

"They say the young fellow left a bad character behind him, and that his visits mean no good to any honest girl, especially a poor workingman's child, who lives from hand to mouth."

"Does my father owe them anything?" demanded Judith, fiercely.

"Not as I know of; but the long and the short of it is, Judith, people will talk so long as that person keeps coming here. A girl without a mother can't spend hours on hours with a strange young man without having awful things said about her; that's what I came to warn you of."

"There was no need of coming. Of course, I expected all the girls to be jealous, and their mothers, too, because Mr. Storms passed their doors without calling," answered Judith.

"That is just where it is. People say that the father is a fore-handed man, and keeps half a dozen hands to work on his place. This young fellow is an only son. Now, is it likely, Judith, that he means anything straight-forward in coming here so much?"

Mrs. Parsons said this with a great deal of motherly feeling, which was entirely thrown away

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upon Judith, who felt the sting of her words through all the kindness of their utterance.

"As if Mr. Storms was not old enough and clever enough to choose for himself," she said.

"That's the worst of it, Judith. Every one is saying that, after making his choice, he's no business coming here to fasten scandal on you."

"It isn't he that fastens scandal on me, but the vile tongues of the neighbors, that are always flickering venom on some one. So it may as well be me as another. I'm only astonished that they will allow that he has made a choice."

"Made a choice! Why, everybody knows, that he's engaged to be married!"

"Engaged to be married!"

A rush of hot color swept Judith's face as these words broke from her lips, but to retreat slowly, leaving a cold pallor behind.

"Just that. Engaged to be married to a girl who lives neighbor to his father's place—one who has plenty of money coming and wonderful good looks," said the woman.

"I don't believe it. I know better! There isn't a word of truth in what any of them says," retorted Judith, with fierce vehemence, while a baleful fire broke into her eyes that fairly frightened her visitor.

"Well, I had nothing to do with it. Every word may be a slander, for anything I know."

"It is a slander, I'll stake my life on it—a mean, base slander, got up out of spite? But who said it? Where did the story come from? I want to know that!"

"Oh, people are constantly going back and forth from 'Norston's Rest,' who put up at the public-house at the foot of the hill, where he leaves his horse. All agree in saying the same thing. Then the young man himself only smiles when he is asked about it."

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"Of course, he would smile. I don't see how he could keep from laughing outright at such talk."

Notwithstanding her disdainful words, Judith was greatly disturbed. The color had faded even from her lips. Her young life knew its keenest pang when jealousy, with one swift leap, took possession of her heart and soul and tortured them. But the girl was fiery and brave even in her anguish. She would not yield to it in the presence of her visitor, who might watch and report.

"They tell you that my father does not know when Mr. Storms comes here. That, you will find, is false as the rest. He is coming home with father this afternoon. I thought it was them when you came in. Look, I have just set out the table. Wait a while, and you will see them coming down the lane together."

Judith flung open the parlor-door as she spoke, and Mrs. Parsons went in. Never had that room taken such an air of neatness within the good woman's memory. The table-cloth was spotless; the china unmatched, but brightly clean; the uncarpeted floor had been scoured and the cobwebs were all swept away. The open fireplace was crowded with leaves and coarse garden flowers.

"Well, I'm glad that I can say that much, anyway," said the good woman, looking around with no little admiration. "What a neck you have got, Judith! Just to think that a few branches from the hedge can do all that! I'll go right home and tell my girls about it."

"Not yet—not till you have seen father and Mr. Storms come in to tea, as they are sure to do before long. The neighbors are so anxious to know about it that I want them to have it from good authority."

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Judith had not recovered from her first exasperation, and spoke defiantly, not at all restrained by a latent fear that her father might come alone.

Mrs. Parsons had made her way to a window, where the wren she had taken so much interest in was twittering joyously among the vine-leaves.

The great anxiety that possessed Judith drew her to the window also, where she stood trembling with dread and burning with wrath. She had been informed before that damaging rumors were abroad with regard to Storms' stolen visits, and it was agreed upon between her and the young man that he should in some natural way seek out old Mr. Hart, and thus obtain a legitimate right to visit the house.

The expectation of his coming that very afternoon had induced Judith to brighten up her dreary old home with so much care, and would make her triumph only the greater if Mrs. Parsons was present to witness his approach.

"Yes," she said, "it is father and Mr. Storms I am expecting to tea. You can see with your own eyes what friends they are."

Mrs. Parsons was not so deficient in curiosity that she did not look eagerly through the vine-leaves, even holding them apart with her own hands to obtain a good view. She saw two persons coming down the lane, as opposite in appearance as creatures of the same race could be. Young Storms walked vigorously, swinging his cane in one hand or dashing off the head of a thistle with it whenever those stately wild-flowers tempted him with their imperial purple.

To the old man who came toiling after him this reckless destruction seemed a cruel enjoyment. His gentle nature shrunk from every blow, as if the poor flowers could feel and suffer under those cruel lacerations. He could not have been induced to break the smallest blossom from its roots in that ruthless fashion, but tore up unseemly weeds in the garden gently and with a sort of compassion, for the tenderness of his nature reached the smallest thing that God has made.

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A slight man loaded down with hard work, stooping in the shoulders, walking painfully beyond his usual speed, Hart appeared as he struggled to keep up with young Storms, who knew that he was weary and too old for the toil that had worn him out, but never once offered to check his own

steps or wait for him to take breath.

"Yes, it is father and Mr. Storms. You can tell the neighbors that; and tell them from me that he'll come again, just as long as he wants to, and we want to have him," said Judith, triumphantly.

"I'll tell the neighbors what I have seen, and nothing more," answered the woman. "There's not one of them that wishes you any harm."

"Oh, no, of course not!" was the mocking answer.

The woman shook her head, half sorrowful, half in anger.

"Well, Judith, I won't say another word, now I see that your father knows; but it is to be hoped he has found out something better about the young man than any of us has heard of yet."

Mrs. Parsons tied her bonnet as she spoke, and casting a wistful look on the table, hesitated, as if waiting for an invitation to remain.

But Judith was too much excited for any thought of such hospitality; so the woman went away more angry than she had ever been with that motherless girl before.

The moment she was gone Judith took her bowl of blackberries, emptied them into the glass dish, heaping them unevenly on one side to conceal a crack in the glass, then ran into the hall, for she heard footsteps on the porch, and her father's voice inviting some one to walk in.

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## CHAPTER X.

### JEALOUS PASSIONS.

**W**ALK in, Mr. Storms. Judith will be somewhere about. Oh, here she is!"

Yes, there she was, lighting up the bare hall with the rosy glow of her smiles, which, sullen as she strove to make them, beamed upon the visitor quite warmly enough to satisfy his insatiate vanity.

"Daughter, this is Mr. Storms, a young gentleman from the neighborhood of 'Norston's Rest,' come up the valley on business. He was kind enough to walk along the hill with me after I got through work, and when I told him of the view, he wanted to see it from the house."

Neither of the young people gave the slightest sign that they had met before. Judith's smile turned to an inward laugh as she made a dashing courtesy, and gave the young man her hand the moment her father's back was turned.

Storms might have kissed the hand, while the old man was hanging up his hat, but was far too prudent for anything of the kind, though he saw a resentful cloud gathering on the girl's face.

The old man gave a quiet signal to Judith that she should stop a moment for consultation, while their visitor went out of the back-door, as if tempted by a glimpse of the scenery in that direction.

"I couldn't help asking him in, daughter, so you must make the best of it. Is there anything in the house—anything for tea, I mean? No butter, I suppose?"

"Yes, there is; I churned this morning."

"You churned this morning! Why, what has come over you, daughter?"

"Dear me, what a fuss about a little churning! As if I'd never done as much before!"

The old man was so well pleased that he did not hint that butter, made in his own house, seemed like a miracle to him.

"But bread—when did we have a baking?"

"No matter about that. There are plenty of cakes, raised with eggs, too."

"That's capital," said the old man, throwing off a load of anxiety that had oppressed him all the way home. "We shall get along famously. The young man has got uncommon education, you see, Judith, and it isn't often that I get a chance to talk with any one given to reading; so I want you to make things extra nice. Now I'll go and see what can be found on the bushes."

"I've picked all the berries, and got them in the dish, father."

"Why, Judith!"

"You asked me to, or as good as that, so there's nothing to wonder at."

The old man drew a deep breath. A little kindness was enough to make him happy, but this was overpowering.

"So you picked 'em for the old man just as if *he* were company, dear child!—dressed up for him, too!"

Judith blushed guiltily. Her poor father was so easily deceived, that she felt ashamed of so many unnecessary falsehoods.

"I dressed up a little because I wanted to be like other girls."

"I wish you could be more like other girls," said the father, sighing, this time heavily enough; "but

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it's of no use wishing, is it, child?"

"I think that there is a great deal of use in it. If it were not for hoping and wishing and dreaming day-dreams, how could one live in this stupid place?"

The old man looked at his child wistfully. It was so many years since he had known a day-dream, that the idea bewildered him.

"It is so long since I was young," he said; "so very long. Perhaps I had them once, but I'm not sure—I'm not sure."

"I'm sure that the cakes will burn up if I stand here any longer," said Judith, on whom the sad pathos of her father's words made no impression. "I'll put them on the table at once. Call your friend in before they get heavy."

When the old man came in with Storms, he found Judith standing by the table, which she was surveying with no little pride. Unusual attempts had been made to decorate the room. The fireplace was turned into a tiny bower fairly set afire by a jar crowded full of great golden-hearted marigolds, that glowed through the soft greenness like flame.

All this surprised and delighted the old man. He turned with childlike admiration from the fireplace to the table, and from that to his daughter, who was now casting stolen and anxious glances into the old mirror opposite, over which was woven more delicate flowers, with the sprays of some feathery plant, heavy and rich with coral berries that scattered themselves in reflection on the glass. [86]

The room was cool with shadows, but swift arrows of gold came shooting from the sunset through the thick vines, and broke here and there upon the floor, giving a soft glow to the atmosphere which was not heat.

The old man glanced at all this very proudly, and when one of these arrows was shivered in his daughter's hair he sat fondly admiring her; for to him she was wonderfully beautiful.

Young Storms looked at her also, with a little distrust. There was something unnatural in her high color and in the dashing nervousness of her movements as she poured out the tea, that aroused his interest. Once or twice she fixed her eyes upon him in a wild, searching fashion, that made even his cold gray eyes droop beneath their lids.

At last they all arose from the table and gathered around the window, looking out upon the sunset. It was a calm scene, rich with golden haze near the horizon; while the gap below was choked up with purple shadows through which the river flowed dimly. Of those three persons by the window, the old man was perhaps the only one who thoroughly felt all the poetic beauty of the scene; even to him the rural picture became more complete when the only cow he possessed came strolling up to the gate, thus throwing in a dash of life as she waited to be milked.

"I'll go out and milk her," said the old man. "You've had a good deal to attend to, daughter, and it is no more than fair that I should help a little." [87]

Help a little! why it was not often that any one else went near the poor beast for weeks together; but the old man was pleased with all the girl had done, and covered her delinquency with this kindly craft as he went into the kitchen in search of a pail.

The moment he was gone, Judith turned upon her visitor.

"Let us go down into the orchard; I want to speak with you," she said.

"Why not here?" questioned the young man, who instinctively refused or evaded everything he did not himself propose.

"Because he may come back, and I want to be alone—quite alone," said the girl, impatiently. "Come, I say!"

There was something rudely imperative in the girl's manner that forced him to go; but a sinister smile crept over his face as he took his hat and followed her through the back way down to the orchard, over which the purple dusk was gathering, though flashes of sunlight still trembled on the hill-tops.

Judith did not accept the half-offered arm of the young man, but walked by his side, her head erect, her hands moving restlessly, and her black eyes, full of wistful fire, now and then turning upon him.

She leaped over the stone wall without help, though Storms reached out his hand, and frowned darkly when she refused it.

Down to an old gnarled tree, bristling with dead limbs, she led the way, and halted under its shadows.

"What does this mean?" said Storms, in a cold, low voice. "Why do you insist on bringing me here?" [88]

"Because of something that worries me," answered Judith, trembling all over; "because I want to know the truth."

"I wonder if there is a girl in the world who has not something to worry her?" said Storms, with smiling sarcasm. "Well, now, what is the trouble? Have the old magpies been picking you to pieces again?"

"No, it isn't that, but something—I know it isn't true; but it seems to me that I can never draw a long breath till you've told me so over and over again—sworn to it."

A shade of disturbance gathered on the young man's face, but he looked at the girl, as she spoke, with sinister coolness.

"But you do not tell me what this dreadful thing is that takes away your breath."



"I—I know it is silly—"

"Of course; but what is it?"

"They tell me—I know it is an awful falsehood—but they tell me that you are engaged!"

"Well!"

"Well!—you say 'well,' as if it were possible!" cried the girl, looking wildly into his face.

"All things are possible, Judith. But is this the only thing that troubles you?"

"Is not that enough—more than enough? Why do you wait so long before denying it? Why do you look so dark and keen, as if an answer to that slander needed thought? Why don't you speak out?"

"Because I want to know everything that you have heard first, that I may deny it altogether."

"Then you deny it, do you?"

"Not till I have all the rest. When people are down on a man, they do not often stop at one charge. What is the next?"

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"Oh, they amounted to nothing compared to this—just nothing. Idling away time, spending money. I—I don't remember! There was something, but I took no heed. This one thing drove the rest out of my mind. Now will you answer me?"

"Answer me a question first."

"Oh, what is it? Be quick! Have I not told you that I cannot breathe?"

"What do you care about the matter?"

"What do I care?" repeated the girl, aghast.

"Yes; why should you?"

The same love of cruelty that made this man behead thistles with his cane and set dogs to tear each other, influenced him now. He revelled in the young creature's anguish, and, being an epicure in malice, sought to prolong it.

How could the girl answer, with so much stormy surprise choking back her utterance? This man, who had spent so much time with her, who had flattered her as if she had been a goddess, whose very presence had made her the happiest creature on earth, was looking quietly in her stormy face, and asking why she should care if he were pledged to marry another!

She could not speak, but looked at him in blank dismay, her great black eyes wildly open, her lips quivering in their whiteness.

"You ask me that?" she said, at length, in a low, hoarse voice—"you dare to ask me that, after—after—"

"After what?" he said, with an innocent, questioning look, that stung her like an insult.

The girl had her voice now. Indignation brought it back. But what could she say? In a thousand forms that man had expressed his love for her; but never once in direct words, such as even a finer nature than hers could have fashioned into a direct claim.

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The wrathful agony in her eyes startled the young man from his studied apathy; but before he could reach out his arms or speak, she lifted both hands to her throat and fled downward toward the gap.

This fierce outburst of passion startled the man who had so coolly aroused it. He sprang after the girl, overtook her as she came near the precipice, increasing her speed as if she meant to leap over, and seizing her by the waist, swung her back with a force that almost threw her to the ground.

"Are you crazy?" he said, as she stood before him, fierce and panting for breath.

"No," she answered, drawing so close to him that her white face almost touched his; "but you are worse than that—stark, staring mad, I tell you—when you expect to even me with any other girl."

"Even you with any other girl!" said Storms, really startled. "As if any one ever thought of it! Why, one would think you never heard of a joke before!"

"A joke?—a joke?"

"Yes, you foolish child, you beautiful fiend—a joke on my part, but something more with the miserable old gossips that have gotten up stories to torment you. As if you had not had enough of their lies!"

Judith drew a deep breath, and looked at him with all the pitiful intensity of a dumb animal recovering from a blow.

"They seemed to be in earnest. They said that you were about to marry some girl of your mother's choosing."

"Well, what then? That was reason enough why you should have laughed at it."

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"But you hesitated. You looked at me with a wicked smile."

"No wonder. Who could help laughing at such folly?"

"Folly—is it folly? Just now your face is pale, but when I look at you a hot red comes about your eyes. I don't like it—I don't like it!"

"Is it strange that a sensible fellow can't help blushing when the girl he loves makes a fool of herself?"

Judith looked in that keen, sinister face with misgiving; but Storms had gained full command of his countenance now, and met her scrutiny with a smile.

"Come, come," he said, "no more of this nonsense. There isn't any such girl as you are dreaming

of in the world."

"Oh, Richard, *are* you telling me the truth?" questioned the girl, clasping her hands, and reaching them out with a gesture of wild entreaty.

"The truth, and nothing but the truth, on my honor—on my soul!"

A fragment of rock half imbedded in the earth lay near Judith. She sunk down upon it, dashed both hands up to her face, and burst into a wild passion of weeping that shook her from head to foot.

The young man stood apart, regarding her with mingled astonishment and dismay. Up to this time she had been scarcely more than an overgrown child in his estimation, but this outgush of strength, wrath, and tears bespoke something sterner and more unmanageable than that—something that he must appease and guard against, or mischief might come of it.

He approached her with more of respect in his manner than it had ever exhibited before, and said, in a low, conciliatory tone:

"Come, Judith, now that you know this story to be all lies, what are you crying about? Don't you see that it is getting dark? What will your father think?"

Judith dashed the tears from her eyes, and, taking his arm, clung to it lovingly as she went toward home.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### PROTEST AND APPEAL.

**F**ATHER, father, do not ask me to meet him; from the first it was an evil engagement, broken, or should have been. Why do you wish to take it up again?"

Ruth Jessup, who made this appeal, stood in front of her father, who had just told her that it had been arranged that a speedy marriage should terminate the engagement with Richard Storms—an engagement entered into when she was scarcely more than a child. "It was high time the thing was settled," he said, "while neighbor Storms was pleased with his son and ready to settle a handsome property on him. That, with the money that would be hers in time, might enable them to move among the best in the neighborhood."

The girl listened to all this with a wild look in her face, half-rebellion, half-terror. "No," she said, straining her hands together in a passionate clasp, "you must not ask me to take him. I could not love him—the very idea is dreadful."

"But, girl, you are engaged to him. My word is given—my word is given."

"But only on condition, father—only on the condition of his amendment."

"Well, the young man has come through his probation like a gentleman, as he has a right to be. He just rode by here on his bay horse, as fine a looking young fellow as one need want for a son-in-law, lifting his hat like a lord as he passed me. We may expect him here to-night."

"But, father, I will not see him. I—I cannot."

The girl was pale and anxious; her eyes were eloquent with pleading, her mouth tremulous.

"And why not?"

"Only I cannot—I never can like him again."

The kind-hearted gardener sat down in the nearest chair, and took those two clasped hands in his, looking gravely but very kindly into the girl's troubled face.

"Daughter," he said, "workingmen don't pretend to fine sentiments, but we have our own ideas of honor, and a man's word once given in good faith must be kept, let the cost be what it may. I have given my word to neighbor Storms. It must be honestly redeemed. You made no objection then."

"But, oh, father, I was so young! How could I know what an awful thing I was doing?"

"If it was a mistake, who but ourselves should suffer for it, Ruth?"

"But he went astray—his company was of the worst."

"That is all changed and atoned for."

The girl shook her head.

"Oh, father, he was never a good son."

"That, too, is changed; no man was ever more proud of a son than neighbor Storms is now of this young man."

The girl turned away and began to cry.

"I thought you had given this up—that I should never again be tormented with it! He seemed willing to leave me alone; but now only three weeks after my godmother has promised to give me her money he comes back again! Oh, I wish she had promised it to some one else!"

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"That is the very reason why we should fulfil our obligations to the letter, Ruth. It must not be said that a child of mine drew back from her father's plighted word because her dower promised to be more than double anything he had counted on when it was given."

The girl's eyes flashed and her lips curved.

"If it has made him more eager, I may well consider it," she said; "and I think it has."

"Shame on you, daughter! Such suspicions are unbecoming!"

"I cannot help them, father; the very thought of this man is hateful to me."

"Well, well," said the father, soothingly, but not the less firm in his purpose; "the young man must plead his own cause. I have no fear that he will find my child unreasonable."

The harassed young creature grew desperate; she followed her father to the door of an inner room.

"Father, come back, come back! It is cruel to put me off so!"

Ruth drew her father into the room again, and renewed her protest with the passionate entreaties that had been so ineffectual. In her desperation she spoke with unusual energy, while now and then her sentences were broken up with sobs.

"Oh, father, do not insist—do not force this marriage upon me! It will be my death, my destruction! I detest the man!"

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Jessup turned away from her. That sweet appealing face made his heart ache.

Ruth saw this look of relenting, and would not give up her cause. She approached close to her father, and, clinging to his arm, implored him, with bitter sobs, to believe her when she said that this marriage would be worse than death to her.

"Hush, girl!" said the old man. "Hush, now, or I may believe some hints that the young man has thrown out of another person. No girl in these parts would refuse a young fellow so well-to-do and so good-looking, if she hadn't got some one else in her mind."

This speech was rendered more significant by a look of suspicion, which brought a rush of scarlet into the daughter's face.

"Oh, father, you are cruel!" cried the tortured young creature, struggling, as it were, for her life.

The old man turned away from this pathetic pleading; nothing but a stern sense of honor, which is so strong in some men of his class, could have nerved him against the anguish of this appeal.

"We have given our word, child; we have given our word," he said. "Neither you nor your father can go beyond that."

The gardener's voice faltered and he broke away from the trembling hands with which Ruth in her desperation sought to hold him. For the first time in his life he had found strength to resist her entreaties.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### THE HEART STRUGGLE.

**H**UMBLE as Jessup's little dwelling was, there hovered about it a spirit of beauty which would have made even an uncouth object beautiful to an imaginative person. The very wild things about the park seemed to understand this: for the sweetest-toned birds haunted its eaves, and the most timid hares would creep through the tangled flower-beds and commit petty depredations in the little vegetable-garden with a sense of perfect security.

As the dawn brightened into sunrise one fair June morning a slight noise was heard in the house. The door opened, and the gardener, in the strength of his middle age, stout, fair-faced, and genial, came through, carrying a carpet-bag in his hand. Directly behind him, in the jasmine porch, stood his daughter, who seemed to shrink and tremble when her father turned back, and, taking her in his arms, kissed her twice upon the forehead with great tenderness.

"Take good care of yourself, child," he said, with a look of kindly admonition, "and do not go too freely into the park while I am away, if you would not wish to meet any guest from the house."

The girl grew pale rather than crimson, and tried to cover her agitation by throwing both arms about her father's neck, and kissing him with a passion of tenderness.

"There! there!" said the man, patting her head, and drawing his hand down the shining braids of her hair, with a farewell caress. "I will be home again before bedtime; or, if not, leave a lamp burning, and a bit of bread-and-cheese on the table, with a sup of ale; for I shall be sore and hungry! One does not eat London fare with a home relish."

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"But you will surely come?" said the girl, with strange anxiety.

"Surely, child. I never sleep well under any roof but this."

"But, perhaps—It—it may be that you will come in an earlier train."

"No, no! There will be none coming this way. So do not expect me before ten of the night."

A strange, half-frightened light came into the girl's eyes, and she stood upon the porch watching the traveller's receding figure as long as she could see him through her blinding tears. Then she went into the house, cast herself on a chair, and, throwing both arms across a table, burst into a wild passion of distress.

After a time she started up, and flung back the heavy masses of hair that had fallen over her arms.

"I cannot—I dare not!" she said, flinging her hands apart, with desperate action. "He will never, never forgive me!"

For a time she sat drearily in her chair, with tears still on her cheek, and hanging heavily on the curling blackness of her eye-lashes. Very sad, and almost penitent she looked as she sat thus, with her eyes bent on the floor, and her hands loosely clasped. The rustic dress, in which a peculiar red color predominated, had all the picturesque effect of an antique painting; but the face was young, fresh, and deeply tinted with a bright gipsy-like richness of beauty, altogether at variance with her father's form or features. Still she was not really unlike him. Her voice had the same sweet, mellow tones, and her smile was even more softly winning. [98]

But she was not smiling now; far from it! A quiver of absolute distress stirred her red lips, and the shadow of many a painful thought swept her face as she sat there battling with her own heart.

All at once the old brass clock struck with the clangor of a bell. This aroused the girl; she started up, in a panic, and began to clear the table, from which her father had eaten his early breakfast, in quick haste. One by one, she put away the pieces of old blue china into an oaken cupboard, and set the furniture in order about the room, trembling all the time, and pausing now and then to listen, as if she expected to be disturbed.

When all was in order, and the little room swept clean, the girl looked around in breathless bewilderment. She searched the face of the clock, yet never gathered from it how the minutes passed. She saw the sunshine coming into the window, bathing the white jasmine-bells with a golden light, and shrunk from it like a guilty thing.

"I—I have time yet. He must not come here. I dare not wait."

The girl snatched up a little straw-hat, garlanded with scarlet poppies, and hastily tied it on her head. In the midst of her distress she cast a look into the small mirror which hung upon the wall, and dashed one hand across her eyes, angry with the tears that flushed them.

"If he sees that I can weep, he will understand how weak I am, and all will go for nothing," she said. "Oh, God help me, here he is!"

Sure enough, through the overhanging trees Ruth saw young Hurst walking down along a path which ran along the high banks of the ravine. He saw the gleam of her garments through the leaves, and came toward her with both hands extended. [99]

"Ready so soon, my darling?" he exclaimed, with animation. "I saw your father safe on the highway, and came at once; but—but what does this mean? Surely, Ruth, you cannot go in that dress?"

"No, I cannot. Oh, Mr. Walton, I dare not so disobey my father! He would never, never forgive me!"

The young man drew back, and a flash of angry surprise darkened his face.

"Is it that you will disappoint me, Ruth? Have I deserved this?"

"No, no; but he trusts me!"

"Have I not trusted you?"

"But my father—my father?"

"It is your father who drives us to this. He is unrelenting, or that presumptuous wretch would not be permitted to enter his dwelling. Has he dared to present himself again?"

"Yes, last night; but for that I might have lost all courage, all power of resistance."

"And you saw him? You spoke with him?"

"Only in my father's presence. I would not see him alone."

"And after seeing him, you repent?"

"No—no—a thousand times no. It is only of my father I think. I am all that he has in the world!" cried the girl, in a passion of distress.

"Have I not considered this? Do I ask you to leave him at once? One would think that I intended some great wrong; that, instead of taking—"

"Hush, hush, Mr. Walton! Do not remind me how far I am beneath you. This is the great barrier which I tremble to pass. My father never will forgive me if I dare to—" [100]

"Become the wife of an honorable man, who loves you well enough to force him into saving his child from a hateful marriage, at the price of deceiving his own father."

"Oh, no! no! It is because you are so generous, so ready to stake everything for me, that I hesitate."

"No, it is because you fear the displeasure of a man who has almost separated us in his stubborn idea of honor. It is to his pride that my own must be sacrificed."

"Pride, Walton?"

"Yes, for he is proud enough to break up my life and yours."

"Oh, Walton, this is cruel!"

"Cruel! Can you say this, Ruth? You who trifle with me so recklessly?"

"I do not trifle; but I dare not—I dare not—"

The young man turned aside with a frown upon his face, darker and sterner than the girl had ever seen there before.

"You certainly never will trifle with me again," he said, in a deep, stern voice, which made the heart in the poor girl's bosom quiver as if an arrow had gone through it.

"Oh, do not leave me in anger," she pleaded.

He walked on, taking stern, resolute strides along the path. She saw that his face was stormy, his gestures determined, and sprang forward, panting for breath.

"Oh, Walton, Walton, forgive me!"

He looked down into her wild, eager face, gloomily.

"Ruth, you have never loved me. You will be prevailed upon to marry that hound."

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She reached up her arms, and flung herself on his bosom.

"Oh, Walton, I do—I do love you!"

"Then be ready, as you promised. I have but a moment to spare."

"But my father!"

"Is it easier to abandon the man who loves you, or to offend him?"

"Oh, Walton, I will go; but alone—I tremble to think of it."

"It is only for a few miles. In less than half an hour I will join you. Be careful to dress very quietly, and seem unconscious when we meet."

"I will—I will! Only do not frown so darkly on me again."

The young man turned his fine blue eyes full upon her.

"Did my black looks terrify you, darling?" he said, with a smile that warmed her heart like a burst of sunshine. "But you deserved it. Remember that."

Ruth looked in the handsome face of her lover with wistful yearning. While alone, with her father's kind farewell appealing to her conscience, she had felt capable of a great sacrifice; but with those eyes meeting hers, with that voice pleading in her heart, she forgot everything but the promise she had made, and the overwhelming love that prompted it.

The young man read all this in those eloquent features, and would gladly have kissed the lips that still trembled between smiles and tears; but even in that solitude he was cautious.

"Now, farewell for an hour or two, and then—"

Ruth caught her breath with a quick gasp, and the color flashed back to her face, vivid as flame.

[102]

A noise among the trees startled them both. Young Hurst turned swiftly, and walked away, saying, as he went:

"Be punctual, for Heaven only knows when another opportunity will offer."

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### ONE RASH STEP.

**R**UTH JESSUP hurried into the house, ran breathlessly to her chamber in the loft, and changed the coquettish dress, which gave such picturesque brightness to her beauty, for one of mingled gray and black. Not a tinge of warm color was there to betray her identity. Her small bonnet was covered by a veil so thick that no one could clearly distinguish the features underneath. In truth, her very air seemed changed, for graceful ease had given place to a timid, hesitating movement, that was entirely at variance with her character.

She came down-stairs hurriedly, and rushed through the little parlor, as if afraid that the very walls might cry out against the act she meditated.

Ruth avoided the great avenues and the lodge-gate, but hurried by the most remote paths, through the deepest shades of the park, until one brought her to a side-gate in the wall, which she opened with a key, and let herself out into the highway. There she stood, for some minutes, with her hand on the latch, hesitating, in this supreme moment of her life, as if she stood upon a precipice, and, looking into its depths, recoiled with shuddering.

[103]

It is possible that the girl might have returned even then, for a pang of dread had seized upon her; but, while she stood hesitating, a noise in the highway made her leap back from the gate with a force that closed it against her, and she stood outside, trembling from head to foot; for, coming down the highway in a cloud of dust, she saw a dog-cart, in which was Walton Hurst and a groom, driving rapidly, as if in haste to meet some train. The young man gave her one

encouraging glance as he swept by; the next moment the dog-cart had turned a curve of the road, and was out of sight.

Ruth felt now that her last chance of retreat was cut off. With a feeling of something like desperation she left the gate, and walked swiftly up the road. There was no sense of fatigue in this young girl. In her wild excitement, she could have walked miles on miles without being conscious of the distance. She did, in fact, walk on and on, keeping well out of sight, till she came to a little depot, some three miles from "Norston's Rest." There she diverged from her path, and, entering the building, sat down in a remote corner, and waited, with a feeling of nervous dread, that made her start and quiver as each person entered the room.

At last the train came up, creating some bustle and confusion, though only a few passengers were in waiting. Under cover of this excitement, Ruth took her seat in a carriage, and was shut in with a click of the latch which struck upon the poor girl's heart, as if some fatal turn of a key had locked her in with an irretrievable fate.

The train rushed on with a swiftness and force that almost took away the girl's breath. It seemed to her as if she had been caught up and hurled forward to her destiny with a force no human will could resist. Then she grew desperate. The rush of the engine seemed too slow for the wild desire that succeeded to her irresolution. Yet it was not twenty minutes before the train stopped again, and, looking through the window, Ruth saw her lover leap from the platform and enter the next carriage to her own.

[104]

Had he seen her? Did the lightning glance cast that way give him a glimpse of her face looking so eagerly through the glass? At any rate, he was in the same train with her, and once more they were hurled forward at lightning speed, until sixty miles lay between them and the mansion they had left.

Once more the train stopped. This time a hand whiter than that of the guard, was reached through the door, and a face that made her heart leap with a panic of joy and fear, looked into hers. She scarcely touched this proffered hand, but flitted out to the platform, like a bird let loose in a strange place. This was a way-side station, and it happened that no person except those two left the train at this particular point. Still they parted like chance passengers, and there was no one to observe the few rapid words that passed between them in the small reception-room.

When the train was out of sight, and all the bustle attendant on its arrival had sunk into silence, these two young persons entered a carriage that stood waiting, and drove swiftly toward a small town, clouded with the smoke of factories, that lay in the distance. Through the streets of this town, and into another, still more remote, they drove, and at last drew up in a small village, to which the spire of a single church gave something of picturesque dignity.

To the door of this church the carriage went, after avoiding the inhabitable portion of the village by taking a cross-road, which led through a neighboring moor. Into the low-browed entrance Walton Hurst led the girl. The church was dim, and so damp that it struck a chill through the young creature as she approached the altar, where a man, in sacred vestments, stood with an open book in his hand, prepared for a solemn ceremony.

[105]

Two or three persons sauntered up to the church-door, attracted by the unusual presence of a carriage in that remote place, and some, more curious than the rest, came inside, and drew, open-mouthed, toward the altar, while the marriage ceremony was being performed.

When the bride turned from the altar, shivering and pale with intense excitement, two or three of these persons secured a full view of her face, and never forgot it afterward; for anything more darkly, richly beautiful than her features had never met their eyes.

Ruth was indeed lovely in this supreme moment of her life. The pallor of concentrated emotion gave depth and almost startling brilliancy to those great eyes, bright as stars, and soft as velvet, which were for one moment turned upon them. All else might have been forgotten in after years; but that one glance was burnt like enamel on more than one memory when Walton Hurst's marriage was made known to the world.

The vestry was dark and damp when they entered it, followed by a grim old clerk, and at a more respectful distance after them came three or four of the villagers, who only saw the shadowy picture of a man and woman bending over a huge book—the one writing his name with a bold dash of the hand, the other trembling so violently that for a moment she was compelled to lay the pen down, while she looked into her husband's face with a pathetic plea for patience with her weakness.

[106]

But the names were written at last, and the young couple left the church in haste, as they had entered it—the bride with a bit of paper held tightly in her hand, the bridegroom looking happy and elated, as if he had conquered some enemy.

As they drove away, two or three of the villagers, who had been drawn into the church, turned back from the porch, and stole into the vestry where the clerk stood by his open register, examining a piece of gold that had been thrust into his hand, with a look of greedy unbelief.

The clerk was saying,

"See, neighbor Knox, it is gold—pure gold. Did any one ever see the like? There is the face of Her Majesty, plain as the sun in yon sky. Oh, if a few more such rare windfalls would but come this way, my place would be worth having."

The sight of this gold only whetted the villagers' curiosity to fresh vigor. They became eager to know what great man it was who had come among them, with such shadow-like stillness, leaving only golden traces of his presence in the church; for the clerk hinted, with glee, that the pastor had been rewarded fourfold for his share in the ceremony. Then one after another of these persons looked at the register. It chanced that the record was made on the top of a blank page;

thus the two names were rendered more than usually conspicuous. This was the record:

WALTON HURST—RUTH JESSUP.

[107]

## CHAPTER XIV.

### ON THE WAY HOME.

**M**Y darling—my wife! Look up and tell me that your joy is equal to mine," said Hurst, when he and his bride were seated in the carriage. "No! that is impossible; but say that you are happy, my Ruth!"

"Happy!" said the girl. "Oh, Walton, it is cruel that I can be so; but I am—I am!"

The young man took her hands in his, and kissed them with passionate warmth.

"You will never repent, Ruth?"

"Repent that I am your wife! That you—" Here the girl's great earnest eyes fell and were shaded at once by lashes black as themselves.

"Well, darling, what more?"

"That you are my husband."

The word seemed to flood her heart with sunshine, and her face with burning blushes. Its very sound was full of exquisite shame. Hurst drew that face to his bosom and kissed it with tender reverence.

"Now, my beloved, we are all the world to each other."

"All, all," she murmured; "but, oh, what will my father do?"

"He can do nothing, Ruth. But that his word was so rashly given, and his love for the old family so near a religion, that his consent could never have been attained, even though Sir Noel had himself commanded it—there should have been no secrecy in this."

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"Oh, if that had been possible! But Sir Noel never would have seen his heir stoop as he has done for a wife."

"Sir Noel is not like other men of his class, my Ruth. His pride is too noble for small prejudices. Besides, I think he has suspected from the first how dear you are to me; for in a conversation the other day he seemed to hint at a vague approval. But for this I should not have acted without his positive consent."

"But my father never would have given *his* consent, even if Sir Noel himself had commanded it," said Ruth. "He would rather die than drag down the dignity of the Hursts."

"It was this stiff-necked integrity that forced me to a step that will be more likely to anger Sir Noel than the marriage itself would have done. One glimpse of the truth would have aroused your father to drive me from his house, dearly as he has always loved me. Then would have come this question of young Storms—don't tremble so—are you not my wife?"

"I—I should have been compelled to marry him. He loves me. My father would die for me any minute; but were I fifty times as dear he would sacrifice me to the dignity of the Hursts—to a promise once given," said Ruth, lifting her face from the bosom where it had rested.

"But you?"

"I could not have resisted. My father is so loving—so kind. He would have told me of your grandeur, your long descent, of the noble—nay, royal ladies—that had been mated with the Hursts. He would have crushed me under the weight of my own miserable presumption. He would have told me, in plain speech, what my heart reproaches me with every minute now most of all, when I am daring to be so happy."

[109]

"But you are happy?"

"Oh, Walton, it seems like wickedness, but I am; so weak, however, so fearful of what must come. Oh, give me a little time! Permit me to dream a while until some chance or great necessity makes concealment impossible. I have no courage left."

"But this Storms?"

"I have got a little respite from my father; he will not break his word, though I pleaded with him almost upon my knees—but I am not to be hurried. They are to give me time, and now, that I know in my heart that it can never, never be, the terror of him is gone. So let me have just one little season of rest before you break this to my poor father, and make me afraid to look Sir Noel in the face."

Perhaps this sweet pleading found some answer in the young man's wishes, for in speaking of Sir Noel's conversation in the library, he had discovered how little there was in it to warrant the step he had taken. At the best there was much in his rash precipitancy to displease the proud old baronet, though he should be found willing to forgive the *mésalliance* he had made.

If these thoughts had great influence with Hurst, the terror and troubled eloquence of his bride completed his conviction. Drawing Ruth gently toward him, he kissed her upon the forehead; for this conversation, coming into the midst of their happiness, had subdued them both.

"Be it as you wish, sweet wife. With perfect love and trust in each other, we need be in no haste to let any one share our secret."

[110]

"Oh, how kind you are!" exclaimed the girl, brightening into fresh happiness. "This will give me time to study, to add something to the education that will be precious to me now; perhaps I can make myself less unworthy of your father's forgiveness."

"Unworthy?" answered Hurst, wounded, yet half charmed by her sweet humility. "Sir Noel has always looked upon you as a pretty favorite, whom it was a pleasure to protect; and my cousin, the Lady Rose—"

"Ah, how ungrateful, how forward she will think me! My heart grows heavy when her name is mentioned."

"She has always been your friend, Ruth."

"I know—I know; and in return I have had the presumption to think of making myself her equal."

"There can be no presumption in the wife of a Hurst accepting all that he has to give; but let us talk of something else. If our happiness is to be a secret, we must not mar its first dawning with apprehensions and regrets. Some perplexities will arise, for our position will be an embarrassing one; but there is no reason why we should anticipate them. It will be difficult enough to guard our secret so well that no one shall guess it."

Ruth was smiling. She could not think it difficult to keep a secret that seemed to her far too sweet and precious for the coarser sympathy of the world. The sacredness of her marriage was rendered more profound by the silence that sanctified it to her mind.

But now the carriage stopped, and the driver was heard getting down from the box. Hurst looked out.

They were in a village through which the railroad passed—not the one they had stopped at. They had been taken above that by a short route from the church, which the driver had chosen without consultation.

[111]

"So soon! Surely we are in the wrong place," said Hurst, impatient that his happiness should be broken in upon.

"You seemed particular about meeting the down train, sir, and I came the nearest way. It is due in five minutes," answered the man, touching his hat.

There was no time for expostulation or regret. In fact, the man had acted wisely, if "Norston's Rest" was to be reached in time to save suspicion. So the newly-married pair separated with a hurried hand-clasp, each took a separate carriage, and glided safely into dreamland, as the train flew across the country at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### THE LADY ROSE.

**N**ORSTON'S REST" was brilliantly lighted, for a dinner-party had assembled, when its heir drove up in his dog-cart that night, and leaping out, threw his reins to the groom, with some hasty directions about to-morrow. It was near the dinner hour, and several fair guests were lingering on the broad, stone terrace, or shaded by the silken and lace curtains of the drawing-room, watching for his return with that pretence of graceful indifference with which habits of society veil the deepest feeling.

One fair creature retreated from the terrace, with a handful of flowers which she had gathered hastily from a stone vase, and carried away when the first sound of wheels reached her; but she lingered in a little room that opened from the great hall, and seemed to be arranging her flowers with diligence in a vase that stood on a small malachite table, when young Hurst came in.

[112]

Unconsciously, and against her own proud will, she lifted her face from the flowers, and cast an eager glance into the hall, wondering in her heart if he would care to seek her for a moment before he went up to dress.

The young man saw her standing there quite alone, sweet and bright as the flowers she was arranging, and paused a moment, after drawing off his gloves; but he turned away and went up the broad, oaken staircase, with the thoughts of another face, dark, piquant, and more wildly beautiful, all bathed in blushes, too vividly in his mind for any other human features to throw even a shadow there.

The Lady Rose dropped a branch of heliotrope and a moss-rosebud, which had for one instant trembled in her hand, as Hurst passed the door, and trod upon them with a sharp feeling of disappointment.



"He knew that I was alone," she muttered, "and passed on without a word. He saw the flowers that he loves best in my hand, but would not claim them."

Tears, hot, passionate tears, stood in the lady's eyes, and her white teeth met sharply for a moment, as if grinding some bitter thing between them; but when Hurst came down-stairs, fully dressed, he found her in the drawing-room, with a richer bloom than usual on her cheeks, and the frost-like lace, which fell in a little cloud over the soft blue of her dress, just quivering with the agitation she had made so brave an effort to suppress.

As young Hurst came into the drawing-room, Sir Noel, who had been talking to a guest, came forward in the calm way habitual to his class, and addressed his son with something very like a reproof.

[113]

"We have almost waited," he said, glancing at the young lady as the person most aggrieved. "In fact, the dinner has been put back."

The old man's voice was gentle and his manners suave; but there was a reserved undertone in his speech that warned the young heir of a deeper meaning than either was intended to suggest.

Hurst only bowed for answer.

"Now that he has come," the baronet added, smiling graciously on the young lady, but turning away from his son, "perhaps we shall not be entirely unforgiving."

Walton Hurst made no apology, however, but offered his arm to Lady Rose, and followed his father's lead into the dining-room.

It was a spacious apartment, brilliantly illuminated with gas and wax lights, which found a rich reflection from buffets loaded with plate, and a table on which gold, silver, and rare old glass gleamed and flashed through masses of hot-house flowers. A slow rustle of silken trains sweeping the floor, a slight confusion, and the party was seated.

During the first course Lady Rose was restless and piqued. She found the person at her side so thoughtful that a feeling of wounded pride seized upon her, and gave to her manner an air of graceful defiance that at last drew his attention.

So Hurst broke from the dreaminess of his love reverie and plunged into the gay conversation about him. Spite of himself the triumphant gladness of his heart burst forth, and in the glow of his own joy he met the half-shy, half-playful attentions of the high-bred creature by his side with a degree of brilliant animation which brought new bloom to her cheeks, and a smile of contentment to the lips of the proud old man at the head of the table. This smile deepened into a glow of entire satisfaction when the gentlemen were left to their wine; for then young Hurst made an excuse to his father, and, as the latter thought, followed the ladies into the drawing-room.

[114]

Deep drinking at dinner-parties is no longer a practice in England, as it may have been years ago. Thus it was not many minutes before the baronet and his guests came up-stairs to find the ladies gathered in knots about the room, and one, at least, sitting in dissatisfied solitude near a table filled with books of engravings, which she did not care to open; for all her discontent had come back when she thought herself less attractive than the wines of some old vintage, stored before she was born.

"But where is Walton?" questioned the old gentleman, approaching the girl, with a faint show of resentment. "Surely, Lady Rose, I expected to find him at your feet."

"It is a place he seldom seeks," answered the lady, opening one of the books with assumed carelessness. "If he has left the table, I fancy it must have been him I saw crossing the terrace ten minutes ago."

Sir Noel replied, incredulously:

"Saw him crossing the terrace! There must have been some mistake. I am sure he spoke of going to the drawing-room."

She hesitated.

"He changed his mind, I suppose," she said at last, with a slight but haughty wave of her hand toward a great bay-window that looked out on the park. "I saw his face as he crossed that block of moonlight on the terrace, I am quite sure. Perhaps—"

[115]

"Perhaps what, Lady Rose?"

"He has some business at the gardener's cottage. Old Jessup is a favorite, you know," answered the lady, with a light laugh, in which the old man discovered the bitterness of latent jealousy.

A hot, angry flush suffused the old man's face; but this was the only sign of anger that he gave. The next instant he was composed as ever, and answered her with seeming indifference.

"Oh, yes, I remember; I had some orders for Jessup, which he was thoughtful enough to take."

The lady smiled again, now with a curve of distrustful scorn on her red lips.

"Perhaps he failed in giving your message earlier, and in his desire to please you has forsaken us."

"Perhaps," was the indifferent reply. Then the old man moved quietly away, and speaking a gracious word here and there, glided out of the room.

Later in the evening, Lady Rose had left her book of engravings, and stood shrouded in the sweeping draperies of the great window, looking out upon the park. Directly she saw the figure of her host gliding across the terrace, which, in that place, seemed flagged with silver, the moonlight lay so full upon it. The next moment he was lost in the blackest shadows of the park.

"He has gone to seek him! Now I shall know the worst," she thought, while quick thrills of hope and dread shot like lances through her frame. "I could not stoop to spy upon him, but a father is

different, and, once on the alert, will be implacable."

While these thoughts were in her mind, the girl gave a sudden start, and grasped at the silken curtains, while a faint shivering came over her, that seemed like coming death. [116]

For deep in the woods of the park, where the gardener's cottage stood, she heard the sharp report of a gun.

"Great Heaven! What can it mean?" she cried; clasping her hands. "What can it mean?"

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### ALONE IN THE COTTAGE.

**B**REATHLESS with apprehension, which was made half joy by an undeniable sense of happiness, all the more intense because it was gained by so much hazard, Ruth Jessup—for she dared not breathe that new name even to herself as yet—reached that remote gate in the park-wall, and darted like a frightened hare into the thick covert of the trees. There she lingered a while, holding her breath with dread. It was scarcely dark, but to her it seemed impossible that so few hours could have passed since she had stolen from her home. Surely, surely, her father must have returned. She would find him standing in the park, ready to arraign and judge her for the thing she had done; or he might come out to find her wandering among the ferns, so happy, yet so terrified, that she would like to stay there forever, like a bird in sight of its nest, trembling while it watched over its trust of love.

The purple twilight was just veiling the soft, green gloom of the trees with its tender darkness. Now and then a pale flash of gold shot through the leaves, giving signs that the evening had but just closed in. Still the girl hesitated. Almost, for the first time in her life, she feared to meet her father face to face. The taste of forbidden fruit was on her lips, tainted with the faint bitterness of coming ashes. [117]

"I will go home—I must!" she said, rising from a fragment of rock that had given her a seat among the ferns. "There is yet a quiver of crimson in the air. It cannot be ten yet!"

The girl walked slowly and cautiously on until a curve in the path brought her in sight of the cottage. Then her pent-up breath came forth in a glad exclamation.

"It is dark yet! No one has been there in all this time!"

Poor child! It seemed an age since she had left the house, and a miracle that she should have found it so still and solitary. When she entered the porch, the light of a rising moon was trembling down to the honeysuckles that clung to it, and a cloud of dewy fragrance seemed to welcome her home again tenderly, as if she had no deception in her heart, and was not trembling from head to foot with vague apprehensions.

Taking a heavy key from under one of the seats which ran along each side of the porch, she opened the door and went into her home again. The moonlight came flickering through the oriel window, as if a bunch of silver arrows had been shivered against it, half illuminating the room with a soft, beautiful light. Ruth would gladly have sat down in this tranquil gloom, and given herself up to such dreams as follow a full certainty of being beloved, but the hoarse old clock twanged out the hour with a force that absolutely frightened her. She had not self-possession enough to count its strokes, but shuddered to think the night had possibly reached ten o'clock. [118]

She lighted a lamp, looked around to make sure that nothing had been left that could betray her, then ran up-stairs, flung off her sad-colored dress, set all her rich hair free, and came down in the jaunty red over-dress and black skirt that had given her beauty such picturesque effect in the morning. All day she had been pale and feverishly flushed by turns. Now a sense of safety gave her countenance a permanent richness of color that would have been dazzling in a broader light than that lamp could give. She was under shelter in her own familiar garment; could it be that all the rest was a dream? Had she, in fact, been married?

A quick, frightened gasp answered the question. The lamp-light fell on a heavy circlet of new gold, that glittered on her finger.

Yes, it was there! His hand had pressed it upon hers; his lips had kissed it reverently. Must she take it off? Was there no way of concealing the precious golden shackle, that seemed to hold her life in?

That was impossible. That small, shapely hand had never felt the touch of ornament or ring before. The blaze of it seemed to light the whole room. Her father would see it and question her. No, no! it must be hid away before he came. She ran up-stairs, opened her bureau-drawer, and began to search eagerly for a ribbon narrow enough to escape attention. Knots of pink, and streamers of scarlet were there neatly arranged, but nothing that might answer her purpose, except a thread of black ribbon which had come out of her mourning two years before, when her mother died. [119]

Ruth snatched this up and swung her wedding-ring upon it, too much excited for superstition at

the moment, and glad to feel the perilous gift safe in her bosom.

Now all was hidden, no trace of her fault had been left. She might dare to look at the old clock.

It lacked an hour and more of the time at which she might expect her father. Well, fortunately, she had something to do. His supper must be prepared. She would take good care of him now. He should lack nothing at her hands, since she had given him such grievous cause of offence.

With these childlike ideas of atonement in her mind, Ruth took up a lamp, and going into the kitchen, kindled a fire; and spreading a white cloth on the table, set out the supper her father had desired of her. When the cold beef and mustard, the bread and cheese, were all daintily arranged, she bethought herself of his most favored dish of all, and taking a posset-dish of antique silver from the cupboard, half filled it with milk, which she set upon the coals to boil. Into this she from time to time broke bits of wheaten bread, and when the milk was all afoam, poured a cup of strong ale into it, which instantly resolved the whole mass into golden whey and snow-white curd.

As Ruth stooped over the posset-cup, shading her face with one hand from the fire, and stirring its contents gently with a spoon, a noise at the window made her start and cry out with a suddenness that nearly upset the silver porringer.

"Who is it? What is it?" she faltered, looking at the window with strained eyes. "Oh, have mercy! That face, that face!"

[120]

Before she could move away from the hearth, some one shook the window-sash so violently, that a rain of dew fell from the ivy clustering around it.

Ruth stood appalled; every vestige of color fled from her face; but she gave no further sign of the terror that shook her from head to foot. Directly the keen, handsome face that had peered through the glass disappeared, and the footsteps of a man walking swiftly sounded back from the gravel path which led to the front door.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### A STORMY ENCOUNTER.

**R**UTH held her breath and listened. She heard the door open, and footsteps in the little passage. Then her natural courage aroused itself, and lifting the posset-cup from the coals, she left it on the warm hearth, and met the intruder at the kitchen door.

"Is it you?" she said, with a quiver of fear in her voice. "I am sorry father is not at home."

"But I am not," answered the young man, setting down a gun he had brought in, behind the door. "It was just because he wasn't here, and I knew it, that I came in. It is high time, miss, that you and I should have a talk together, and no father to put in his word between pipes."

"What do you want? Why should you wish to speak with me at this time of night?"

"Why, now, I like that," answered the young fellow, with a laugh that made Ruth shudder. "Well, I'll just come in and have my say. There mayn't be another chance like this."

[121]

Richard Storms turned and advanced a step, as if he meant to enter the little parlor, but Ruth called him back. It seemed to her like desecration, that this man should tread on the same floor that Hurst, her husband—oh, how the thought swelled her heart!—had walked over.

"Not there," she said. "I must mind my father's supper. He will be home in a few minutes."

"Well, I don't much care; the kitchen seems more natural. It is here that we used to sit before the young master found out how well-favored you are, as if he couldn't find comely faces enough at the house, but must come poaching down here on my warren."

"Who are you speaking of? I cannot make it out," faltered Ruth, turning cold.

"Who? As if you didn't know well enough; as if I didn't see you and him talking together thick as two bees this very morning."

"No, no!" protested Ruth, throwing out both her hands. "You could not—you did not!"

"But I did, though, and the gun just trembled of itself in my hand, it so wanted to be at him. If it hadn't been that you seemed offish, and he looked black as a thunder-clap, I couldn't have kept my hand from the trigger."

"That would have been murder," whispered the girl, through her white lips.

"Murder, would it? That's according as one thinks. What do men carry a gun at night for, let me ask you, but to keep the deer and the birds safe from poachers? If they catch them at it, haven't they a right to fire? Well, Ruth, you are my game, and my gun takes care of you as keepers protect the deer. It will be safe to warn the young master of that!"

[122]

"I do not know—I cannot understand—"

"Oh, you don't, ha!" broke in the young man, throwing himself into a chair and stretching out his legs on the hearth. "Well, then, I'll tell you a secret about him that'll take the starch out of your

pride. You're not the only girl with a pretty face that brings him among my covers!"

"What?"

"Ah, ha! Oh, ho! That wakes you up, does it? I thought so. Nothing like a swoop of spite to bring a girl out of cover."

"I do not understand you," said Ruth, flashing out upon her tormentor with sudden spirit. "What have I to do with anything you are talking about?"

"The other lass, you mean. Not much, of course. It isn't likely he put her in your way."

A burst of indignation, perhaps of something more stinging than that, filled the splendid eyes with fire that Ruth fixed upon her tormentor.

"Do you know—can you even guess that it is my—my—!"

The girl broke her imprudent speech off with a thrill of warning that left the prints of her white teeth on the burning lips which had almost betrayed her. In her terror the insult that followed was almost a relief.

"Sweetheart!" sneered the young man.

She did not heed the word or sneer; both were a proof that her secret was safe as yet.

"One up at the house, one here, and another—well, no matter about her. You understand?"

"You slander an honorable gentleman," said Ruth, controlling herself with a great effort.

[123]

"Do I? Ask the Lady Rose, if she ever stoops to speak to you."

"She is a sweet, gracious lady," broke in Ruth, magnanimous in her swift jealousy. "A great lady, who refuses speech or smile to no one."

"Ask her, then, who was out on the terrace this evening, before he came home, robbing the great stone vases of their sweetest flowers for his button-hole!"

Ruth lifted one hand to her bosom, and pressed the golden ring there close to her heart.

Then turning to the young man, who was watching her keenly, she said, with composure:

"Well, why should you or I ask such questions of the young lady? I would no more do that than spy upon her, as you have done!"

Storms looked at her keenly from under his bent brows, and his thin lips closed with a baffled expression.

"Off the scent," he thought. "What is it? She was hot on the chase just now. Has she really doubled on him?"

"It needs no spying to see what goes on up there," he answered, after a moment, waving his head toward the great house. "Grand people like them think we have neither eyes nor ears. They pay us for being without them, and think we earn our wages like dumb cattle. Just as if sharpness went with money. But we do see and hear, when they would be glad to think us blind and dumb!"

The girl made no answer. She longed to question the creature she despised, and had a fierce struggle with her heart, until more honorable feelings put down the swift cravings of jealousy that were wounding her heart, as bees sting a flower while rifling it of honey.

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The young man watched her cunningly, but failed to understand her. The jealousy which made him so cruel had no similitude with her finer and keener feelings. He longed to see her break out in a tirade of abuse, or to have her question him broadly, as he wished to answer.

Ruth did nothing of the kind. In the tumult of feelings aroused by his words she remembered all that had been done that day, and, with sudden vividness of recollection, the promise of caution she had made to her husband.

Her husband! She pressed her hand against her bosom, where the wedding-ring lay hid, and a glorified expression came to her face as she turned it toward the firelight, absolutely forgetful that a hateful intruder shared it with her.

Richard Storms was baffled, and a little saddened by the strange beauty in the face his eyes were searching.

"Ruth!" he said at length. "Ruth!"

The girl started. His voice had dragged her out of a dream of heaven. She looked around vaguely on finding herself on earth again, and with him.

"Well," she said, impatiently, "what would you say to me?"

"Just this: when is it to be? I am really tired of waiting."

"Tired of waiting!" said Ruth, impatiently. "Waiting for what?"

"Why, for our wedding-day. What else?"

The proud blood of an empress seemed to flame up into the girl's face; a smile, half rage, half scorn, curved her lips, which, finally, relaxed into a clear, ringing laugh.

"You—you think to marry me!" was her broken exclamation, as the untoward laugh died out.

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The young man turned fiery red. The scornfulness of that laugh stung him, and he returned it with interest.

"No wonder you ask," he said, with a sharp, venomous look, from which she shrunk instinctively. "It isn't every honest man that would hold to his bargain, after all these galivantings with the young master."

Ruth turned white as snow, and caught hold of a chair for support. Her evident terror seemed to appease the tormentor, and he continued, with a relenting laugh, "Don't be put about, though."

I'm too fond to be jealous, because my sweetheart takes a turn now and then in the moonlight when she thinks no one is looking."

"Your sweetheart! Yours!"

Storms waved his hand, and went on.

"Though, mind me, all this must stop when we're married."

Ruth had no disposition to laugh now. The very mention of Hurst had made a coward of her. Storms saw how pale she was, and came toward her.

"There, now, give us a kiss, and make up. It's all settled between father and the old man, so just be conformable, and I'll say nothing about the young master."

As the young man came toward her, with his arms extended, Ruth drew back, step by step, with such fright and loathing in her eyes that his temper rose again. With startling suddenness he gave a leap, and, flinging one arm around her, attempted to force her averted face to his.

One sharp cry, one look, and Ruth fell to the floor, quivering like a shot bird.

She had seen the door open, and caught one glimpse of her husband's face. Then a powerful blow followed, and Richard Storms went reeling across the kitchen, and struck with a crash against the opposite wall.

Ruth remembered afterward, as one takes up the painful visions of a dream, the deadly venom of those eyes; the gray whiteness of that aquiline face; the specks of foam that flew from those half-open lips. She saw, too, the slow retreat during which those threatening features were turned upon her husband. Then all was blank—she had fainted away.

For some moments it seemed as if the girl were dead, she lay so limp and helpless on her husband's bosom; but the burning words that rose from his lips, the kisses he rained down upon hers, brought a stir of life back to her heart. Awaking with a dim sense of danger, she clung to him, shivering and in tears.

"Where is he? Oh, Walton! is he gone?"

"Gone, the hound! Yes, darling, to his kennel."

"Ah, how he frightened me!"

"But how dare he enter this house?"

"I cannot tell—only—only my father has not come home yet. Oh, I—I hate him. He frightens me. He threatens me."

"Threatens you! When? How?"

"Oh, Walton! he has seen us together. He will bring you into trouble."

"Not easily."

"Your father?"

"Is not a man to listen to the gossip of his servants."

Ruth drew a deep breath. Walton had concealed his real anxiety so well, that her own fears were calmed.

"Come, come," he said; "we must not let this hind embitter the few minutes I can spend with you. Look up, love, and tell me that you are better."

"Oh! I am; but he frightened me so."

"And now?"

Hurst folded the fair girl in his arms, and smoothed her bright hair with a caressing hand.

"Now!" she answered, lifting her mouth, which had grown red again, and timidly returning his kisses. "Now I am safe, and I fear nothing. Oh, mercy! Look!"

"What? Where?"

"The window! That face at the window!"

"It is your fancy, darling. I see nothing there."

"But I saw it. Surely I did. His keen, wicked face. It was close to the glass."

"There, there! It was only the ivy leaves glancing in the moonlight."

"No, no! I saw it. He is waiting for you."

"Let him wait. I shall not stir a step the sooner or later for that."

Ruth began to tremble again. Her eyes were constantly turning toward the window. She scarcely heard the words of endearment with which Hurst strove to reassure her. All at once the old clock filled the house with its brazen warning. It was ten o'clock. The girl sprang to her feet.

"It is time for my father to come. He must not find you here."

Hurst took his hat, and glancing down at his dinner dress, remembered that he would be missed from the drawing-room. Once more he enfolded the girl in his arms, called her by the new endearing name that was so sweet to them both, and finally left her smiling through all her fears.

Ruth stole to the little oriel window, and watched her husband as he turned from the moonlight and entered the shadows of the park. Then she went back to the kitchen and busied herself about the fire.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### AN ENCOUNTER.

**W**HEN Richard Storms left the gardener's cottage, he dashed like a wild beast into the densest thickets of the forest, and tore his way through toward his own home. It gave him a sort of tigerish pleasure to tear at the thickets with his fierce hands, and trample the forest turf beneath his iron-shod heels, for the rage within him was brutal in its thirst for destruction. All at once he stopped short, seemed to remember something and turned back, plunging along at a heavy but swift pace, now through the shadows, now in the moonlight, unconscious of the quiet beauty of either.

It took him but a brief time to reach the cottage, around which he pondered a while, stealing in and out of the tangled vines which hung in thick draperies around the building. At last Ruth saw his face at the kitchen window, and gave a sharp cry that drove him away, more fiercely wrathful than ever, for he had seen the creature he worshipped after a rude fashion giving caresses to another, that he would have gone on his grovelling knees to have secured to himself.

"Jessup promised my father that I should wed her, and it has come to this," he grumbled fiercely, as if tearing the words between his teeth. "On the night I had set aside to win an answer for myself, the young master hustles me out of the door like a dog, and takes the kennel himself. He thinks I am not man enough to bark back when he kicks me, does he? He shall see! He shall see! Bark! Nay, my fine fellow, it shall be biting this time. A growl and a snap isn't enough for kicks and blows." [129]

The wrath of this man was less fiery now, but it had taken a stern, solid strength, more dangerous than the first outburst of passion. He sought no particular path as he left the house, but stamped forward with heavy feet, as if he were trampling down something that he hated viciously, now and then gesticulating in the moonlight, till his very shadow seemed to be fighting its way along the turf.

All at once he came upon another man, who had left the great chestnut avenue, and turned into a side path, which led to the gardener's passage. The two men stopped, and one spoke cheerfully.

"Why, good-night, Dick. This is late to be out. Anything going wrong?"

"Wrong!" said the other, hoarsely. "Yes, wrong enough to cost a man his life some day. Go up yonder, and ask your daughter Ruth what it is. She'll tell, no doubt—ask her!"

Richard Storms, after flinging these words at his father's friend, attempted to push by him on the path; but Jessup stood resolutely in his way.

"What is all this, my lad? Nay, now, you haven't been to the cottage while I was away, and frightened the girl about what we were talking of. I should take that unfriendly, Dick. Our Ruth is a bit dainty, and should have had time to think over such matters."

"Dainty! I should think so. She looks high in her sweethearting; I must say that for her."

"What is it you are saying of my daughter?" cried Jessup, doubling his great brown fist, unconsciously.

"I say that a man like me has a chance of getting more kicks than kisses when he seeks her," answered Dick, with a sneer. [130]

"And serves him right, if he dared to ask such things of her mother's child," said Jessup, growing angry.

"But what if he only asked, honest fashion, for an honest wife, as I did, and got kicks in return?"

"Kicks! Why, man, who was there to give them, and I away?" questioned the gardener, astonished.

"One who shall pay for it!" was the answer that came hissing through the young man's lips.

"Of course, one don't give kicks and expect farthings back; but who has got up pluck to try this with you, Dick? He must be mad to dare it."

"He is mad!" answered Storms, grinding his teeth. "Mad or not, no man but the master's son would have dared it."

"The master's son! Are you drunk or crazy, Dick Storms?"

"I almost think both. Who can tell?" muttered Dick. "But it's not with drink."

"The master's son! but where—when?"

"At your own house, where he has been more than once, when he thought sure to find Ruth alone."

"Dick Storms, this is a lie."

Dick burst into a hoarse laugh.

"A lie, is it? Go up yonder, now. Walk quick, and you'll see whether it is the truth or not."

Jessup rushed forward a step or two, then came back, as if ashamed of the action.

"Nay, there is no need. I'll not help you belie my own child."

"Belie her, is it? I say, Bill Jessup, not half an hour ago, I saw Ruth, your daughter, with her head on the young master's bosom, and her mouth red with his kisses. If you don't believe this, go and [131]

see for yourself."

The florid face of William Jessup turned to marble in the moonlight, and a fierce, hot flame leaped to his eyes.

"I will not walk a pace quicker, or be made to spy on my girl, by anything you can say, Dick; not if it were to save my own life; but I like you, lad—your father and I are fast friends. We meant that, by-and-by, you and Ruth should come together."

Storms flung up his head with an insulting sneer.

"Together! Not if every hair on her head was weighed down with sovereigns. I am an honest man, William Jessup, and will take an honest woman home to my mother, or take none."

Before the words left his lips, Richard Storms received a blow that sent him with his face upward across the forest path; and William Jessup was walking with great strides toward his own cottage.

It was seldom that Jessup gave way to such passion as had overcome him now, and he had not walked a dozen paces before he regretted it with considerable self-upbraiding.

"The lad is jealous of every one that looks at my lass, and speaks out of range because she is a bit offish with him. Poor darling, she has no mother; and the thought of marrying frightens her. It troubles me, too. Sometimes I feel a spite toward the lad, for wanting to take her from me. It makes me restless to think of it. I wonder if any living man ever gave up his daughter to a sweetheart without a grip of pain at the heart? I think it wasn't so much the mad things he said that made my fist so unmanageable, for that come of too much drink, of course; but since he has begun to press this matter, I'm getting heartsore about losing the girl."

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With these thoughts in his mind, Jessup came within sight of his own home, and paused in front of it.

How cool and pleasant it looked in the moonlight, with the shadowy vines flickering over it, and a golden light from the kitchen window brightening the dew upon them into crystal drops! The very tranquillity soothed the disturbed man before he entered the porch.

"I wonder if it'll ever be the same again when she is gone," he said, speaking his thoughts aloud, and drawing the hand that had struck down young Storms across his eyes. "No, no; I must not expect that."

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

**R**UTH did not come forth to receive her father. This was strange, for a trip to London, with these simple people, was a great event, and it seemed to Jessup as if he had been gone a year.

When he entered the kitchen, Ruth was busy at the table moving the dishes with unsteady hands; but when he spoke, she came forward with breathless eagerness, and made herself very busy taking off his dusty things, which she shook, and folded with wonderful care.

Spite of his utter disbelief in the coarse accusations made by Storms in the park, Jessup watched his daughter anxiously. It seemed to him that she looked paler than usual, and that all her movements were suspiciously restless. Besides this, he observed, with a sinking heart, that her eyes never once met his with their own frank smile.

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Could it be that there was some shadow of truth in what Storms had said? He would not believe it.

"Come, father, the posset is ready. I have been keeping it warm."

Ruth stood on the hearth then, with the antique silver posset-cup, which had been his grandmother's, in her hand. The firelight was full upon her, concealing the pallor of her face with its golden flicker. Surely there could be nothing wrong under that sweet look.

The gardener gave a great sigh of relief as he accepted this thought, and his anger toward Dick Storms grew deep and bitter.

"Come, lass," he said, with more than usual affection, "sit down here by my side. The posset is rare and good; while I eat it, you shall tell me of all that has been done since I went away."

All that had been done since he went away! Would Ruth ever dare to tell her father that? The very thought sent up a rush of blood to her face.

"Oh, father! there is little to be done when you are away. I did not even care to cook my own supper."

"Ah! well, take it now, child," said the good man, pouring half his warm posset into an old china bowl, and pushing it toward her.

"No, no, father, I am not hungry. I think the cooking of food takes away one's appetite."

"Nay, eat. It is lonesome work, with no one to help me," said the father, who certainly had no

cause to complain of his own appetite. Ruth stirred the posset languidly with her spoon, and strove to swallow a little; but the effort almost choked her. It might be fancy; but she could not help thinking that her father was furtively regarding her all the time, and the idea filled her with dismay.

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Something of the same feeling possessed her father. Inherent kindness made him peculiarly sensitive, and he did not know how to question his daughter of the things that disturbed him, without wounding her and himself too.

In this perplexity, he ate with that ravenous haste which sometimes springs from an unconsciousness of what we are doing when under the pressure of great mental excitement. He was astonished when his spoon scraped on the bottom of that silver posset-cup. He sat for a moment embarrassed and uncertain how to begin. Where the feelings of his daughter were concerned, Jessup was a coward; to him she had been, from her very babyhood, a creature to worship and care for with a sort of tender reverence. So, with cowardice born of too much love, he thought to cheat himself, and bade her bring the little carpet-bag that had been his companion to London, and which he had dropped near the door.

Ruth, glad of anything that promised to distract her mind from its anxieties, brought the bag, and stood over her father while he unlocked it.

"See, child," he said, taking out a parcel done up in filmy paper, "I have brought some fill-falls from London, thinking my lass would be glad of them. Look, now!"

Here Jessup unrolled a ribbon, which streamed half across the room, as he shook out its scarlet waves.

"Isn't that something like, now?"

"Oh, it is beautiful!" cried the girl, with true feminine delight. "My dear, dear father!"

"I remembered—but no matter about that. My little Ruth is like a rose, and must have color like one. See what I have brought to go with the ribbon."

"White muslin," cried Ruth, in an ecstasy of delight. "Fine enough for the Lady Rose. How beautifully the scarlet sash will loop it up! Oh, father, who told you how well these things would go together?"

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"I guessed it one day when the Lady Rose came here with a lot of stuff like that, puffed and looped with a ribbon bright as the field-poppies about her. You didn't know then, my lass, that your father felt like crying too, when he saw tears in his child's eyes, because she craved a fine dress and bonny colors for herself, and never thought to get it. There, now, you must get the best seamstress in the village to make it."

"No, no! I will make it with my own hands. Oh, father! father! how good, how kind you are!"

Dropping the sash and the muslin from her hold, Ruth threw her arms around Jessup's neck, and, bursting into tears, laid her head upon his shoulder.

"So, so! That will never do," cried the kind-hearted man, smoothing the girl's hair with his great hand, tenderly, as if he were afraid his very fondness might hurt her. "If you cry so, I shall turn the key, and lock all the other things up."

Ruth lifted her sweet face, all bedewed with penitent tears, and laid it close to the weather-beaten cheek of the man.

"Oh, father! don't be so good to me! It breaks my heart!"

Jessup took her face between his hands, and kissed it on the forehead, then pushed her pleasantly on one side, and thrust his hand into the bag again. This time it was drawn forth with a pretty pair of high-heeled boots, all stitched with silk, and circled about the ankles with a wreath of exquisite embroidery.

"There, now, we will leave the rest till to-morrow," he said, closing the box with a mysterious look. "Only say that you are pleased with these."

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"Pleased! Oh, father, it is the dress of a lady!"

"Well, even so. One day my Ruth may be next door to that," said Jessup, putting forth all his affectionate craft. "Farmer Storms is a warm man, and Dick is his only son. It is the lad's own right if he sometimes brings his gun and shoots our game—his father has an interest in it, you know. The master has no right over his farm, and birds swarm there."

Jessup stopped suddenly, for Ruth stood before him white and still as marble, the ribbon which she had taken from the floor streaming from her hand in vivid contrast with the swift pallor that had settled upon her.

"Lass! Ruth, I say! What has come over you?" cried out the gardener, in alarm. "What have I done to make you turn so white all in a minute?"

"Done! Nothing, father—nothing!" gasped the girl.

"But you are ill!"

"Yes, a little; but nothing to—to trouble you so."

Ruth stood a moment after this, with one hand on her temple, then she turned, with a show of strength, to her father.

"What were you saying just now about farmer Storms, and—and his son? I don't think I quite understood, did I?"

Jessup was now almost as white as his daughter. Her emotion kindled up a gleam of suspicion, which had hung about him in spite of himself, though he had left Richard Storms prostrate across the forest path for having inspired it.



"Ruth, has not Dick Storms told you to-night that both he and his father are getting impatient to have you at the farm?" he questioned, in a low voice.

"Dick—Dick Storms, father!"

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"I ask you, Ruth. Has he been here, and did he tell you?"

"He was here, father," faltered the girl.

"And he asked you?"

"He asked me to be his wife," answered the girl, with a shudder.

"Well!"

"His wife at once; and you promised that he should not come until I was better prepared. Oh, father, it was cruel. He seemed to take it for granted that I must be whatever he wished."

"That was ill-timed; but Dick has been kept back, and he is so fond of you, Ruth."

"Fond of me? Of me? No, no! The thought is awful."

"It was his loving impatience that broke forth at the wrong time. Nothing could be worse; but you were not very harsh with him, Ruth?"

"I could not help it, father, he was so rude."

"Hang the fellow! I hope he won't get over the buffet I gave him in one while. The fool should have known better than treat my daughter with so little ceremony. She is of a daintier sort than he often mates with. He deserves all he has gotten from her and from me."

While these thoughts were troubling Jessup's mind, Ruth stood before him with tears swelling under her eyelids, till the long, black lashes were heavy with them. They touched the father's heart.

"Don't fret, child. A few hasty words in answer to over rough wooing can easily be made up for. The young man was sorely put about; but I rated him soundly for coming here when I was away. He will think twice before he does it again."

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"He must never do it again. Never—never!" cried Ruth, desperately. "See to that, father. He never must."

"Ruth!"

"Oh, father, do not ask me ever to see this man again. I cannot—I cannot!"

"Hush, child—hush! It is only a quarrel, which must not break the compact of a lifetime. Till now, you and Dick have always been good friends."

"Have we? I don't know. Not lately, I'm sure; and we never, never can be anything like friends again."

"Ruth!"

The girl lifted her great wild eyes to her father, and dropped them again. She was too much terrified for tears now.

"Ruth, was any person here to-night beyond Dick?"

The girl did not answer. She seemed turning to stone. Her silence irritated the poor man, who stood watching like a criminal for her reply. He spoke more sharply.

"Did you hear me, Ruth?"

"Yes, I hear."

"I asked if any one was here besides Dick?"

"Yes."

Jessup could hardly hear this little word as it dropped painfully from those white lips; but he understood it; and spoke again.

"Who was it, Ruth?"

"Young Mr. Hurst."

"He was here, then. What brought him?"

"He came—he came—"

"Well!"

"He did not tell me why he came, father. It was all too sudden; and he was very angry."

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"Too sudden? Angry? How?"

"Dick Storms frightened me so, and Mr. Hurst saw it, just as he came in. I could have struck him myself, father!" cried the girl, and her pale face flamed up with a remembrance of the indignity offered her.

Jessup clenched his fist.

"Why, what did the young man do?"

"He would not believe that his offer was hateful to me, and—and acted as if I had said yes."

"I understand. The idiot! But he must have been drinking, Ruth."

"I don't know, and I only hope you will never let him come here again."

"But he will be sorry, Ruth. You must not be too hard on the young fellow."

"Hard upon him? Oh, father!"

"He has had a tough lesson. But young Hurst—what did he do?"

"I can hardly tell you, it was so sudden and violent. All in a minute Dick was hurled against the

wall, and through the door. Then there was a struggle, deep, hoarse words, and Dick was gone."

"Was that all?"

"Yes, all that passed between Mr. Hurst and Dick. There was no time for talking."

"And after that?"

"I don't know what Dick did."

"But Mr. Hurst?"

"He—he stayed a while. I was so frightened, so—"

"Ah, he stayed a while. That was kind."

"Very kind, father!"

"Ruth," said the gardener, struggling with himself to speak firmly, and yet with kindness, "there was something more. After Dick left, or before that, did Mr. Hurst—that is, were you more forgiving to him than you were to Storms?"

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"I—I do not understand, father."

She does understand, thought Jessup, turning his eyes away from her burning face, heart-sick with apprehension. Then he nerved himself, and spoke again.

"Ruth, I met Dick in the park, and he made a strange charge against you."

"Against me!"

"He says that insults greater than he would have dared to offer, but for which he was kicked from my door, were forgiven to young Mr. Hurst. Nay, that you encouraged them."

"And you believed this, father?" questioned the girl, turning her eyes full upon those that were searching her face with such questioning anxiety.

"No, Ruth, I did not want to believe him; but how happened it that the young master came here so late at night?"

"Oh, father! Why do you question me so sharply?"

The panic that whitened Ruth's face, the terror that shook her voice, gave force to the suspicion that poor man had been trying so hard to quench. It stung him like a serpent now, and he started up, exclaiming:

"With one or the other, there is an account to be settled before I sleep."

William Jessup seized his cap and went out into the park, leaving Ruth breathless with astonishment. She stole to the window, and looked after him, seized with uncontrollable dread. How long she sat there Ruth could never tell; but after a while, the stillness of the night was broken by the sharp report of a gun.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### THE TWO THAT LOVED HIM.

**A**CROSS one of the moonlit paths of the park lay the form of a man, with his face turned upward, white and still as the moonbeams that fell upon it. A little way farther on, where the great boughs of a cedar of Lebanon flung mighty shadows on the forest sward, another figure lay, scarcely perceptible in the darkness, of which it seemed only a denser part. Between the two, some rays of light struck obliquely on the lock of a gun, which was half buried in dewy fern-leaves.

One sharp crack of that rifle had rung through the stillness of the night. Two men had fallen, and then the same sweet, calm repose settled on the park. But it was only for a minute.

Scarcely had the sound reached the gardener's cottage, when the door flew open, and dashing out through the porch came a young girl, white with fear, and wild with a terrible desire to know the worst. She had given one look behind the entrance-door as she fled through it, and saw that the gun which Richard Storms had left there was gone. She had seen it since he went, and its absence turned her fears to a panic.

Through a window of the drawing-room, up at "Norston's Rest," another figure rushed in wild haste. She ran blindly against one of the great marble vases on the terrace, and shook the sweet masses of dew-laden foliage till they rained a storm of drops upon her bare arms and soft floating garments.

For a moment Lady Rose, for it was she, leaned against the marble, stunned and bewildered. The shot she had heard in the depths of the park had pierced her heart with a terrible fear.

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Then she knew that, for a time, the music within had ceased, and that the company would be swarming that way, to irritate her by questions that would be a cruel annoyance while the sound of that shot was ringing in her ears.

Swift as lightning, wild as a night-hawk, the girl darted away from the vase, leaving a handful of

gossamer lace among the thorns of the roses, and fled down the steps. She took no path, but, guided by that one sound, dashed through the flower-beds, heedless that her satin boots sunk into the moist mould, wetting her feet at every step; heedless that her cloud-like dress trailed over grass and ferns, gathering up dew like rain; heedless of everything but that one fearful thought—some one was killed! Was it Walton Hurst?

Lady Rose was in the woods, rushing forward blindly, but jealous distrust had taught her the way to the cottage, and she went in that direction straight as an arrow from the bow, and wild as the bird it strikes. Coming out from the shadow of some great spreading cedar trees, she saw lying there in the path a man—a white, still face—his face.

It seemed to her that the shriek which tore her heart rang fearfully through the woods, but it had died on her lips, and gave forth no sound, only freezing them to ice as she crept toward the prostrate man, and laid her face to his.

"Oh, Walton! Oh, my beloved, speak to me! Only breathe once, that I may hear. Move only a little. Stir your hand. Don't—don't let the moonlight look into your eyes so! Walton, Walton!"

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She laid her cold, white hand over the wide-open eyes of the man as he lay there, so stiff and ghastly, in the moonlight. She turned his head aside, and hid those eyes in her bosom, in which the ice seemed to melt and cast off tears. She looked around for help, yet was afraid that some one might come and rob her. She had found him; he was there in her arms. If one life could save another, she would save him. Was she not armed with the mightiest of all earthly power—great human love?

Wild, half-frightened by the impulse that was upon her, the girl looked to the right and left as if she feared the very moonlight would scoff at her. Then, with timid hesitation, her lips sought the white mouth of the prostrate man, but her breath was checked with a shrinking sob. The cold touch terrified her.

Was he dead?

No, no! She would not believe that. There was no sign of violence upon his face; a still whiteness, like death, a fixed look in the open eyes; but the moisture that lay around him was only dew. She bathed her hand in it and held the trembling fingers up to the light, to make sure of that; and with the conviction came a great sob of relief, which broke into a wild, glad cry, for a flicker of shade seemed to tremble over that face, and the eyes slowly closed.

"Oh, my God be thanked! he is alive! My darling! Oh, my darling!"

"Hush!" cried another voice, at her side.

A shadow had fallen athwart the kneeling girl, and another face, more wildly pale, more keenly disturbed with anguish, looked down upon the prostrate man, and the young creature who crouched and trembled by his side.

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"Look up, woman, and let me see your face," said Ruth Jessup, in a voice that scarcely rose above a whisper, though it was strong in command.

Lady Rose drew herself up, and lifted her piteous face as if appealing for compassion.

"You!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Yes, Ruth Jessup, it is I, Lady Rose. We will not be angry with each other, now that he is dead."

"Dead!" repeated Ruth, "and you the first by his side? Dead? Oh, my God! my God! Has our sin blasted us both?"

Down upon the earth this poor girl sunk, wringing her hands in an agony of distress. Still Lady Rose looked at her with touching appeal. She had not comprehended the full force of Ruth's speech, though the words rested in her brain long after.

"Lay your hand on his heart," she said. "I—I dare not."

Ruth smiled a wan smile, colder than tears; still there was a faint gleam of triumph in it.

"No!" she said. "You should not dare."

Then the girl thrust her trembling hand down to the bosom her head had so lately rested upon, and leaning forward, held her breath, while Lady Rose eagerly searched her features in the moonlight.

"Is—is there nothing?" she whispered.

Ruth could not answer. Her hand shook so fearfully, that its sense of touch was overwhelmed.

"Oh, speak to me!"

"Hush! I shake so! I shake so!"

Lady Rose bent her head and waited. At last a deep, long breath broke from Ruth, and a flash of fire shot from her eyes.

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"Give me your hand; I dare not trust myself," she whispered.

Seizing the hand which lay helplessly in Lady Rose's lap, she pressed it over the heart her own had been searching, and fixed her eager eyes on the lady's face for an answer.

As a faint fire kindles slowly, that fair face brightened till it shone like a lily in the moonlight. As Ruth looked, she saw a scarcely perceptible smile stealing over it. Then the lips parted, and a heavy sigh broke through.

"Is it life?" whispered Ruth. "Tell me, is it life?"

Lady Rose withdrew her hand.

"Yes, faint. Oh! so faint, but life."

Then both these girls broke into a swift passion of tears, and clung together, uttering soft, broken words of thanksgiving. Ruth was the first to start from this sweet trance of gratitude.

"What can we do? He must be carried to the house. Ho, father! father!"

She ran up and down the path, crying out wildly, but no answer came. The stillness struck her with new dread. Where was her father, that he could not hear her cries? Who had done this thing! Could it be he?

"No, no!—a thousand times, no! But then—"

She went back to Lady Rose, whose hand had nestled back to that poor, struggling heart.

"Couldn't we carry him, you and I? We must have help," Ruth said, a little sharply, for the position of the lady stung her.

The question surprised Lady Rose; for never in her life had she been called upon to make an exertion. But she started to her feet and flung back the draperies from her arms.

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"Yes, he might die here. Let us save him. 'The Rest' is not so far off."

"'The Rest?' No, no; our cottage is nearest. He might die before we could get him to 'The Rest.' My father will be there. Oh, I am sure my father will be there!"

Ruth spoke eagerly, as if some one had disputed her.

"He will be coming this way," she added, "and so help us. Come, come, let us try!"

Before the two girls could test their strength, footsteps were heard coming along the path.

"It is my father. Oh, now he can be carried to the cottage in safety."

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### BOTH HUSBAND AND FATHER.

**T**HE two girls stood up and listened. The footsteps came forward swiftly, and with a light touch of the ground; too light, Ruth felt, with a sinking heart, for the heavy tread of her father. She had not the courage to cry out now. It seemed as if some one were coming to take that precious charge from her forever. This fear broke into a faint exclamation when she saw Sir Noel Hurst coming toward them more swiftly than she had ever seen him walk before. Without uttering a word, he came up to where the young man was lying, and bent over him in dead silence, as if unconscious that any other human being was near.

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"He is not dead! Oh, Sir Noel, his heart beats. Don't—don't look so! He is not dead!"

"Lady Rose," said the baronet, "you heard—"

The lady shrank back, and faltered out—

"Yes; I heard a shot, and it frightened me."

The baronet made no answer, but bent over his son. The faint signs of life that Lady Rose had discovered were imperceptible to him. But habitual self-command kept his anguish down, and in a low, grave voice, he bade Ruth, whose presence he had not otherwise noticed, run to the mansion, and call help at once.

Ruth obeyed. Her nearest path led under the great cedar trees, where the blackest shadows fell, and she darted that way with a swift step that soon carried her into the darkness. But all at once came a cry out from the gloom, so sharp, so full of agony, that Sir Noel started up, and turned to learn the cause.

It came in an instant, out from the blackness of the cedars; for there Ruth appeared on the edge of the moonlight, pallid, dumb, shivering, with her face half averted, waving her hand back to the shadow.

"What is it? What has frightened you so?" he said.

"Look! look! I cannot see his face; but I know—I know!" she gasped, retreating into the darkness.

Sir Noel followed her, and there, lying as it seemed on a pall flung downward by the huge trees, lay the body of a man perfectly motionless.

"My father! Oh, my poor father!" cried the girl, falling down among the shadows, as if she sought to engulf herself in mourning.

"Be quiet, child. It may not be your father," said the baronet, still controlling himself into comparative calmness.

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Ruth arose in the darkness, and crept toward the body. Her hand touched the hard, open palm that lay upon the moss where it had fallen. She knew the touch, and clung to it, sobbing piteously.

"Let me go and call help," said Lady Rose, coming toward the cedars.

"No," answered Sir Noel. "That must not be. This is no place for Lady Rose Hubert. The poor girl yonder has lost all her strength; it is her father, I greatly fear. Stay by him until you see lights, or

know that help is coming. Then retire to the gardener's cottage. We must have no careless tongues busy with your name, Lady Rose."

Sir Noel strove to speak with calmness; but a shiver ran through his voice. He broke off abruptly, and, turning down the nearest path, walked toward "The Rest."

Meantime, there was bitter sorrow under the great cedar trees; low, pitiful moaning, and the murmurs of a young creature, smitten to the heart with a consciousness that the awful scene, with its train of consequences, had been her own work. She crept close to the man, afraid to touch him with her guilty fingers, but, urged on by a faint hope that he was not quite dead, she felt, with horror, that there was something heavier than dew on the bed of moss where he lay, and that for every drop of her father's blood she was responsible. Still she crept close to him, and at last laid both hands upon his shoulder. There was a vague motion under her hands, as if a wince of pain made the flesh quiver.

"Oh, if some one would help me. What can I do! What can I do!" she moaned, striving to pierce the darkness with her eyes. "Oh, father! father!"

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"Ruth!"

The sound of that name was not louder than a breath of summer wind; but the girl heard it, and fell upon her face, prostrated by a great flood of thankfulness. She had not killed him; he was alive. He had spoken her name.

Directly the sound of voices swept that way, and the great cedar trees were reddened with a glare of torches, and a streaming light from lanterns. Then Lady Rose, who had been sitting upon the ground with Walton Hurst's head resting on her lap, bent down softly, kissed the white forehead, and stole away from all traces of light. Sir Noel had been thoughtful for her. She could not have borne that the eyes of those menial helpers, or their masters either, should see her ministering to a man who, perhaps, would hold her care, as he might her love, in careless indifference.

Yes, Sir Noel was right. She must not be found there.

Down through the trees she went, looking wistfully back at the figure left alone in the moonlight, tempted to return and brave everything, rather than leave him alone. But the torches came up fast and redly, hushed voices broke the stillness that had seemed so deathlike, and, envying that other girl, who was permitted to remain, the lady stole toward the cottage, and sinking down upon the porch, listened to the far-off tumult with a dull pain of the heart which death itself could hardly have intensified.

It was well that Lady Rose had fled from the path, along which some thirty men were coming—gentlemen in evening dress, gamekeepers and grooms, all moving under the torch-light, like a funeral procession.

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With the tenderness of women, and the strength of men, they lifted Walton Hurst from the ground, and bore him toward the house. Ruth rose up in the darkness of the cedars, and saw him drifting away from her, with the red light of the torches streaming over the whiteness of his face, and then fell down by her father, moaning piteously.

By-and-by the torch-lights flashed and flamed under the cedars, lighting up their great, drooping branches, like a tent under which a wounded or perchance dead man was lying prone upon his back, with his strong arms flung out, and a slow ripple of blood flowing from his chest.

The torch-bearers took little heed of the poor girl, who had crept so close to her father that her garments were red with his blood, but lifted the body up with less reverential care than had marked the removal of the young master, but still not unkindly, and bore it away toward the house. Ruth arose, worn out with anguish, and followed in silence, wondering that she was alive to bear all this sorrow.

It seemed to Lady Rose that hours and hours had passed since she had sheltered her misery in that low porch, and this was true, if time can be measured by feeling. It was even a relief when she saw that little group of menials bearing the form of the gardener along the forest-path, which was slowly reddened by lanterns and half-extinguished torches. In the midst of this weird scene came Ruth Jessup, holding fast to her father's hand, with her pallid face bowed down, creeping, as it were, along the way, as if all life had been smitten from her.

A sort of painful pity seized upon Lady Rose, as she saw this procession bearing down upon the cottage. She could not look upon that poor girl without a sensation of shrinking dislike. Had not Hurst been on his way to her when he met with this evil fate? Had he not almost fled from her own presence to visit this beautiful rustic, whose desolation seemed so complete? Yes, she pitied the poor young thing; what woman could help it? But, underlying the pity, was a feeling of subdued triumph, that only one wounded man was coming that way.

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All at once the girl started from her seat.

"They must not find me," she thought. "Sir Noel did not think of this when he bade me seek shelter here. I will go! I will go!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### WAS IT LIFE OR DEATH?

**J**UST as the lights crept up to the front paling, and began to cast a glow on the flowers inside, Lady Rose stole out from the porch, threaded a lilac thicket, which lay near a back gate, and let herself into a portion of the park which was strange to her. For a while she stood bewildered, not knowing the direction she ought to take. Then a flash of distant lights, shooting through the trees, revealed the position in which "The Rest" lay from the cottage; and taking the very path Ruth had sought in the morning, she hurried along it, so sheltered by the overhanging trees, that she might have passed unobserved, but for the flutter of her garments, and the glint of her jewels, as the moonbeam struck them now and then, in her progress.

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"Does he breathe yet? Will the motion put out that one spark of life, before he reaches home? Shall I never see him again?"

The thought gave a wild, abnormal strength to the girl. She no longer felt fatigue. The faint dread at her heart was swept away with a more powerful force of suffering. She must know for herself.

Swiftly as these thoughts swept through her brain, they scarcely matched the speed of her movements. Gathering up the long skirts that encumbered her feet, she fairly flew along the path, panting with impatience rather than fear, as each step brought her closer to those lighted windows. All at once she sprang aside with a sharp cry, and turned, like an animal at bay, for, in a dark hollow, into which the path dipped, the figure of a man stopped her.

The shriek that broke from Lady Rose seemed to exasperate the black shadow, which had a man's form, that moved heavily. This was all the frightened girl could see; but, in an instant, a low, hoarse voice broke from it, and her hand was seized with a fierce grasp.

"So you have found it out. So much the better. Both down, and one answerable for the other. Famous end to a day's sweethearting, isn't it?"

"What is this? What do you mean? Take your hand from my wrist," cried the lady, in sharp alarm.

"Not so easy, my lady, that would be. Some things are sweeter than revenge, though that tastes rarely, when one gets a full cup. I thought you would be coming this way, and waited to meet you."

"Meet me? For what?" faltered the lady, shivering.

"Oh, no wonder your voice shakes, till one hardly knows it again," answered the man. "If anything can drive the heart back from your throat, it might be the grip of my hand on your arm. You never felt it so heavy before, did you, now? Can you guess what it means?"

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"It means that you are a ruffian—a robber, perhaps, no matter which. Only let me go!"

"A ruffian! Oh, yes; I think you said that once before; but I warn you. Such words cut deep, and work themselves out in an ugly way. Don't attempt to use them again, especially here. It isn't a safe spot; and just now I ain't a safe man to sneer at."

"Why do you threaten me? What have I done to earn your ill-will?" faltered the lady, shuddering; for the man had drawn so close to her as he spoke, that his breath swept with sickening volume across her face, and his hand clinched her wrist like a vice.

"What have you done? Ha! ha! How innocent she is! How daintily she speaks to the ruffian—the robber!"

"I was rash to call you so; but—but you frightened me."

"Oh, yes, I am always frightening you. A kiss from me is worse than a bullet from some one we know of."

"Hush, sir! I cannot bear this!"

"Don't I know that you could bear me well enough, till he came along with his silky beard and soft speech? Then I became a ruffian—a robber. Well, now, what you wouldn't give at any price, I mean to take."

"There is no need. I give them to you freely. Unclasp the bracelet. It is heavy with jewels. Then free my hand, and I will take the locket from my neck. Trust me; I will keep nothing back."

"Bracelets, lockets, jewels! What are you thinking of? Dash me, but I think you have gone crazy. Undo your bracelet, indeed. When did you come by one, I should like to know?"

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"It is on my wrist. Oh, if a ray of moonlight could only strike down here."

"On your wrist? What, this heavy shackle? Stay, stay! How soft your hand is. Your dress rustles like silk. Your voice has changed. Woman, who are you?"

"Take the jewels. Oh, for pity's sake, unlock them, and let me go."

The hand that held that delicate wrist so firmly dropped it, the dark body swerved aside, and Richard Storms plunged down the path. Swift as a lapwing Lady Rose sped up the hill through the shrubberies, nearest "The Rest," and at last stood panting within the shadows of the terrace, where a solitary man was walking up and down with mournful slowness.

"It is Sir Noel," she said, as the moonlight fell on his white face. "God help us! It looks as if he had been with death!"

Gliding noiselessly up the steps, Lady Rose met the baronet as he turned in his walk.

"Tell me! oh, tell me!" she faltered, coming close to him, and breaking off in her speech.

"He is alive, my child."

"Ah!"

"The doctors are with him now."

"So soon—so soon!" exclaimed the lady, seizing upon a desperate hope from the doctor's presence.

"I came out here for breath. It was so close in the rooms," said the baronet, gently.

Lady Rose glanced at the house. It was still brilliantly lighted. The windows were all open, and a soft breeze was playing with the frost-like curtains, just as it had when she heard that shot, and fled down the terrace. The music was hushed, and the rooms were almost empty; that was all the change that appeared to her. Yet it seemed as if years had passed since she stood on that terrace.

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"But we shall hear soon. Oh, tell me!"

"Yes, my child. They know that I am waiting."

The baronet strove to speak calmly, for the suppression of strong feeling had been the education of his life; but his voice shook, and he turned his head aside, to avoid the piteous glance of those great, blue eyes that were so full of tears.

"Go—go up to your room, Lady Rose," said the baronet, after a moment's severe struggle with himself. "In my selfish grief I had forgotten everything. Was Jessup alive when he reached the cottage?"

"I—I think so; but there came so many with him that I escaped through the shrubberies."

"And came here alone. That was brave; that was wise. At least, we must save you from the horrors of to-night, let the result be what it may."

Lady Rose uttered a faint moan, and the tears grew hot under her drooping eyelids.

"If it goes ill with him, I do not wish to be spared. Pain will seem natural to me then," she said, shivering.

The baronet took her hand in his own; both were cold as ice; so were the lips that touched her fingers.

"You will let me stay until we hear something?" she pleaded.

Just then she stood within the light which fell from one of the tall windows, and all the disarray of her dress was clearly betrayed: the trailing azure of her train soiled with earth and wet with dew; the gossamer lace torn in shreds, the ringlets of her thick, rich hair falling in damp masses around her. Surely that was no figure to present before his critical guests. They must not know how this fair girl suffered. There should be no wounds to her maidenly pride that he could spare her.

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These thoughts drew the baronet partially from himself. It was a relief to have something to care for. At this moment, when all his nerves were quivering with dread, the sweet, sad sympathy of this fair girl was a support to him. He did not wish to part with her now, that she so completely shared the misery of his suspense.

"You are shivering; you are cold!" he said.

"No, no; it is not that."

"I know—I know!"

He dropped her hand and went into the great, open hall, where bronze statues in armor, life-sized, held lights on the points of their spears, as if on guard. Some lady had flung her shawl across the arm of one of these noble ornaments, where it fell in waves of rich coloring to the marble floor. Sir Noel seized upon this and wrapped the Lady Rose in its loose folds from head to foot. Then he drew her to a side of the terrace, where the two stood, minute after minute, waiting in silence. Once the baronet spoke.

"The windows of his room are just above us," he said. "I thought perhaps we might hear something."

"Ah me! How still they are!" sighed the girl, looking upward.

"We could not hear. No, no, we could not hear. The sashes are all closed," answered the baronet, sharply, for he felt the fear her words implied.

Rose drew close to her companion.

"I did not mean that. I only thought—"

"They are coming."

The baronet spoke in a whisper, but did not move. He shrunk now from hearing the news so impatiently waited for a moment before.

A servant came through the hall, and rushed toward his master.

"Sir Noel, they are waiting for you in the small drawing-room."

The baronet hesitated. His lips were striving to frame a question which the man read in the wild eyes fixed on his.

"He is alive, Sir Noel. I know that."

The father drew a deep, deep breath. The claw of some fierce bird of prey seemed loosened from his heart; a flood of gentle pity for the fair girl, who dared not even look her anxiety, detained him another moment.

"Go into the library. I will bring you news," he said.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

**L**ADY ROSE watched the master and servant as they went into the hall; then, gliding through one of the open windows, stole into the library, where she walked up and down, up and down, until it seemed as if she had travelled leagues on leagues, but could not stop.

The baronet came at last, looking calmer and more self-possessed, but still very pale.

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Lady Rose came up to him, looking the question she could not ask.

"It is not death as yet," he said.

"But, tell me—oh! tell me, is there danger?"

"Great danger, the doctors think; all the more because they can find no wound."

"No wound! But that shot! that shot!"

The baronet shook his head.

"It is all a mystery as yet."

"But if he is not wounded?"

"There has been a fall—a blow; something which threatens congestion of the brain."

"But if the other, Jessup, is shot. I heard the report from the terrace."

"And I from the woods. But let us say nothing of this—think nothing, if we can help it," said the baronet.

"If we can help it! Ah! me."

"The surgeons have gone over to Jessup's cottage. He may be able to speak. I will go with them."

Lady Rose looked up eagerly.

"And he?"

"Must be kept perfectly quiet. My man is with him."

"Have you seen him? Is it certain that he breathes?"

"I have seen him only for a moment. He was breathing, but very feebly," answered the baronet.

"Ah! that poor white face! I shall never forget it," answered Rose, covering her eyes with both hands. "His eyes so wide open! Oh, how they frightened me!"

"They are closed now, and he lies there quiet as a child. There is some burden upon the brain."

"But the doctors, how can they leave him? He might die."

"It is only long enough to visit Jessup. He is wounded badly, the people say who took him home."

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"Yes, I know. I heard them speaking of blood on the grass as they came up. Of—of course, the doctors must go to him—and you; it is but right."

A strange resolve had suddenly flashed into her thoughts.

"You will go to your room now, Lady Rose. It is long after midnight," said the baronet, as he opened a door leading to the hall.

"No, Sir Noel; I could not sleep; I could not breathe under all this uncertainty. You will find me here, with your news, good or bad. It would be like shutting myself in a prison cell if I went to my room now."

"As you wish. I will not be gone long," answered the baronet.

Lady Rose stood in the middle of the library, listening, until Sir Noel's footsteps died out on the terrace; then she stole into the hall and mounted the stairs, holding her breath as she went.

In her dressing-room she found a woman leaning back in an easy-chair, who had fallen into a restless sleep.

"Hipple, Hipple!" said Lady Rose, under her breath. "Do wake up."

The thin little shadow of a woman opened two black eyes, and thrust up her shoulders with a sleepy protest.

"Mrs. Hipple, Hipple! always Mrs. Hipple, sleeping or waking. Well, what is it now, my lady?"

"Get up, that is a good soul. I know that you have been kept out of your bed, cruelly, but I want you so much."

"Well, well, lady-bird, what is it all about? Of course, you want me. That is what you always were doing as a child. Oh, well, one is something older now, and that makes a difference."

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While the sleepy woman was uttering this half-protest, Lady Rose was arranging the cap, that had been crushed on one side as she slept, and gently shaking off the sleep which threatened to renew itself in soft grumbles.

"There, now, everything is set to rights, and you look wide awake."

"Of course, I am wide awake; I, who never sleep, though you dance away the hours till morning," answered the little lady, testily.

"But I have not been dancing to-night, Hipple; far from it. Something dreadful has happened."



"Dreadful! Lady Rose, do speak out. My heart is rising into my mouth."

"Mr. Walton Hurst has been hurt."

"Hurt! My poor, dear child. Oh, now I know why you came to me gasping for breath."

"He is very ill—quite insensible, in his room over yonder, with no one to take care of him but Sir Noel's man."

"Who knows nothing."

"Who might let him die, you know, while the doctors are away. I am so troubled about it."

"Well, what shall I do? Of course Webb isn't to be trusted."

"Just step in and offer to take his place, while he goes down to the gardener's cottage and inquires about Jessup, who is hurt also."

"Jessup hurt! What right had he to take the same night of the young gentleman's misfortune, for his poor trouble, I should like to know," exclaimed the old lady, resentfully. "It is taking a great liberty, I can tell him."

"Still, he is hurt, and I want to hear about it, if you can only get Webb to go."

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"Can! He shall!"

"He will trust Mr. Hurst with you!"

"Of course. Who doubts that?"

"And then—"

Lady Rose faltered, and a faint streak of carmine shot across her forehead.

"Well, what then, lady-bird? something chokes in your throat. What am I to do then?"

"Perhaps, you would let me come in, just for a moment."

"Oh-h! But don't—don't. I cannot see your pretty lip quivering so! There—there. I understand it all now!"

"And you will?"

"When did Hipple ever say no? Is she likely to begin now, when rain is getting under those eyelids? Sit down a minute, and take comfort. Things must be amiss indeed if the old woman can't set them right."

Gently forcing her young mistress into the easy-chair, the faithful old companion left the room, swift as a bird, and noiseless as a mouse. Directly she came back, and beckoned with her finger through the open door.

"He has gone. I frightened him about his master. Come!"

Lady Rose was at the door in an instant. The next she stood in the midst of a large chamber, in the centre of which was a huge high-posted bedstead of carved ebony, shrouded by a torrent of lace and damask, on which the shaded light fell like the glow of rubies. Shrinking behind these curtains, which were drawn back at the head in gorgeous masses, Lady Rose looked timidly upon the form that lay prostrate there, afraid of the death signs which might be written upon it.

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Walton Hurst was deadly pale yet; but the locked features had relaxed a little, the limbs were outlined less rigidly under the snow-white counterpane than they had been upon the forest path. There was a faint stir of breath about the chest also; but for this the intense stillness in which he lay would have been horrible.

As she gazed, holding her own breath that she might listen for his, her hand was touched softly by lips that seemed to be whispering a prayer or blessing, and Mrs. Hipple stole from the room.

Lady Rose was alone with the man she loved better than anything on earth, and the solitude made her tremble, as if she were committing a crime. She dared not move, or scarcely breathe. What if he were to open his eyes and discover her! Then she could only wish to die of the shame she had brought upon herself.

Still the girl was fascinated. The way of retreat was before her, but she would not take it. Perhaps this was the only time she might hope to see him upon earth. Was she to cast this precious opportunity away? He stirred a little. It was nothing but a faint shiver of the limbs; but that was enough to startle her. Then a shadow seemed to flit across his features. His eyes opened, and were fixed upon her with a blank, unquestioning look.

Lady Rose could not help the words that sprang to her lips.

"Are you better? Ah, tell me that you are better."

A faint gleam of intelligence came into the eyes she no longer sought to evade, and the lips moved a little, as if something heavier than a breath were disturbing them.

"Can you speak? Do you know me?"

Some unintelligible words were broken on the invalid's lips.

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"Do you want anything?"

"No. I—I—"

Here the man's feeble speech broke off, and his head moved restlessly on the pillow. Lady Rose leaned over him. Her soul was craving one word of recognition.

"Try and say if you know me," she whispered, too eager for any thought of the fear that had possessed her.

"Oh, yes, I know. Only the name. I never mention that—never!"

"But why? Is it hateful to you?"

"Hateful! No, no! Don't you know that?"

Rose could not resist the temptation, but touched his forehead with her hand. A ghostly little smile crept over his mouth, which was half-concealed by a wave of the silken beard that had drifted across it. She longed to know if it was a smile or a tremor of light from the shaded lamp, and softly smoothed the beard away. As she did so, a faint kiss was left upon her hand. She drew it back with a sob of delight so exquisite that it made her feel faint.

"He knows me. With his poor, feeble breath he has kissed my hand." This thought was like rare old wine to the girl; she felt its glow in every pulse of her being. With that precious kiss on her palm, she drew back among the curtains, and gathered it into her heart, pressing her lips where his had been, as children hide away to eat their stolen fruit.

Then she grew ashamed of her own happiness, and came into sight again. Hurst was apparently asleep then. His eyes were closed; but low murmurs broke from him, now and then, as if he were toiling through some dream. The girl bent her head to listen. The hunger of a loving heart made her insatiable.

"Here—here with me! Then all is well! Dreams haunt one: but what are dreams? Her hand was on my mouth. I felt her breath. No harm has come to her. Yet, and yet—dreams all!"

Here the young man fell into deeper unconsciousness, and his murmurs ceased almost entirely.

Some minutes passed, and then the door was swiftly opened, and Mrs. Hipple glided through.

"My lady! my lady! They are here, mounting the terrace."

Lady Rose heard the loud whisper, and fled from the room.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A FATHER'S MISGIVING.

**A** FIGURE crouched low in the darkness of that narrow passage, listening at the door, and shrinking with shudders when a groan broke through the ill-fitted panels. There was some confusion in the room beyond, voices, and guarded footsteps, quick orders given, then dull, dead silence, and a sharp scream of agony.

"That was his cry! They are killing him! they are killing him!" cried that poor girl, springing to her feet.

Ruth opened the door in rash haste, and her pale face looked in.

"Back! Go back, child!"

It was the impatient voice and white hand of the surgeon that warned Ruth Jessup back; and she shrunk into the darkness again, appalled by what she had seen—her father's gray hair, scattered on the pillow, his face writhing, and his eyes hot and wild with anguish.

It was a terrible picture, but while it wrung her heart, there was hope in the agony it brought. Anything was better than the deathly stillness that had terrified her under the cedars. It was something that her father could feel pain.

"Now," said the kind surgeon, looking through the door, "you can come in. The bullet is extracted."

In his white palm lay a bit of bent lead, which he looked upon lovingly, for it was a proof of his own professional skill; but Ruth turned from it with a shiver, and creeping up to her father's bed, knelt down by it, holding back her tears, and burying her face in the bed-clothes, afraid to meet the wild eyes turned upon her.

The wounded man moved his hand a little toward her. She took it in her own timid clasp, and laid her wet cheek upon it in penitent humility.

"Oh, father!"

The hard fingers stirred in her grasp.

"Did it hurt you so? Has it almost killed you?"

The old man turned a little and bent his eyes upon her.

"It isn't *that* hurt," he struggled to say. "Not that."

Ruth began to tremble. She understood him.

"Oh, father!" she faltered, "who did it? How could you have been hurt?"

A stern glance shot from the sick man's eye.

"You! oh, you!"

"Oh, father! I did not know. How could I?"

The old man drew away his hand, and shook off the tears she had left upon it, with more strength than he seemed to possess.

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"Hush!" he said. "You trouble me."

Ruth shrunk away, and once more rested her head on the quilt, that was soon wet with her tears. After a little she crept close to him again, and timidly touched his hand.

"Father!"

"Poor child! Poor, foolish child!"

"Father, forgive me!"

The sick man's face quivered all over, and, spite of an effort to restrain it, his poor hand rose tremblingly, and fell on that bowed head.

"Oh, my child! if we had both died before this thing happened."

"I wish we had. Oh, how I wish we had!"

"It was my fault," murmured the sick man.

"No, no! It was mine. I am to blame, I alone."

"I might have known it; poor, lost lamb, I might have known it."

Ruth lifted her head suddenly.

"Lost lamb! Oh, father! what do these words mean?"

The gardener shook his head faintly, closed his eyes, and two great tears rolled from under the lids.

"Oh! tell me—tell me! I—I cannot bear it, father!"

That moment the surgeons, who had gone out for consultation, came back and rather sternly reprimanded Ruth for talking with their patient.

The girl rose obediently, and turned away from the bed. The surgeons saw that a scarlet heat had driven away the pallor of her countenance, but took no heed of that. She had evidently agitated their patient, and this was sufficient excuse for some degree of severity, so she went forth, relieved of her former awful dread, but wounded with new anxieties.

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Two days followed of intense suffering to that wounded man and the broken-hearted girl. Fever and delirium set in with him, terror and dread with her. The power of reason had come out of that great shock. In trembling and awe she had asked herself questions.

Who had fired that murderous shot? How had the gun disappeared from behind the passage door, where Richard Storms had surely left it? Had there been a quarrel between the father she loved and the husband she adored? If so, which was the aggressor?

The poor girl remembered with dread the questions with which her father had startled her so that night, the sharp gleam of his usually kind eyes, and the set firmness of his mouth, while he waited for her answer. Did he guess at the deception she had practised, or were his suspicions such as made the blood burn in her veins?

With these thoughts harassing her mind, the young creature watched over that sick man until her own strength began to droop. In his delirium, he had talked wildly, and uttered at random many a broken fancy that cut her to the soul; but even in his helpless state there had seemed to be an undercurrent of caution curbing his tongue. He raved of the man who had shot him, but mentioned no names; spoke of his daughter with hushed tenderness, but still with a sort of reserve, as if he were keeping some painful secret back in his heart. Sometimes he recognized her, and then his eyes, lurid with fever, would fill with hot tears.

After a while this fever of the brain passed off, and left the strong man weak as a child. It seemed as if he had lost all force, even for suffering; but Ruth felt that some painful thing, that he never spoke of or hinted at, haunted him. He was strangely wakeful, and at times she felt his great eyes looking out at her from their deepening caverns, with an expression that made her heart sink.

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One day he spoke to her with a suddenness that made her breath stand still.

"Ruth!"

"Father, did you speak to me?"

"Where is he?"

"Who, father?"

"You know. Is he safe out of the way?"

"Do you mean—"

The girl broke off. She could not utter Walton Hurst's name. The sick man also seemed to shrink from it.

"Is he safe?"

"Oh, father! he was hurt like yourself."

"Hurt!—he? I am speaking of Walton Hurst, girl."

The man spoke out plainly now, and a wild questioning look came into his eyes.

"Oh, father! he was found, like yourself, lying on the ground, senseless. We thought that he was dead."

"Lying on the ground! Who hurt him? Not I—not I!"

Ruth flung herself on her knees by the bed; a flush of coming tears rushed over her face.

"Oh, father! oh, thank God! father, dear father!"

"Did you think that?" whispered the sick man, overwhelmed by this swift outburst of feeling.

"I did not know—I could not tell. It was all so strange, so terrible! Oh, father, I have been so

troubled!"

The sick man looked at her earnestly.

"Ruth!"

"Yes, father!"

"Was he shot like me?"

"I do not know. They say not. Some terrible blow on the head, but no blood."

"A blow on the head! But how? As God is my witness, I struck no one."

Ruth fell to kissing that large, helpless hand, as if some awful stain had just been removed from it. In all her father's sickness she had never touched him with her sweet lips till now. Then all at once she drew back as if an arrow had struck her. It was something keener than that—one of the thoughts that kill as they strike. After a struggle for breath, she spoke.

"But who? Oh, father, you were shot. Was it—was it—"

"Hush, child! Not a word! I—I will not hear a word. Never let that question pass your lips again so long as you live. I charge you—I charge you!"

The sick man fell back exhausted, and gasping for breath. The question put so naturally by his daughter seemed to have given him a dangerous shock.

"But how is he now?"

The question was asked in a hoarse whisper, and more by the bright eyes than those trembling lips.

"I—I have not dared to ask. I—I could not leave you here alone," answered Ruth, with a fitful quiver of the lips.

"How long is it?"

"Two days, father."

"Two days, and no news of him."

"They would not keep it from us if he had been worse," said Ruth, who had listened with sickening dread to every footstep that approached the cottage during all that time, fearing the news she expected, and gathering hope because it did not come.

"Has Sir Noel been here?"

"He was here that night," answered Ruth, shuddering, as she thought of the awful scene, when her father was brought home so death-like.

"Not since? He knew that I was hurt, too."

"He has sent the doctors here."

"What news did they bring?"

"I—I did not dare to ask."

A look of deep compassion broke into those sunken eyes, and, turning on his pillow, the old man murmured in a painful whisper:

"Poor child! Poor child!"

Then Ruth fell to kissing his great hand again, murmuring:

"Oh, father! you are so good to me—so good!"

"I am weak—so weak," he answered, as if excusing something to himself. "But how could he—Well, well, when I am stronger—when I am stronger."

The cottage was small, and the jar of an opening door could be felt through the whole little building. Some one was trying at the latch then, and a step was heard in the passage.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE BIRD AND THE SERPENT.

**G**O. It may be news," said the sick man.

Before Ruth could reach the door she met Richard Storms coming toward her father's room. His manner was less audacious than usual, and his face clouded.

"I have come to ask after your father," he said, with an anxious look, as if he expected some rebuff. "They say that he has been shot in the back by some lurking thief. Perhaps I could help ferret out who it is if the old man'll tell me all about it."

"Father is too ill for talking," answered Ruth, shrinking out of her visitor's path. "He must be kept quiet."

"Of course; but not from neighbors like us. The old man at the farm sent me over to hear all about it."

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"There is nothing to hear. Everybody knows how my poor father was found bleeding in the park. He has been very ill since, and is only now coming to himself."

"Oh! ah! Then he has come to his senses. That was what we most wanted to know; for, of course, he can tell who shot him. I'll be sworn it is guessed at rightly enough. Still knowing is knowing."

As he spoke, Storms moved forward, as if determined to enter the sick man's chamber.

Ruth had no means of stopping him. She retreated backward, step by step, shrinking from his approach, but without the least power of resistance. When she reached the door, Storms put forth his hand and attempted to put her aside, not rudely; but she so loathed his touch, that a faint cry broke from hers.

A look of bitter malice broke over the young man's face as he bent it close to her.

"You didn't scream so when the young master took my place the night all this trouble came up. I could tell something of what chanced between your sweetheart and the old man, after he went out with my gun in his hand."

"You know—you can tell? You saw?" whispered the poor girl, rendered hoarse by fear.

"Ah, that makes you whimper, does it? That starts the blood from your white face. Yes, I saw—I saw; and when the courts want to know what I saw they will hear about it. Kicked dogs bite now and then. So don't gather your comely little self into a heap, when I come by again, or my tongue may be loosened. I have kept it between my teeth till now, for the sake of old times, when you were ready to smile when I came and were sorry when I went."

"But we were children then."

"Yes; but when he came with his dainty wooing, some one forgot that she had ever been a child."

"No, no! As a playmate, I liked you. It was when—when—"

"When, having the feelings of a man, I spoke them out, and was treated like a dog. Do not think I will ever forget that. No, never—never, to my dying day."

"Why are you so harsh with me, Richard?" cried the poor girl, now thoroughly terrified. "I never in my whole life have done you harm."

The young man laughed a low, disagreeable laugh.

"Harm! Oh, no! Such milk-white doves as you never harm anything. They only fire a man's heart with love, then torment him with it, like witches—soft-spoken, smiling witches—that make us devils with their jibes, and idiots with their tears. Oh, I hardly know which is most enticing, love or hate, for such creatures."

"Don't! don't! You frighten me!" pleaded the girl.

"Aye, there it is. Faint at a plain word; but work out murder and bloodshed with the witchcraft of your false smiles and lying tears. That is what you have done, Ruth Jessup."

"No! no!" cried the girl, putting up her hands.

"Who was it that set her own father and sweetheart at each other?"

"Hush! I will not hear this. It is false—it is cruel. There was no quarrel between them—no evil blood."

"No quarrel—no evil blood! She says that, looking meek as a spring-lamb, chewing the lie in her mouth as that does clover. But what if I tell you that the old man in yonder knew just all that happened after I was turned out of the kitchen that night?"

"It was you who told him that which might have brought great trouble on him and me; only good men are slow to believe evil of those they love. I knew from his own lips that you had waylaid him in the park with a wicked falsehood."

"It was the truth, every word of it," exclaimed Storms, stamping his foot on the floor. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"Saw what?" faltered the girl, sick with apprehension.

"Saw! But I need not tell you. Only the next time Sir Noel's heir comes here, with his orders for flowers, and his wanting to know all about growing roses, have a curtain to the kitchen window, or train the ivy thicker over it. Now do you understand?"

"It is you who cannot understand," said Ruth, feeling a glow of courage, which the young man mistook for shame. "The thing you did was a mean act, and if I had never hated you before, that would be cause enough."

"This is brass. After all, I did think to see some sign of shame."

Ruth turned away, faint with terror and disgust.

"You may thank me that I told no one but the old man in yonder. Had I gone to Sir Noel—"

"No, no—you could not; you dare not!"

"Dare not! Well, now, I like that. Some day you will know how much I dare."

"But why—why do you wish to injure me?"

"Why does a hound snap when you mock him with a dainty bit of beef, and while his mouth waters, and his eyes gloat, toss it beyond his reach? You have learned something of the kennels, Ruth Jessup, and should know that men and hounds are alike in this."

Ruth could hardly suppress the scorn that crept through her into silence. But she felt that this man held an awful power over everything she loved, and gave no expression to her bitter loathing.

"Do you mean to let me in?" said Storms, almost coaxingly. "I want to have a word with the old

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man."

Ruth stood aside. She dared not oppose him; but when free to pass, he hesitated, and a look of nervous anxiety came over his features.

"The old man doesn't speak much; hasn't said how it all happened, ha?"

"He has said nothing about it," answered Ruth, struck with new terror.

The look of cool audacity came back to her enemy's face, and, without more ceremony, he pushed his way into the wounded man's room.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### TRUE AS STEEL.

**J**ESSUP was lying with his eyes closed, and his mouth firmly compressed, as if in pain. But the tread of heavy feet on the floor aroused him, and he opened his eyes in languid wonder. The sight of Storms brought slow fire to his eyes.

"Is it you—you?" he whispered, sharply.

"Yes, neighbor Jessup, it is I," answered Storms. "Father is sadly put about, and wants to know how it all happened. He means to have justice done, if no one else stirs in the matter—and I think with him."

A look of keen, almost ferocious anxiety, darkened the young man's face as he said this.

"That is kind and neighborly," answered the gardener, moving restlessly in his bed. "But there is nothing to tell."

Storms looked at the sick man in dumb amazement. Up to this time his manner had been anxious, and his voice hurried. Now a dark red glow rose to his face, and blazed from his eyes with a glare of relief.

"Nothing to tell, and you shot through the shoulder, in a way that has set the whole country side in commotion? This is a pretty tale to go home with."

The young man spoke cheerfully, and with a sort of chuckle in his voice.

"It is the truth," said Jessup, closing his eyes.

"But some one shot you."

"It was an accident," whispered the sick man.

"An accident! Oh! was it an accident?"

"Nothing worse."

"Are you in earnest, Jessup?"

"Do I look like a man who jokes?" said the gardener, with a slow smile.

"And you are willing to swear to this?"

"No one will want me to swear. No harm worth speaking of has been done."

"Don't you be sure of that," answered Storms. "The peace has been broken, and two men have been badly hurt. This is work for a magistrate."

Jessup shook his pale head on the pillow, and spoke with some energy.

"I tell you it was an accident; my gun went off."

"And I tell you it was no accident. I saw it all with my own eyes."

"You—you saw it all?" exclaimed Jessup, rising on his elbow. "You!"

"Just as plain as a bright moon and stars could show it to me."

"How? How—"

Jessup had struggled up from his pillow, but fell back almost fainting, with his wild eyes fixed steadily on the young man's face.

"I had just passed under the cedar-trees, when you came in sight, walking fast, as if you were in a hurry to find some one."

"It was you I was looking for. I was on my way to find you," whispered Jessup, so hoarsely that Storms had to bend low to catch his words.

"Me! What for, I should like to know?"

"Because I thought you had lied to me," answered the old man, turning his face from the light.

"Oh, that it had been so—if it only had been so!"

A sob shook that strong frame, and from under the wrinkled eyelids two great tears forced their way.

A flash of intelligence gleamed across Storms' face. He was gaining more information than he had dared to hope for. But craft is the refuge of knaves, and the wisdom of fools. He had self-

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command enough for deception, and pretended not to observe the anguish of that proud man, for proud he was, in the best sense of the word.

"I was hanging about the grounds, too savage for home or anything else," he went on to say. "I had seen enough to drive a man mad, and was almost that, when you came up. There was another man under the cedar-trees. I had been watching for him all the evening. You know who that was."

Jessup gave a faint groan.

"I knew that he was skulking there in hope of seeing her again."

"It is a mistake!" exclaimed Jessup, with more force in his voice than he had as yet shown.

Storms laughed mockingly.

"So you mean to shield him? You—you tell me that young master wasn't in your house that night: that your daughter did not see him; that he did not shoot you for being in the way? Perhaps you will expect me to believe all that; but I saw it!"

As these cruel words were rained over him, the sick man settled down in his bed, and seemed hardened into iron. The fire of combat glowed in his deep-set eyes, and his hand clenched a fold of the bed-clothes, as if both had been chiselled out of marble.

"No one shot me. It was my own careless handling of the gun," he said. "No one shot me."

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Storms laughed again.

"Oh, no, Jessup, that'll never do! What a man sees he sees."

"No one shot me—it was myself."

"But how did he come to harm, if it was not a kick on the head from the gun he did not know how to manage? I could have told him how to handle it better. My gun, too—"

"Your gun!"

"Yes, my gun. I left it behind the door, in the passage, when he sent me out. He took it when it was dangerous to stay longer. I saw it in his hand before you came out. He was armed—you were not."

"I took the gun," said Jessup.

"You will swear to that!" said Storms, really amazed. "You believe it?"

"I took the gun. It went off by chance. That is all I have to say. Now leave me, young man, for so much talk is more than I can bear."

Storms obeyed. He had not only gained all the information he wanted, but the material for new mischief had been supplied to a brain that was strong to work out evil. He found Ruth in the passage, walking up and down, wild and pale with distress. She gave him a look that might have softened a heart of marble, but only increased his self-gratulation.

"Just let me ask this," he said, coming close to her, with a sneer on his face. "Which of those two men took out the gun I left standing behind the door that night—father or sweetheart? One or the other will have to answer for it. Which would you prefer to have hanged?"

The deadly whiteness which swept over that young face only deepened the cruel sneer that had brought it forth. Bending lower down, the wretch added, "I saw it all. I know which it was that fired the shot. Now what will you give me to hold my tongue?"

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Ruth could not speak; but her eyes, full of shrinking fear, were fixed upon him.

"You might marry me now rather than see him hung."

Ruth shuddered, and looked wildly around, as a bird seeks to flee from a serpent that threatens its life.

"Say, isn't my tongue worth bridling at a fair price?"

"I—I do not understand you," faltered the poor young creature, drawing back with unconquerable aversion, till the wall supported her.

"But you will understand what it all means, when he is dragged to the assizes, for all the rabble of the country side to look upon."

Ruth covered her face with both hands.

"Oh, you seem to see it now. That handsome face, looking out of a criminal's box; those white hands held up pleading for mercy. Mind you, his high birth and all his father's gold will only be the worse for him. The laws of old England reach gentlemen as well as us poor working folks. Ha! what is this?"

The cruel wretch might well cry out, for Ruth had fainted at his feet.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A CRUEL DESERTION.

**A** WEEK or two before these painful events happened at "Norston's Rest," Judith Hart had been expecting to see Storms day after day till disappointment kindled into fiery impatience, and the stillness of her home became intolerable. Had he, in fact, taken offence at her first words of reproach, and left her to the dreary old life? Had her rude passion of jealousy driven him from her forever, or was there some truth in the engagement that woman spoke of?

Again and again Judith pondered over these questions, sometimes angry with herself, and again filled with a burning desire to know the worst, and hurl her rage and humiliation on some one else.

She was a shrewd girl, endowed with a sharp intellect and a will, that stopped at nothing in its reckless assumption. To this was added a vivid imagination, influenced by coarse reading, uncurbed affections, and, in this case, an intense passion of love, that lay ready to join all these qualities into actions as steam conquers the inertia of iron. One day, when her desire for the presence of that man had become a desperate longing, her father came home earlier than usual, and in his kindly way told her that he had seen young Storms in the village where he had loitered half the morning around the public house.

Judith was getting supper for the old man when he told her this; but she dropped the loaf from her hands and turned upon him, as if the news so gently spoken had offended her.

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"You saw Mr. Storms in the village, father? He stayed there hour after hour, and, at last, rode away up the hill-road, too, without stopping here? I don't believe it; if you told me so a thousand times, I wouldn't believe it!"

The old man shook his head, and replied apologetically, as if he wished himself in the wrong, "You needn't believe it, daughter, if you'd rather not. I shall not mind."

"But is it true? Was it Mr. Storms, the young gentleman, who took tea with us, that you saw?"

"Of course, I don't want to contradict you, daughter Judith, but the young man I saw was Richard Storms. He stayed a long time at the public house talking with the landlord; then rode away on his blood horse like a prince."

"Hours in the village, within a stone's throw from the house, and never once turned this way," muttered the girl, between her teeth; and seizing upon the loaf, she pressed it to her bosom, cutting through it with a dangerous sweep of the knife.

"Did he speak to you?" she asked, turning upon her father.

"Nay, he nodded his head when I passed him."

"And the landlord, you said, they were speaking together?"

"Oh, yes, quite friendly."

"What did they talk about—could you hear?"

"Yes, a little, now and then."

"Well!"

"Oh, it was a word lifted above the rest, when Storms got into the saddle."

"A word—well, what was it?"

"Something about a lass near 'Norston's Rest,' that folks say the young man is to wed."

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When Judith spoke again, her voice was so husky that the old man looked at her inquiringly, and wondered if it was the shadows that made her so pale.

She felt his eyes upon her, and turned away.

"Did you chance to hear the name—I mean *her* name—the girl he is going to wed?"

"If I did, it has slipped from my mind, but it was some one about 'Norston's Rest.' She is to have a mint of money when some people die who are in the way."

"Did he say this?"

"Yes, daughter."

When Hart looked around, he saw that Judith had laid the loaf of bread on the table, with the knife thrust in it, and was gone. The old man was used to such reckless abandonment whenever Judith was displeased with a subject, or disliked a task; so, after waiting patiently a while for her to come back, he broke off the half-severed slice of bread, and began to make his supper from that.

After a while Judith came into the room. Her color was all gone, and a look of fiery resolve broke through the trouble in her eyes.

"Where has he gone, father—can you tell me that?"

"How can I say? He wasn't likely to give much of an account of himself to an old man like me."

"Don't you think it strange that he should go off like that?"

"Well, no," answered the old man, with some deliberation. "Young fellows like him take sudden ideas into their heads. They're not to be depended on."

"And this is all you know, father?"

"Yes; how should I know more?"

"Good-night, father."

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The girl went into the hall, came back again, and kissed her father on the forehead three or four times. While she did this, tears leaped into her eyes, and the arms around his neck trembled violently.



"Why, what has come over the girl?" said the old man. "I'm not angry about the supper, child. One can't always expect things to be hot and comfortable. There, now, go to bed, and think no more about it."

"Go to bed!" No, no! the girl had no thought of sleep that night. Far into the morning the light of her meagre candle gleamed through the window of her room, revealing her movements as she raved to and fro, like a wild animal in its cage—sometimes crouching down by the window as if impatient for the dawn—sometimes flinging herself desperately on the bed, but always in action.

Hart went to his work very early the next morning, and did not see his daughter, who sometimes slept far beyond the breakfast hour. He was very tired and hungry that night, when he came home from work, but found the house empty, and saw no preparation for supper, except that the leaf of a table which stood against the wall was drawn out, and an empty plate and spoon stood upon it.

Finding that Judith did not appear, he arose wearily, went into the pantry, and brought out a dish of cold porridge in one hand, with a pitcher of milk in the other. With this miserable apology for a meal, he drew his chair to the table and began to eat, as he had done many a time before, when, from caprice or idleness, the girl had left him to provide for himself. Then the poor old man sat by the hearth, from habit only; for nothing but dead ashes was before him, and spent a dreary hour waiting. Still Judith did not come, so he went, with a heavy heart, into a small untidy room where he usually slept, carrying a candle in his hand. [184]

As he sat on the bed wondering, with vague uneasiness, what could have kept his daughter out so late, the old man saw a crumpled paper, folded somewhat in the form of a letter, lying on the floor at his feet, where some reckless hand had tossed it. When this paper met the poor father's eye, he arose from the bed, with painful weariness, and took it to the light. Here he smoothed the heartless missive with his hands, and wandered about a while in search of his iron-bound spectacles, that shook in his hand as he put them on:

FATHER—Don't fret about me; but I am going away for a while. This old place has tired me out, and there is no use in starving oneself in it any longer. The wages you get is not enough for one, to say nothing of a girl that has wants like other folks, and is likely to keep on wanting if she stays with you against her will. I might feel worse about leaving you so if I had ever been of much use or comfort to you; but I know just as well as you do, that I haven't done my share, and nothing like it. I know, too, that if I stayed, it would be worse instead of better; for I couldn't stand trying to be good just now—no, not to save my life!

"You won't miss me, anyhow; for when I'm gone, the people you work for will ask you to take a meal now and then; besides, you were always handy about the house, and know how to cook for yourself.

"I would have come in to say good-by, but was afraid you might wake up and try to keep me from going. Now don't put yourself out, or let the neighbors fill your head with stories about me. There's nothing to tell, only that I have taken an idea to get a place and better myself, which I will before you see me again. If I do, never fear that I will not send you some money. [185]

Your daughter,

JUDITH.

The old man read this rude scrawl twice over—the first time shaking like a leaf, the last time with tears—every one a drop of pain—trembling in his eyes and blinding them.

"Gone!" he said, wiping his eyes with the soiled linen of his sleeve. "My lass gone away, no one knows where, and nothing but this left behind to remember her by! Poor thing!—poor young thing! It was lonesome here, and maybe I was hard on her in the way of work—wanted too much cooking done! But I didn't mean to be extravagant—didn't mean to drive her away from home, poor motherless thing! It's all my fault! it's all my fault! Oh! if she would only come back, and give me a chance to tell her so!"

The poor old man went to his work that day, looking worn out, and so downcast that the neighbors turned pitying glances at him as he passed down the hill, for he never had stooped so much or appeared so forlorn to them before. One or two stopped to speak with him. He said nothing of his daughter, but answered their greetings with downcast eyes and humble thanks, not once mentioning his trouble, or giving a sign of the gnawing anguish that racked his bosom and sapped his strength. She had left him, and in that lay desolation too dreary for complaint. [186]

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE WIFE'S VISIT.

**I** MUST see him. I will see him! Oh, Mrs. Mason, if you only knew how important it is!"

The good housekeeper, who sat in her comfortable parlor at "The Rest," was surprised and troubled by the sudden appearance of her pretty favorite from the gardener's cottage. She was hard to move, but could not altogether steel herself against the pathetic pleading of that pale young creature, who had come up from her home through the lonely dusk, to ask a single word with the young heir.

Sick or well, she said, that word must be spoken. All she wanted of Mrs. Mason was to let her into his room a single minute—one minute—she would not ask for more. Only if Mrs. Mason did not want to see her die, she would help her to speak that one word.

There is something in passionate earnestness which will awake the most lethargic heart to energy, if that heart is kindly disposed. The stout housekeeper of the Hall had known and petted Ruth Jessup from the time she was old enough to carry her little apron full of fruit or flowers from the gardener's cottage to her room in the great mansion. It went to her heart to refuse anything to the fair young creature, who still seemed to her nothing more than a child; but the wild request, and the tearful energy with which it was urged, startled the good woman into sharp opposition.

"Mr. Walton! You wish to see him, Ruthy? Who ever heard of such a thing? It quite makes me tremble to think of it. What can a child like you want with the young master, and he sick in bed, with everybody shut out but the doctor, and wet ice-cloths on his head, night and day. I couldn't think of mentioning it. I wonder you could bring yourself to ask me. If it had been anything in my line now!"

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"It is! It is! Kindness is always in your line, dear godmother!" pleaded the poor girl, putting one arm over the housekeeper's broad shoulders, and laying her pale cheek against the rosy freshness which bloomed in that of her friend. "I wouldn't ask you, only it is so important."

"But what can it be that you want to say, Ruthy? I cannot begin to understand it," questioned the old woman, faltering a little in her hastily expressed denial; for the soft-pleading kisses lavished on her face had their effect. "If you were not such a child now."

"But I am not a child, godmother."

"Hoity-toity! Is she setting herself up as a woman? Well, that does make me laugh. Why, it is but yesterday like since your mother came into this very room, such a pale, young thing, with you in her arms. She was weak then, with the consumption, that carried her off, burning like fire in her poor, thin cheeks, while you lay in her arms, plump as a pheasant, with those gipsy black eyes full of fire, and a crow of joy on your baby mouth. Ah, me! I remember it so well!"

"My poor young mother asked something of you then, didn't she?" said Ruth.

"Well, yes, she did. I mind it well. She had something on her heart, and came to me about it."

"And that was—"

"About you, child. She knew that she was going to die, and—and I had always liked her, and been friendly, you know."

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"Yes, I know that. Father has told me."

"Being so, it was but natural that she should come to me in her last trouble."

"She could not have come to a dearer or kinder soul," murmured Ruth.

"Nonsense, child! She might; but then the truth was she didn't. It was me the poor thing chose to trust. I shall never forget her look that day when she sat down on a stool at my feet, just there by the window, and told me that she knew it was coming death that made her so feeble. She was looking at you then as well as she could, through the great tears that seemed to cool the heat in her eyes; and you lay still as a mouse, looking at her as if there was cause of baby wonderment in her tears. Then all at once your little mouth began to tremble, and lifting up your arms, you cried out, as if her tender grief had hurt you. That brought the tears into my eyes. So we all sat there crying together, though hardly a word had been spoken up to then. Still I knew what it all meant, and reaching out my arms, took you to my own bosom."

"Bless you for it," murmured Ruth.

"Another baby had slept in that bosom once, and somewhere in God's great universe I knew that she might find it among the angels, and care for it as I meant to care for you, Ruthy."

"She did! She does! Only that child is so much happier than I am," sobbed Ruth, tenderly. "She has all the angels; I only you!"

Mrs. Mason lifted her plump hand, with which she patted the young creature's cheek, and said that she was a good child, and always had been; only a little headstrong, now and then, which was not to be wondered at, seeing it was out of the question that she, though she meant to be a kind godmother, could altogether fill the place of that sweet, dead mother; she must be at her duties there in "The Rest," while Jessup was obstinate, and would keep the child with him.

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"And you are all the mother I have now," said Ruth, who had listened with forced patience. "To whom else can I go?"

"Why, to no one. I should like to see man or woman attempt to cheat me out of my trust! I will say this for Jessup, headstrong as he is about having you with him, he has not interfered. When it was my pleasure to have you taught things that only ladies think of learning, he never thought of having a word to say against it; so I had my own way with my own money, and you will know the good of all the learning when you are old enough to go among people, and think of a husband, which must not be for years yet."

Ruth sighed heavily.

"Meantime, my dear," continued the housekeeper, "we must be looking about for the proper person. With the learning we have given you, and certain prospects, we shall have a right to look high. Not among the gentry, though you will be pretty enough and bright enough for most of them, according to my thinking; but there are genteel tradespeople in the village, and they sometimes creep up among the gentry in these times. So who knows that you will not be made a lady in that way?"

"Oh, no! Do not speak of it—do not think of it!" said Ruth, with nervous energy. "I cannot bear that!"

"What a child it is! but I like to see it. Forward young things are my abomination; but you may as well know it first as last, Ruthy. When I promised your dying mother to be a mother to you, it was not in words; but deep down in my heart, I gave you that other child's place. I am an old woman, and have saved money, which would have been hers, and shall be yours some of these days."

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Ruth let her head fall on the kind housekeeper's shoulder, and burst into a passion of tears. Again the old woman patted her upon the cheek.

"Why, child, what is the matter? I thought this news would make you happy. Take this for your comfort, my savings are heavier than people think."

"Don't! oh, don't! I cannot bear it," sobbed the girl. "Everybody—that is almost everybody—is far too kind: you above all. Only—only it is not money I want just now."

"But my dear—"

"All the money in the world, if you could give it me, could not be so much as the thing I asked just now," Ruth broke in, made desperate as the subject of her wish seemed drifting out of sight. "I want it so much—so much."

"My child, it is impossible. What would Sir Noel say? What would the Lady Rose say?"

"She has no right. What is it to her?" cried the girl, stung by a sharp pang of jealousy, which overmastered every other feeling.

"Ruth!"

"Forgive me. I am so unhappy."

"Ruth, I do not understand. You do not cry like a child, but as women cry when their hearts are breaking."

"My heart is breaking."

"Poor child! Is it about your father?"

"Yes, oh, yes! My father!"

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"But the doctors say he is better."

"He is better; but we fear trouble, great trouble."

"Where? How?"

"Oh, Mrs. Mason, I must tell you, or you will not let me see him. They will try to make out that the young master shot my father."

"They? Who? I should like to meet the man who dares say it, face to face with me."

Ruth shuddered. She had met the man, and his evil smile haunted her.

"It may be that it is only a threat," she said; "but it frightened us, and made my father worse."

"But he knows—surely he knows? What does your father say?"

"The man's rude talk threw him into a fever. He was quite wild, and tried to get up and dress himself, that he might come and see Wa—, the young master, at once."

"Why, the man was crazy," exclaimed Mrs. Mason.

"He seemed like it. I could not keep him in bed, and only pacified him, by promising to come myself. You see now why it is that I must speak with Mr. Walton."

"Yes, I see," observed the housekeeper, now quite bewildered. "But had you not better go to Sir Noel?"

"No! no! My father bade me speak to no one but the young master."

"Well, well! if he knows about your coming, I don't so much mind. Wait a bit, and I will send for Webb, Sir Noel's own man, who is in the young master's chamber night and day. I will have a nice bit of supper served up here, and that will keep him while you can steal into the room without trouble."

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Ruth flung her arms around the good woman's neck, and covered her face with grateful kisses.

"Oh, how good you are—how good you are!"

"Well! well! Remember, dear, if I give you your own way now, it is because of your father."

"I know—I know; but how soon? It is now after dark!"

The housekeeper rung her bell. Then, as if struck with a new thought, told Ruth to go into her bedroom, and not attempt to enter any other part of the house, till she knew that Webb was safe down at the supper-table. Ruth promised, and stealing into the bedroom, sat down on a couch and waited.

Scarcely had she left the room, when Mrs. Hipple, the companion of Lady Rose, came in, and heard the orders Mrs. Mason gave regarding Webb. A certain gleam of intelligence shot across that shrewd old face, and after making some trifling errand, she went out, with a smile on her

lips.

For half an hour Ruth sat in the darkness with her head bowed and her hands locked. It seemed an age to her before she heard the clink of cups, and the soft ring of silver. Then, listening keenly, she heard a man's voice speaking with the housekeeper. This might be Webb. She was resolved to make sure of that, and, walking on tip-toe across the carpet, noiselessly opened the door far enough to see that personage seated by the housekeeper, eating a dainty little supper.

Quick as a bird, Ruth stole through the opposite door, up the servants' stair-case, and along the upper hall, on which the family bed-chambers opened.

Trembling with excitement, which oppressed her to faintness, she turned the latch, and stole into the chamber, but only to pause a step from the door, dumb and cold, as if, then and there, turned into stone.

Another person was in the room, standing close by the bed, with the glow of its silken curtains falling over the soft whiteness of her dress, and the rich masses of her golden hair. It was Lady Rose.

A moment this fair vision stood gazing upon the inmate of the bed, then her face drooped downward, and seemed to rest upon the pillow, where another head lay. The night-lamp was dim, but Ruth could see this, and also that the lady sunk slowly to her knees, and rested her cheek against a hand, around which her fingers were enwoven.

Not a word did that young wife utter. Not a breath did she draw, but, turning swiftly, fled.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### BY MY MOTHER IN HEAVEN.

**R**UTH JESSUP stood by her father's bed, white as a ghost, and cold as a stone. Her step, usually so light, had fallen heavily on the floor as she entered the room—so heavily that the sick man started in his bed, afraid of some unwelcome intrusion. The room was darkened, and he did not see how pale his child was, even when she stood close to him.

"Did you see him? Did you tell him to keep a close lip? Does he know that I would be hacked to pieces rather than harm him? Why don't you speak, Ruth?"

"I saw him, father; but that was all," answered the girl, in a voice that sounded unnatural to him.

"That was all? Did you not give him my own words?"

"No, father! Another person was with him. I had no power to speak."

The old man groaned, and gave an impatient grip at the bed-clothes.

"I will get up. I will go myself!"

With the words on his lips, the old man half-rose, and fell back upon his pillow with a gasp of pain.

"Oh, father! do not try to move. It hurts you so!" said Ruth, bending over him.

"But he must be told. That young man threatens us. He must be told! So rash—so young. He might—Oh!"

"Father! father! You are killing yourself!"

"No, no, child! I must not do that. Never was a poor wounded man's life of so much consequence as mine is now."

Ruth bent over him, and he saw that she was silently crying.

"Oh, father! what would I do—what would I do?" she sobbed.

The gardener's eyes filled with pity.

"Aye. What would you? But I am not dead yet. There, there! wipe your eyes. We shall live to go away from this dreary place, and take the trouble with us—the trouble and the shame."

A flash of fire shot through the pallor of Ruth Jessup's face. She drew her slender figure upright.

"Shame! No, father. Sick or well, I will not let you say that. No shame has fallen upon us."

"Ruth! Ruth! You say this?"

"Father, I swear it! I, who tremble at the sound of an oath, knowing how sacred a thing it is. I swear it by my mother, who is in heaven!"

The old man reached up his arms, and drew the girl down to his bosom, which was heaving with great wave-like sobs.

"My child! my child! my own—own—"

He murmured these broken words over her. He patted her shoulder; he smoothed her hair with his great, trembling hand. His sobs shook the bed, and a rain of tears moistened his pillow.

"You believe me, father?"

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"Would I believe your mother, could she speak from her place by the great white throne? The mother you have sworn by!"

"The mother I have sworn by," repeated Ruth, lifting her eyes to heaven.

"Thank God! Thank God! Ah, Ruth! my child! my child!"

The locked agony, which was not all physical pain, went out of the old man's face then. His eyes softened, his lips relaxed; a deep, long breath heaved his chest. After this he lay upon his pillow, weak as a child, and smiling like one.

Thus Ruth watched by him for an hour; but her face was contracted with anxiety, that came back upon her after the calm of her father's rest. She had told him the truth, yet how much was kept back? There was no shame to confess; but oh, how much of sorrow to endure! Danger, too, of which Hurst should be warned. But how, with that fair woman by his side—how could any one approach him with counsel or help?

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Jessup stirred on his pillow. An hour of refreshing sleep had given him wonderful strength. That surgeon, when he took the bullet from his chest, had not given him half the relief found in the words which Ruth had uttered. But out of those words came subjects for reflection when his brain awoke from its slumbers. If Ruth spoke truly, what object could have led to his own wounds? Why had young Hurst assaulted him if there was nothing to conceal—no vengeance to anticipate? Then arose a vague consciousness that all was not clear in his own mind regarding the events that had brought him so near death. The darkness of midnight lay under those old cedars of Lebanon. He had seen the figure of a man under their branches that night, but remembered it vaguely. A little after, when the bullet had struck him, and he was struggling up from the ground, he did see a face on the verge of the moonlight, looking that way. That face was Walton Hurst. Then all was black. He must have fainted.

But how had the young man been wounded? There had been a struggle—Jessup remembered that. Perhaps he had wrested the gun from his assailant, and struck back in the first agony of his wound; but of that he had no certainty—a sharp turn, and one leap upon the dark figure, was all he could remember.

What motive was there for all this? Better than his own life had he loved the family of Sir Noel Hurst—the young heir most of all. What cause of enmity had arisen up against him, a most faithful and always favored retainer? Ah, if he could but see the young man!

But that was impossible. Both were stricken down, and Ruth had failed to carry the message of conciliation and caution that had been intrusted to her. Even when writhing under a sense of double wrong, his love for the young man had come uppermost; and in the desperate apprehension inspired by Richard Storms, he had urged Ruth to go and warn the heir.

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In health he might not have done this; for, though anything but a vindictive man, Jessup was proud in his manly way, and would have shrunk from that means of reassuring the man who had hurt him; but there was still continued riots of fever in his brain, and in the terror brought on him by Storms he had forgotten all the rest. Indeed, he had been incapable of cool reasoning from the first; but his affectionate nature acted for itself.

Now, when the pressure of doubt regarding his own child was removed, a struggle to remember events clearly came on, which threatened to excite his nerves into continued restlessness. He was constantly pondering over the subject of that attack, and the morning found him dangerously wakeful.

"My child."

Ruth, who had been resting in an easy-chair, was by his side in an instant.

"I am here, father, but you have not slept. How bright your eyes are!"

"Ruth, have I been out of my head again, or did you say something in the night that lifted the stone from my heart? Is it all or half a dream?"

"I told you only the truth, father."

"Ah, but that truth was everything. It may change everything."

"Do not talk so eagerly, father; the doctor will scold me when he comes."

"Let him scold. You have done me more good, child, than he ever can; but you look worn out, your eyes have dark stains under them."

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"I shall be better now," answered the poor girl, turning her face away.

"Ah, yes, everything will turn out right as soon as I can see him. Anyway, my lips shall never tell a word of it. All the courts in the world could not draw that out of me. He thought I was doubting him—that I meant to harm him, may be. Youth is so quick to act—so quick!"

"Oh, father, did he—did he do it?" cried Ruth, with a quick, passionate outburst.

"Have I not said that nothing should make me answer that, lass? No one shall hurt the young master with my help."

Ruth questioned her father no more. His words had confirmed her worst fears. It seemed to her as if all the world had arrayed itself against her feeble strength. But one ray of light broke through her troubles. Her father was better. He evidently believed in her. The bitter pain had all gone out from his heart. He smiled upon her when she left the room, and tasted of the breakfast she prepared for him with something like a return of appetite.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THE BARMAID OF THE TWO RAVENS.

**N**ORSTON'S REST" had its village lying within a mile of the park gate, mostly inhabited by the better sort of small tradespeople, with laborers' cottages scattered here and there on the outskirts, with more or less picturesqueness. From the inhabitants of this village and a large class of thrifty farmers, tenants on the estate, the public house drew its principal support. [199]

One evening, just after the heir of "Norston's Rest" and its gardener were taken up wounded and insensible in the park, a party of these persons was assembled in the public room, talking over the exciting news. Among them was young Storms, who was referred to and called upon for information more frequently than seemed pleasant to him.

"How should I know?" he said; "the whole affair happened in the night. There wasn't likely to be any witnesses but the young heir and the old man himself. Who knows that it wasn't a chance slip of the trigger?"

A hoarse laugh followed this speech, and the drinking-cups were set down with a dash of derision as one after another took it up.

"A chance slip of the trigger! Ha, ha, ha! Who ever heard tell of a gun going off of itself and killing two men—one at the muzzle and t'other with the stock?" exclaimed one. "Most of us here have handled a gun long enough to know better than that. Come, come, Storms, tell us summat about it, for, if any man knows, it's yoursel'."

"I," said Dick, lifting both hands in much astonishment, while his face gave sinister confirmation of the charge. "How should I know? What should bring me into that part of the park?"

"In that part of the park—as if a more likely place could be found for you. Besides, some one said that you were out that very night, and you never gave the lie to it."

"Well, and if I was, what should bring me to the cedars, lying straight in the way between 'The Rest' and Jessup's cottage? My road home lay on the other side." [200]

This was said with a covert smile, well calculated to excite suspicion of some secret knowledge which the young man was keeping back.

"Did you order more wine, sir?"

Storms half leaped from his chair, but sat down again instantly; casting a swift glance at the barmaid, who was apparently occupied in changing some of the empty bottles for others that were full.

"Judith Hart!"

The name had almost broken from his lips, but he checked it promptly, and pushing his empty glass toward her, looked smilingly in her face, and said, "I was afraid you had forgotten me."

There was a subtle thrill of persuasion in his voice, some meaning far deeper than his words, that turned the girl's averted look to his own.

"No," she answered, almost in a whisper, "it is not me that forgets."

Dick breathed again; a tone of reproach had broken through the hard composure of her first speech. In reaching forth his cup he managed to touch the girl's hand. She drew it back with a jerk, and flashing a wrathful glance at him left the room.

Meantime the conversation had been going on among the other occupants of the room.

"The doctor says that it may go hard with Jessup. One was saying, 'the ball went clear through him.' As for the young master—"

"Ah, he will be all right in a day or two. There was no great hurt; nothing but a blow on the head, which laid him out stark a while, and left him crazy as a loon; but that is nothing like a hole through the body." [201]

"If Jessup should die, now," said another.

"Why, then, there would be a sharp lookout for the murderer. Now Sir Noel will have nothing done."

"There may be a reason for that," said Storms, coming forward, and speaking in a sinister whisper.

The man, thus addressed, lifted the pewter cup, newly-filled with beer, to his mouth and drank deeply, giving Dick a long, significant look over the rim.

"Least said soonest mended," he answered, in a low voice, wiping the foam from his lips. "At any rate, where the family up there is concerned. Sir Noel is not likely to make a stir in the matter; and as for Jessup—"

"Jessup is a stubborn fool," said Storms, viciously.

"Not if Sir Noel makes it worth his while. I would rather have a hundred gold sovereigns in my pocket any day than see a dashing, handsome youngster like one we know of at the assizes; though it would be a rare sight in old England."

"Yes, a rare sight. A rare sight!" said Storms, rubbing his thin hands with horrid glee. "I would go half over England to see it. Only as you say, old Jessup loves gold better than vengeance. If he

had died now—"

"Why, then, there would be no evidence, you see."

"Don't you be so sure of that," said Storms, "he may die. Men don't get up so readily with bullet-holes through them. He may, and then—"

Here the young man took his wine from the barmaid, and began to sip its contents, drop by drop, as if it had a taste of vengeance he was prolonging to the utmost.

The girl watched him, and a strange smile crept over her mouth.

"Here, drink with me, lass," he said, holding the glass toward her. "Drink with me, and fill again; there is enough for us both."

"No," said the girl, pushing the glass away; "not here or now."

Storms saw that the men around his portion of the table were occupied, and spoke to her in a swift, low voice:

"When and where?"

The girl gave her head a toss, and moved down the table, casting a look over her shoulder, which made the young man restless in his seat. Directly she came back, and leaning close to him, while her hand was busy with the glasses, whispered sharply:

"To-night, after the house is closed, I want to see you, face to face, just once more."

"That will do," whispered Storms; "and a nice time I shall have of it," he thought, with some apprehension.

"A fine lass that," said the man who sat nearest him, as the barmaid moved across the room, with the force and rude grace of a leopardess. "Kin to the mistress here, isn't she—a cousin?"

The man spoke loud enough for others to hear, and followed the girl with bold, admiring eyes.

Storms answered him with sneering sarcasm. He felt this to be imprudent, but could not suppress the venom of his nature, even when his heart was quaking with terror.

"I have not inquired into her pedigree. You may be more interested. She is a little out of my level."

He was about to say more, but checked himself, and ended his speech more cautiously: "If she has kinsfolk here, none of us ever heard of them."

"But where did she come from?" questioned the man, who was greatly interested in the singular girl. "Such black hair and eyes should be of a strange land. There is nothing English about her but her speech. Look at her face; the color burns through it like wine."

"Now that she looks fierce," said another, "one sees how handsome a fiery woman can be. Some one has stirred up her temper. He may find himself the worse for it. The fellows are shy of angering her, take my word on that. She has a quick hand, and a sharp tongue; but her bright, comely face brings customers to the house. A tidy girl is the new one. Only keep the right side of her, that's all."

Just then the barmaid came back into the room. There was something in her appearance that might have reminded one of Ruth Jessup, could the soul of a wild animal have harbored in the form of that beautiful girl. The same raven hair, and large eyes; the same rich complexion, joined to features coarser, sensuous, and capable of expressing many passions that Ruth could not have imagined. As she stood, with a sort of easy grace, the purely physical resemblance was remarkable; but when she moved or spoke, it was gone. Then the coarse nature came out, and overwhelmed the imagination.

"Where did she come from?" asked Judith's new admirer.

"Better ask her yourself," answered Storms, absolutely jealous that any one should admire the beauty he had begun to loathe.

"I will," said the man, and, leaving the table, he approached Judith with a jaunty exhibition of gallantry, which she received with a cold stare, and, turning from him, walked back into the bar.

Storms broke into a laugh, and followed the girl into her retreat. Even in that brief interval he had arranged his plan of action, and carried it out adroitly. The girl knew that he was coming, and stood there, like a leopard in its den, ready to fight or be persuaded, as her heart swayed to love or resentment.

"This is madness; it is cruel to your old father—hard on me. Twice have I been to the house, and found it empty."

The fire went out of Judith's face. Bewildered, baffled and ready to cry, she turned away with a gesture that Storms took for unbelief of what was indeed a glib falsehood.

"No one could tell me where to look for you. Of all places in the world, how could I expect to find you here?"

"You have been to the old house?" said Judith. "Is this true? Tell me, is it the truth?"

"The truth!" repeated Storms, with a look of amazement. "What should prevent me going as usual?"

"Nothing but your own will. Nothing but—"

"But what, Judith?"

"But her—the girl that lives in the park at 'Norston's Rest.'"

"That story again! How often shall I be called upon to tell you it is sheer gossip?"

"But you told it yourself to the landlord at our village."

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"Not as a fact; but amusing myself with the absurd things that are said about one; things that one repeats and laughs about with the first man he meets."

Judith bent her eyes downward; their proud defiance was extinguished; the heaviness of repentant shame fell upon her. Before she could speak, a call outside startled them both. Storms broke off the interview with some hurried snatches of direction. [205]

"Take the highway; here is a key to the little park-gate; turn to the left, the wilderness lies that way. In its darkest place you will come upon a lake. There is an old summer-house on the bank: I will be there; if not, wait for me. You will not mind the walk?"

"No, no!"

"Good-night, then."

Storms said this and was gone. Judith went back to the public room. There the company had fallen into more confidential conversation.

"No wonder the young man is put about so," said one. "Old Jessup was as good as his father-in-law, and of course he feels it. Then there is a story going that the heir was over sweet on pretty Ruth, the daughter, and that, no doubt, has made more bitterness. For my part, I think the young man bears it uncommonly well."

"Uncommonly well," answered another. "This poaching in our cottages, whenever a young face happens to grow comely there, is a shame that no man should put up with. I shouldn't wonder if Jessup had made a stand against it, and got a bullet through him for interfering. Our young lords make nothing of putting an old man aside when he dares to stand between a pretty daughter and harm. But see how the law waits for them. Had it been Storms, now, he would have been in jail, waiting for the assizes. Yet who could have blamed him? The girl was his sweetheart, and a winsome lass she is. But Storms will never wed her now."

"Wed her—as if the young gentleman ever thought of it!" said Judith, breaking into the conversation. "There is your beer, man; let it stop your mouth till more sense comes into it." [206]

The man laughed and cast a knowing glance at his companions. "Hoity-toity! Lies the wind in that quarter?" he said. "Well, I had begun to suspicion it."

This outburst was received with shouts of laughter, and a loud rattling of pewter. This was an ovation that the landlady liked to witness; for half the value of her new barmaid to the public house lay in her quick wit and saucy expression. Even the fierce passions into which she was sometimes thrown amused the men who frequented that room, and enticed them there quite as much as the beer they drank.

"One thing is sure," said Judith's tormentor, renewing the conversation with keener zest: "Storms has lost a pretty wife and a good bit of money by this affray."

Judith turned deadly white, and specks of foam flew to her lips.

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I mean it."

"That Richard Storms and Ruth Jessup would have been wed now, if this affray at the park had not happened? Is that what you mean?"

"Mean? Why, lass, there is not a man here who does not know it. Ask him, if you can't believe us."

"I will!" answered the girl, between her white teeth. "That is the very question I mean to put to him before the sun rises."

These words were uttered in a voice so low and broken that no one heard it. She was silent after that, and went about her work sullenly. [207]

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE OLD LAKE HOUSE.

**T**HE park at "Norston's Rest" was divided by a swift stream that flowed into it from the distant uplands, separating the highly cultivated portions from the wilderness. Jessup's cottage was within the pleasure grounds, but its upper windows overlooked a small but deep lake, formed by a ravine, and the hollows of a rocky ledge, which made an almost bottomless gulf, into which the mountain stream emptied itself, and after losing half its volume in some underground outlet glided off down the valley.

Nothing could be more wild and picturesque than this little lake, embosomed, as it was, with thrifty evergreens, fine old trees, and rocks, to which the ivy clung in luxuriant draperies. At its outlet, where the sun shone most of the day, wild hyacinths and mats of blue violets empurpled the banks before they appeared in any other place, and a host of summer flowers kept up the blossom season sometimes long after leaf-fall. Near this spot, the brightest of all the wilderness, stood an old summer-house, built by some former lord of "The Rest." Jessup had trained wild roses among the ivy that completely matted the old building together, and around its base had



allowed the lush grasses to grow uncut, casting their seed, year by year, until the most thrifty reached to the balustrades of a wooden balcony that partly overhung the lake in its deepest part.

Nothing could be more picturesque than this old building, when the moon shone down upon and kindled up the waters beneath it, with a brightness more luminous than silver. The shivering ivy, the flickering shadows of a great tree, that drooped long, protecting branches over it, formed a picture that any artist would have got up at midnight to look upon. Still a more practical man might have pronounced its old timbers unsafe, and its position, half perched on a bank, with its balcony over the water, dangerous as it was picturesque.

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Be this as it may, two persons stood within this building, after eleven o'clock at night, revealed by the same moon that looked down on those two wounded men, now struggling for life in the proud old mansion and the humble cottage. It was curved like the blade of a sickle then. Now, its rounded fulness flooded the whole wilderness, breaking up its darkness into massive shadows, all the blacker from contrast with the struggling illumination.

The waterfall at the head of the lake was so far off that its noise gave no interruption to the voices of these two persons when they met, for Storms had arrived earlier than the girl, and lay apparently asleep on one of the fixed seats, when Judith Hart came in, breathless with fast walking, and gave forth sharp expletives of disappointment when she supposed the summer-house empty.

"Not here. The wretch—the coward! I knew it—I knew it! He never meant to come. Does he think I will trapse all this way, and wait for him? If I do, may I—Ha!"

The girl stopped at the door, through which she was angrily repassing, with the invective cut short on her lips.

"Hallo! Is it you, Judith? I began to think you wasn't coming, and dropped asleep. But, upon my soul, I was dreaming about you all the time."

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"Here you are!" said the girl, coming slowly back. "How was one to know—lying there like a log? That isn't the way one expects to be met after a walk like this!"

"Why, what's the matter? The walk is just nothing for an active girl like you, but I hope you had no trouble in getting out."

"I've had trouble in everything; nothing but trouble, since I first knew you, and I've just come to tell you, that, according to my idea, you are a treasonable, traitorous—"

"Judith Hart!"

"Cut that off short. I come here to have my say, and nothing more. From this night out you and I are two. Remember that. I'm not to be taken in a second time."

Storms arose from the bench, and shook himself, as if he had really been asleep.

"What on earth are you grumbling about, Judith Hart? What has a fellow been doing since nightfall that you come down upon him with a crash like this, after keeping him on the wait in this damp hole till his limbs are stiff as ramrods!"

"They'll be stiffer before I'm fool enough to believe you again, you may be sure of that."

"Hoity-toity! What's the row? Who has forgotten to fee the barmaid, I wonder? Or is it that the mistress begins to suspect that there has been more stealing out than she knows of, or I either?"

The young man said this in a half-jeering tone, that drove the girl wild.

"You say that! You dare to say that!" drawing her wrathful face close to his, till both their evil countenances were defined by the moonlight. "I tell you now that such words are as much as your life is worth."

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Storms laughed, sunk both hands into the pockets of his velveteen jacket, and laughed again, leaning against the wall of the old summer-house.

"There, there, Judith! Enough of that! I don't want to be tempted into doing you a harm; far from it. But neither man nor woman must threaten Dick Storms. No one but a lass he is sweet upon would dare do it."

"Dare! I like that!"

"But I don't like it. Once for all, tell me what this is all about."

"You know, as well as I do, that it is everywhere about that you were plighted to the girl up yonder when her father was hurt."

"But you know that there isn't a word of truth in it."

"Not true! Not true! Oh, Richard, I have seen with my own eyes."

Judith lifted her finger threateningly, and shook it close to the young man's face.

"Well, what have you seen?" questioned Dick, a little hoarsely; and even in the moonlight the girl could detect a slow pallor stealing over his face.

"I have been at the inn yonder longer than you know of," she said. "This isn't the first time I've been in the park at night."

He started back a pace, then turned upon her. The cunning of his nature rose uppermost; he spoke to her low and earnestly.

"Then you must know that I don't want the lass, and wouldn't take her at any price, though I don't care to say that."

"Perhaps you deny going to the gardener's cottage at all?"

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"No, I don't. Why should I? If you were watching me, so much the better. I wish you had listened to every word I said to her; hating her as you do, it would have done you good, and set all this

nonsense at rest."

"But you went?"

"Yes, I went."

"And—and—"

"And told her, then and there, that nothing should force me to wed her. She had set the old man and the young master to nagging me about it. Neither they nor she gave me an hour's peace."

"Oh, Richard! Richard! Is this true?"

"But for my love of you, I might have given in—"

"I don't care that for such love," cried the girl, tearing a leaf of ivy from a spray that had crept through the broken window, and dashing it to the floor. "I want you to love me better than all the world beside. No halving. I want that, and nothing else."

"And haven't you got it? When did you see me walking out with her, or meeting her here like this?"

"She wouldn't come."

"Wouldn't she?"

Storms laughed as he repeated the audacious insinuation, "Wouldn't she?"

Judith threw off her defiant attitude, and the sharp edge left her speech, which became almost appealing.

"Richard Storms! Was it for my sake?"

"I won't answer you; you don't deserve it, suspicioning a fellow like that."

"I am sorry."

"Yes, after pushing me on to—to anything rather than be nagged, at home and up yonder, about wedding the girl, you come here, when I expected a pleasant meeting, with your scolding and threats. It's enough to drive a man into marrying out of hand." [212]

"No, no, Dick! You wouldn't do that."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"If you ever try this on again, I may. One doesn't stand threats, even from the sweetheart he loves better than everything else—that is, if he is a man worth having." "But I didn't threaten you! I only—"

"Said what you must never say again, if you don't want to see me wedded down in yon church, with a farm of my own, and a fortune waiting, which they are willing to pay down, and ask no questions. A pretty lass pining for me too."

"Pretty! Oh, Richard, this is too bad! You have told me a hundred times that of the two, I was—"

The girl broke off and turned away her face.

"And I have told you the truth, else they would have had me fast before this. Both the young master and the old man were threatening me with the law. You might have heard them."

"No. I was never near enough."

"Well, they did, though; and but for you, I might have given in."

"But you never—never will!"

"So long as you keep quiet, I'll stand out."

"Oh, Richard, no mouse was ever so quiet as I will be. Now, say, was it all for my sake?"

"What else could it be?"

"I don't know. Only it is so strange. And Richard! Richard! I will die before—You understand—I would die rather than harm you." [213]

"That is my own brave lass. Now you are like yourself, and we can part friends—better friends than ever."

"Part! It is not so late."

"But the moon is up, and you will be seen by the village people. They must have no jibes to cast on my wife when you and I are wed."

The girl's eyes flashed in the moonlight, which came broadly through a glass door that led upon the old wooden balcony.

A smile crept over Storms' subtle lips. He was rather proud of his victory over this beautiful Amazon. The brilliant loveliness of her face in the softening light was so like that of Ruth Jessup, that he astonished the handsome virago by taking her head between his hands, and kissing her with something like tenderness.

His heart recoiled from this caress the next moment, as the prodigal son may have loathed the husks he eat, when he was famishing for corn; but Judith sat down upon the hard wooden seat, and covering her face with both hands, broke into a passion of delicious tears.

This outbreak of tenderness annoyed the young man, who was hating himself for this apostacy from the only pure feeling that had ever ennobled his heart, and he said, almost rudely, "Come, come, there is nothing to cry about; I am sorry, that's all."

"Sorry!" repeated the girl, lifting her happy, tearful face into the moonlight. "Ah, well, I will go home, now. Good-night, if you will not go with me a little way."

"We must not be seen together," answered Richard, opening the door for her to pass out; "only remember, I have trusted you."

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The girl went to the door, hesitated a moment, and stepped back.

"Will you kiss me again, Richard? It shall be the seal of what I promised."

"Don't be foolish, girl," said Dick, stooping his head that she might kiss him. "You women are all alike; give them an inch and they will take an ell. There, there; good-night."

Storms stood behind the half-open door, and watched the barmaid as she took the little path which led to the postern gate which Ruth had used on the morning of her wedding-day. A key to this gate had been intrusted to the young man, and he had duplicated it for the girl who had just left him.

When Judith was quite beyond his vision, Storms retired back into the summer-house, and examined it with strange scrutiny. There was but one window, a single sash that opened into the balcony, answering for a second door, which was quite sufficient to light the little apartment. Through this window the moonlight fell like a square block of marble, barred with shadows. To Storms it took the form of a tombstone lying at his feet, and he stepped back with a sort of horror, as if some evil thought of his had hardened into stone which he dared not tread upon; going cautiously around it, and gliding along the wall, but with his eyes turned that way, he escaped from the building.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE NEW LEASE.

**S**IR NOEL, farmer Storms is here, wanting to see you about something important, he says."

Sir Noel Hurst was sitting in his library, looking and feeling more like his old self than he had done for days.

"I will see him presently," he said, almost smiling, "but not quite yet. Tell him to wait."

The servant retired, and Sir Noel began to walk up and down the room, rubbing his white hands in a gentle, caressing way, as if some joyous feeling found expression in the movement. The physician had just left him, with an assurance that the son and heir for whose life he had trembled was now out of danger. He had heard, too, that William Jessup was slowly improving, and the burden of a fearful anxiety was so nearly lifted from his heart that he saw the fair form of Lady Rose coming through the flower-garden, beneath his window, with a smile of absolute pleasure. A flight of stone steps led to the balcony beneath the window, and the young lady lingered near them, looking up occasionally, as if she longed to ascend, but hesitated.

"Sweet girl! Fair, noble girl," thought Sir Noel, as he looked down upon the lovely picture she made, standing there, timid as a child, with a glow of freshly-gathered flowers breaking through the muslin of her over-skirt, which she used as an apron. "God grant that everything may become right between them, now."

Sir Noel stepped to the window with these thoughts in his mind, and beckoned the young lady to come up. She caught a glance of his face, and her own brightened, as if a cloud had been swept from it. She came up the steps swiftly, and paused before the window, which Sir Noel flung open.

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"I saw the doctor, but dared not question him. You will tell me, Sir Noel; but I feel what the news is. You would not have called me had it been more than I—than we could bear."

"I would not, indeed, dear child. God knows if I could endure all this trouble alone, it would not be so hard."

"I have been down yonder every day, Sir Noel; so early in the morning, sometimes, that it seemed as if the poor flowers were weeping with me. Oh, how often I have looked up here after the doctors went away, hoping that you would have good news, and notice me!"

"I saw you, child, but had no heart to make you more sorrowful."

"Did you think him so fearfully dangerous, then?" questioned the lady, with terror in her blue eyes. "I tried to persuade myself that it was only my fears. Every morning I came out and gathered such quantities of flowers for his room, but he never once noticed them, or me—"

"You! Have you seen him, then?"

A flood of crimson swept that fair face, and the white lids drooped over the eyes that sunk beneath his.

"No—no one else could arrange the flowers as he liked them. Once or twice—but only when his eyes were closed. I never once disturbed him."

"Dear child, how he ought to love you!"

Sir Noel kissed the crimson forehead, which drooped down to the girl's uplifted hands, and he knew that the flush, which had first been one of maiden shame, was deepened by coming tears.

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"There, there, my child, we must not grieve when the doctors give us hope for the first time. He is sleeping, they tell me, a calm, natural sleep. Go, and arrange these flowers after your own dainty fashion. He will notice them when he awakes. Already he has called the doctor by name."

"Oh, uncle! dear, dear guardian, is it so?"

The girl fell upon her knees by a great easy-chair that stood by, and the blossoms, no longer supported by her hand, fell in glowing masses around her as she gave way to such happy sobs as had never shaken her frame before. At last she looked up, smiling through her tears.

"Is it really, really true?" she questioned, shaking the drops from her face.

"Go, and see for yourself, Rose."

"But he might awake, he might know."

"That an angel is in his room? Well, it will do him no harm, nor you either."

Lady Rose looked down at the flowers that lay scattered around her, and gathered them into the muslin of her dress again. She was smiling, now, yet trembling from head to foot. Would he know her? Would the perfume of her flowers awaken some memory in his mind of the days when they had made play-houses in the thickets, and pelted each other with roses, in childish warfare? How cold and distant he had been to her of late! Would he awake to his old self? Would she ever be able to approach him again without that miserable shrinking sensation?

"Sir Noel," she said, "I think my own father would never have been so kind to me as you are." [218]

"I am glad you think so, child, for that was what I promised him on his death-bed. That and more, which God grant I may be able to carry out."

"I cannot remember him," said Lady Rose, shaking her head, as if weary with some mental effort.

"No; he left us when you were a little child. But we must not talk of this now."

"I know! I know! Just a moment since I was in such haste. Now I feel like putting it off. Isn't it strange?"

Sir Noel understood better than that fair creature herself the significance of all these tremors and hesitations. Now that his first fears were at rest, they both touched and amused him, and a smile rose to his lips as she glided from the room, leaving a cloud of sweet odors behind her.

Into this delicate perfume old farmer Storms came a few minutes after, looking stolid, grim, and clumsily awkward. The nails of his heavy shoes sunk into the carpet at every step, and his fustian garments contrasted coarsely with the rich cushions and sumptuous draperies of the room.

"Well, Sir Noel, I've come about the new lease, if you've no objection. I want your word upon it; being o'er anxious on the young man's account."

"Why, Storms, has there been any disagreement between you and the bailiff? It has always been my orders that the old tenants should have preference when a lease dropped in."

"Well, as to that, Sir Noel, it isn't so much the lease itself that troubles one; but Dick and I want it at a lighter rent, and we would like a new house on the grounds agin the time when the lad will get wed, and want a roof of his own. That is what we've been thinking of, Sir Noel." [219]

"A new house?" said Sir Noel, astonished. "Why, Storms, yours is the best on the place. It was built for a dower house."

"Aye, aye! I know that; but as our Dick says, no house is big enough or good enough for two families. The lad is looking up in the world a bit of late. He means to take more land; that is why I come about the lease; and we shall give up our home to him and his wife."

"Indeed!" said Sir Noel. "What has he been doing to warrant this extraordinary start in the world?"

"Something that he means to keep to himself yet a while, he says, but it is sure, if things turn out rightly. So I want a promise of the lease, and all the other things, while the iron is hot. He told me to say nothing about it, only to ask, in a civil way, if the young master had come to his senses yet, or was likely to. He is awful fond of the young master, is my son, and sends me o'er, or comes himself to the lodge every day to hear about him. He would be put about sorely if he knew that I had let on about the house just yet; but I can see no good in waiting. You will kindly bear it in mind that we shall want a deal more than the lease. Dick says he's sure to have it, one way or another; and a rare lad for getting his own will is our Dick."

There was something strange in the extravagance of this request, that made the baronet thoughtful. He felt the stolid assumption of the old man, but did not resent it. Some undercurrent of apprehension kept him prudent. He only replied quietly, "Well, Storms, the lease is not out yet. There is plenty of time," and, with a wave of the hand, dismissed the old man. [220]

In the hall Storms was astonished to find his son waiting, apparently careless, though his eyes gleamed with suppressed wrath. He followed the old man out, and once under the shelter of the park, turned upon him.

"What were you doing in there?"

"Nothing, Dick! Only asking after the young master, and talking a bit with the baronet."

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH.

**YOUNG STORMS** was very restless after his midnight interview with Judith Hart, and became feverishly so when he discovered that the elder Storms had begun to move in his affairs more promptly than he desired. He walked on by the old farmer with a frown on his face, and only spoke when his own footsteps bore him ahead of the stronger and more deliberate stride, which goaded his impatience into anger. There was, indeed, a striking contrast between the two men, which even a difference in age could not well account for. Old Storms was a stoutish man, round in the shoulders, slouching in his walk, and of a downcast countenance, in which a good deal of inert ability lay dormant. There was something of the son's cunning in his eye, and animal craving about the mouth, but if the keen venom which repulsed you in the younger man ever existed in the father, it had become too sluggish for active wickedness, except, perhaps, as the subordinate of some more powerful nature. [221]

That nature the old man had fostered in his own family, of which Richard was the absolute head, before he became of legal age. If the old man had been a tyrant over the boy, as many fathers of his class are supposed to be in the mother land, Richard avenged his youth fully when it merged into manhood. As the two walked together across the park, toward their own farm, it was pitiful to see such gleams of anxiety in that old man's eyes, whenever they were furtively lifted to the stern face of the son.

Once, when Dick got ahead of his father, walking swiftly in his wiry activity, he paused, and cut a sapling up by the roots with his heavy pruning-knife, and stood, with a grim smile on his face, trimming off the small branches, and measuring it into a slender walking-stick.

"Art doing that for me, lad?" said the old man, in a voice that did not sound quite natural. "Nay, nay, I am not old enough for a stick yet a while. My old bones aren't so limber as thine, maybe; but they'll do for me many a year yet, never fear."

The young man made no answer, but smiled coldly, as he shook the sapling with a vigor that made the air whistle around him. Then he walked on, polishing up the knots daintily with his knife as he moved.

"More'n that," continued the old man, eying his son wistfully; "there isn't toughness enough there for a walking-stick, which should be something to lean on."

"It'll do," answered Dick, closing his knife, and thrusting it deep into his pocket. "It'll do, for want of a better." [222]

"Ha, ha," laughed the old man, so hoarsely that his voice seemed to break into a timid bark. "That was what I used ter say when you were a lad, and I made you cut sticks to be lathered with. Many a time the twig that you brought wouldn't hurt a dormouse. Ah, lad, lad, you were always a cunning one."

"Was I?" said Dick. "Well, beating begets cunning, I dare say."

By this time they were getting into the thick of the wilderness, a portion of the park little frequented, and in which the lonely lake we have spoken of lay like a pool of ink, the shadows fell so blackly upon it.

Here Richard verged out of the usual path, and struck through the most gloomy portion of the woods. After a moment's hesitation, the old man followed him, muttering that the other path was nearest, but that did not matter.

When the two had left the lake behind them, Richard stopped, and wheeling suddenly around, faced his father.

"Now, once for all, tell me what took you to 'The Rest' this morning; for, mark me, I'm bound to know."

"I—I have told ye once, Dick. I have—"

"A lie. You have told me that, and nought else."

"Dick, Dick, mind, it's your father you are putting the lie on," said the old man, kindling up so fiercely that his stooping figure rose erect, and his eyes shone beneath their heavy brows like water under a bank thick with rushes.

"What took you up yonder, I say?" was the curt answer. "I want the truth, and mean to have it out of you before we go a stride farther. Do you understand, now?"

"I went to ask after the young maister," was the sullen reply. [223]

"The truth! I will have the truth—so out with it, before I do you a harm!"

"Before ye do your old father a harm! Nay, nay, lad, it has no come to that."

Dick bent the sapling almost double, and let it recoil with a vicious snap, a significant answer that kindled the old man's wrath so fiercely that he seized upon the offending stick, placed one end under his foot, and twisted it apart with a degree of fury that startled the son out of his sneering insolence.

"Now what hast got to say to your father, Dick? Speak out; but remember that I am that, and shall be till you get to be the strongest man."

The thin features of Richard Storms turned white, and his eyes shone. He had depended too much, it seemed, on the withering influence his insolent overbearance had produced on the old man, whose will and strength had at last been aroused by the audacious threat wielded in that

sapling. Whether he really would have degraded the old farmer with a blow or not, is uncertain; but, once aroused, the stout old man was more than a match for his son, and the force of habit came back upon him so powerfully, that he began to roll up the cuffs of his fustian jacket, as if preparing for an onset.

"Say out what there is in you, and do it gingerly, or you'll soon find out who is maister here," the old man said, with all the rough authority of former times.

The young man looked into his father's face with a glance made keen by surprise. Then his features relaxed, and he burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Why, father, did you think I was about doing you a harm with that bit of ash? It was for a goad to the cattle I was smoothing it off."

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"Ah!" ejaculated the old man.

"But you have twisted it to a wisp now."

"That I have, and rare glad I am of it."

"It don't matter," said the son. "I can find plenty more about here. But the thing we were talking of. Did Sir Noel kick in the traces when ye came down upon him about the lease?"

A gleam of the young man's own cunning crept into the father's eyes.

"The lease, Dick? Haven't I said it was the young maister's health that took me to 'The Rest?'"

Richard made a gesture that convulsed his whole frame, and, jerking one hand forward, exclaimed, "It was for your own good, father, that I asked; so I don't see why you keep things so close."

"An' I don't know why a child of mine should ask questions of his own father like a schoolmaster, or as if he were ready for a bout at fisticuffs," answered the old man.

"It's a way one gets among the grooms and gamekeepers; but it means nothing," was the pacific answer. "I was only afraid you might have dropped a word about what I told you of, and that would have done mischief."

"Ah!"

"Just now, father, half a word might spoil everything."

"Half a word! Well, well, there was nought said that could do harm. Just a hint about the lease, nothing more. There, now, ye have it all. A fair question at the first would ha' saved all this bother."

"Are you sure this was all?" asked the young man, eyeing his father closely.

"Aye. Sure."

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"Hush! One of the gamekeepers is coming."

"Aye, aye."

Old Storms moved forward, as the intruder came up with a pair of birds in his hands, which he was carrying to "The Rest."

Richard remained behind, for the man met him with a broad grin, as if some good joke were on his mind.

"Good-morrow to ye," he said, dropping the birds upon a bed of grass, as if preparing for a long gossip.

"Dost know I came a nigh peppering thee a bit yon night, thinking it war some poachers after the birds; but I soon found out it was a bit of sweethearting on the sly? Oh, Dick, Dick! thou'lt get shot some night."

"Sweethearting! I don't know what you mean, Jacob."

"Ye don't know that there was a pretty doe roving about the wilderness one night this week, just at the time ye passed through it?"

"Me, me?"

"Aye. No mistake. I saw ye with my own eyes in the moonlight."

"In the moonlight? Where?"

"Oh, in the upper path, nearest thy own home."

Richard drew a deep breath.

"Ah, that! I thought you said by the lake."

"Nay, it was the lass I saw, taking covert there."

"What lass? I saw none!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the gamekeeper, placing a hand on each knee, and stooping down to look into his companion's eyes. "What war she there for, then? Tell me that."

"How should I know?"

"And what wert thou doing in the wilderness?"

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"What, I? Passing through it like an honest Christian, on my way home from the village."

"Well, now, that is strange! Dost know, I got half a look at the doe's face, and dang me! if I didn't think it was Jessup's lass."

A quick thought shot through that subtle brain. Why not accept the mistake, throw the reputation of the girl who had scorned him into the power of this man, and thus claim the triumph of having cast her off when the certainty of her final rejection came? After a moment's silence, and appearing to falter, he said:

"You—you saw her, then? You know that it was Ruth Jessup?"

"Ha! ha! Have I run ye to covert? Yes, I a'most saw her face; an' as to the figure, any man, with half an eye, would know that. There isn't another loike it within fifty miles o' 'The Rest.'"

"Well, well, Jacob, as you saw her and me so close, I'll not deny it. A lass will get fractious, you know, when a fellow is expected, and don't come up to time, and follow one up, you understand. We have been sweethearting so long, and the old ones being agreeable, perhaps she is a trifle over restless about my hanging back."

"Aye, aye. This story about the young maister being o'er fond of her. I wouldn't put up with that."

Storms nodded his head mysteriously.

"You'll say nothing about her coming to seek me that night."

"In course not. Only I wouldn't a thought it of Jessup's lass, she looks so modest like."

"But when a lass is—is—"

"O'er fond, and afraid of losing her sweetheart. Still, I wouldn't a thought it of her anyhow."

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"You're not to think hard of her for anything, friend Jacob, because we may be wed after all, and no one must have a fling at my wife, mind that. When I give her up will be time enough."

The gamekeeper laughed, and nodded his head, perhaps amused at the idea that a bit of gossip, like that, could escape circulation, in a place already excited on the subject of Jessup and his daughter. Storms having given the impression he desired, took a watch from his pocket, and glanced at the dial.

"It's wonderful how time flits," he said, putting the watch back. "It's near dinner-time, and the old man will be waiting. Mind that you keep a close mouth. Good-day!"

"Good-day ter ye," responded the gamekeeper, picking up his birds, and smoothing their mottled feathers as he went along. "I wouldn't a thought it of yon lass, though, not if the parson himself had told me. That I wouldn't."

Meantime young Storms walked toward home, smiling, nay, at times, laughing, as he went. The cruel treachery of his conversation with the keeper filled him with vicious delight. He knew well enough that the whole subject would be made the gossip of every house in the village within twenty-four hours, and revelled in the thought. If it were possible for him to marry Ruth in the end, this scandal would be of little importance to him; if not, it should be made to sting her, and poison the returning life of young Hurst. Under any circumstances, it was an evil inspiration, over which he gloated triumphantly.

So full was the young plotter's brain of this idea, that he was unconscious of the rapidity with which he approached home, until the farm-house hove in view, a long, stone building sheltered by orchards, flanked by outhouses, and clothed to the roof with rare old ivy. It was, in truth, something better than a common farm-dwelling, for an oriel window jutted out here, a stone balcony there, and the sunken entrance-door was of solid oak; such as might have given access to "The Rest" itself.

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There had been plenty of shrubbery, with a bright flower-garden in front, and on one side of the house; but of the first, there was only a scattering and ragged bush left to struggle for life, here and there, while every sweet blossom of the past had given way to coarse garden vegetables, which were crowded into less and less space each year, by fields of barley or corn, that covered what had once been a pretty lawn and park.

"Ah, if I could but get this in fee simple. If he had died I might!" thought the young man, as he walked round to the back door. "If he had only died!"

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### THE SICK MAN WRITES A LETTER.

**W**ILLIAM Jessup seemed to be getting better rapidly after those few words with Ruth, that had lifted a mountain of pain from his heart, pain deeper and keener than the biting anguish of his wound, or the fever which preyed upon him continually, though he scarcely felt it, now that the anguish of mind was gone.

"I shall be better, I shall be quite well, only let me get one word to him. He is so rash. Ah, when that is done, I can rest a little," he kept thinking to himself, for the subject seemed so distasteful to Ruth that he shrunk from naming it to her. "If the old man Storms would but come, I might trust him; but he always sends that lad, who frightens Ruth. Poor child, poor child!"

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Ruth was sitting by her father's bed when these thoughts possessed him, and broke out in a tremulous exclamation, his eyes fastened tenderly on her.

"What is it, father? What are you thinking of? Nothing ails me. I must not be pitied at all while you are ill, or only because of that. What are you thinking about?"

"Only this, Ruthy. Don't let it bother you, though. Only, if I could get a word to the young master —"

Ruth shrunk visibly from the anxious eyes bent upon her, but forced herself to answer, calmly, "If I could see him one minute, alone. Oh, if I could," she said, clasping the hands in her lap till the blood fled from them, "but it would be of no use trying."

All at once Jessup rose from his pillow, but leaned back again, gasping for breath.

"Put another pillow under my head, and prop me up a bit. I will write a line with my own hand. I wonder we never thought of it before. Bring me a pen, and the ink-bottle. The big Bible, too, from yon table. It will be all the better for that."

Ruth obeyed him at once. Why had she never thought of this? Surely a letter could be got to that sick-chamber without danger. That, at least, would relieve her father's anxiety, and remind Hurst of her.

Why had she never thought of it before? That was not strange; Jessup was no letter writer, and, save a few figures, now and then, Ruth had not seen him use a pen half a dozen times in her life. It seemed a marvel to her even then that he should undertake so unusual a task. [230]

The girl had a pretty desk of her own, otherwise a supply of ink and paper might have been wanting. As it was, she brought both to her father's bed, and arranged the great Bible before him, that he might use them at once.

At any time it would have been a severe task that the gardener had undertaken; but now his weak fingers shook so fearfully that he was compelled to lay the pen down at every word, almost in despair. But the great heart gave his hand both strength and skill. After many pauses for rest, and struggles for breath, a few lines were written, and this was what they said:

MY DEAR YOUNG MASTER:—Have no fear about me. I have sworn, in soul, before Almighty God, to keep all that is within me a secret forever. No law and no blame shall ever reach you through me. Oh, that my eyes had been struck blind before they saw your face that night, when you shot me down! I would have groped in darkness to my grave, rather than have seen what I did. Sometimes I think it must have been all a dream. But it haunts me so—it haunts me so. Your father saved my life once. Maybe I am saving his now. I hope so. Do not fear about me. I shall not be more silent in death than I am in life.

WILLIAM JESSUP."

Many a misspelt word did this short epistle contain. Many an uncouth letter that linked sentences running riot with each other; but the spirit of a high resolve was there, and the good man exhausted the little strength left to him in writing it. [231]

"You will seal this," he whispered, hoarsely, giving her the paper to fold and direct. "Some one will take it to him."

"Yes, I will go. He shall get it. How, I do not know; but if he is well enough to read it, the paper shall reach him."

"And no one else. Remember that."

"I will remember. Oh, father, what is this terrible thing?"

"Be silent, Ruth. I will not have you question me."

"Forgive me, father."

"Yes, yes."

The poor man spoke in painful gasps. The old Bible seemed to bear him down; he struggled under the weight, but could not remove it.

Ruth lifted the book in her arms, settled the pillows under her father's head, and would have stayed by him, but he motioned her away.

Oh, how precious, yet how perilous that paper seemed to the poor girl! He would touch it. His eyes would follow the jagged lines. They would bring assurance of safety to him. He might even guess that she had been the messenger through whom it had reached him. She did not understand the meaning of this important scrawl. With regard to that, her mind was swayed by vague uncertainties, but she knew that it was pacific, and intended for good.

Ruth tied on her bonnet, and set forth for "The Rest" at once, with the precious letter in her bosom, over which she folded her scarlet sacque with additional caution.

"Perhaps—perhaps I shall see him. It might have meant nothing, after all. He could not be so false. Lady Rose is like a sister to him, that is all! I am so foolish to care; so very, very foolish. But, then, how can I help it?" [232]

The day was so beautiful, that such hopeful thoughts came to Ruth with the very atmosphere she breathed. The birds were singing all around her, and a thousand summer insects filled the air with music. Coming, as she did, from the close seclusion of a sick-room, all these things thrilled her with fresh vigor. Her step was light as she walked. The breath melted like wine on her red lips. Once or twice she paused to snatch a handful of violets from the grass, and drank up their perfume thirstily.

At last she came out into the luxurious beauty of the pleasure-grounds close to "The Rest," and from thence, looked up to the window where her young husband lay, all unconscious of her coming. Perhaps she had hoped that he might be well enough to sit up. Certainly, when she saw no one at the window, her heart sunk, and a deep sigh escaped her. It would not do to be found



there by any of the household. She felt that, and bent her steps towards the servants' entrance, heavy-hearted and irresolute.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### WITH THE HOUSEKEEPER.

**T**HE housekeeper was more than usually busy that day, but she greeted her favorite with affectionate warmth. "You there, my poppet," she said, seating herself for a talk. "I have been wondering why you kept away so long, now that the doctors tell me that your father is coming round."

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"I wished to come, godmother. Indeed, I never stopped thinking about you here; but there is no one to stay by father when I leave him, and he needs care."

"Of course he does, and something else as well. I was just putting up a bottle or two of our choice old Madeira, with some jellies, and the cook is roasting a bird, which he must eat with the black currant-jelly, remember. We must build your father up, now, with nice, strengthening things. They would do you no harm, either, child. Why, how thin and worried you look, Ruth! This constant nursing will break you down. We must send over one of the maids, to help."

"No, no; I can do very well. Father is used to me, you know. Only, if you wish to be kind—"

"Wish to be kind? Did I ever fail in that, goddaughter?"

"Did you ever? Indeed, no. Only I am always asking such out-of-the-way things."

"Well, well. What is it, now?"

"I have a letter from my father to—to the young master."

"From your father? When did he ever write a letter before, I wonder? And he sick in bed? A letter —"

"That I want to deliver into Wal—into Mr. Hurst's own hands, if you will only help me, godmother."

"Into his own hands? As if any other trusty person wouldn't do as well," said the housekeeper, discontentedly.

"But I should not be so certain, godmother."

"Ah, true. Is the letter so important, then?"

"I—I don't know, exactly. Only father was very particular about it."

"Well, give me the letter. I will see that he gets it safe."

Ruth still pressed her hand against her bosom, and a look of piteous disappointment broke into her eyes.

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"Is he so very ill, then? Might I not just see him for a minute, and take the answer back?"

"The young master is better, but not half so well as he strives to be. I never saw any one so crazy to get out."

"Is he—is he, though?"

"And about your father. He is always questioning me if I have heard from the cottage."

"Indeed!"

"Why, child, how chirpish you speak, all at once! I hardly knew your voice. But what was I saying? Ah, I remember. Yes, yes! The young master scarcely got back his speech before he began to question us about Jessup, whose hurt seems to wound him more than his own. To pacify him Lady Rose sent round every morning."

"Lady Rose! Did the messengers come from her?" questioned Ruth, and her voice sunk again.

"Of course. Sir Noel, in his trouble, might have forgotten; but she never did. Ah, goddaughter, that young lady is one in a thousand, so gentle, so lovely, so—"

"Yes, yes! I know—I know!"

"Such a match as they will make."

Ruth turned very pale; still a singular smile crept over her lips. She said nothing, however, but walked to a window, and looked out, as if fascinated by the rich masses of ivy that swept an angle of the building like black drapery.

"How the ivy thrives on that south wall!" she said, at last. "I can remember when it was only a stem."

"Of course you can; for I planted it on the day you were born, with my own hands. There has been time enough for it to spread. Why, it has crept round to the young master's window. He would have it trained that way."

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"Godmother, how good you are!"

"Not a bit of it, child. Only I was always careful of that ivy. Ruth's ivy, we always call it, because of the day it was planted."

"Did—did any one else call it so?"

"Of course, or the young master would never have known of it. 'Let me have,' says he, 'just a branch or two of your ivy—what is its name, now?—for my corner of the house.' Well, of course, I told him its name, and how it came by it, which he said was a pretty name for ivy, or any other beautiful thing, and from that day a thrifty branch was trained over to the balcony where he sits most, and sometimes smokes of an evening."

"Yes, I remember," said Ruth, breaking into smiles. "Some climbing roses are tangled with it."

"True enough; they throve so fast, that between them, the little stone-steps that run up to the balcony were hid out of sight; but Lady Rose found them out, and carries her flowers that way from the garden when she fills the vases in his room."

"She always did that, I suppose," said Ruth, in a low voice.

"Most likely," answered the housekeeper, carelessly, as if that young creature did not hang on every word she uttered with unutterable anxiety. "Most likely. There is little else that she can do for him just now."

"Does he need so very much help now, godmother?"

"None that a dainty young lady can give; but when he begins to sit up, her time will come. Then she will sit and read to him from morning till night, and enjoy it too."

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"And tire him dreadfully," muttered Ruth, with a dash of natural bitterness in her voice.

"I don't know. Anyway I shouldn't care about it; but people vary—people vary, Ruth! You will find that out as you get along in life. People vary!"

"Yes, I dare say," answered Ruth, quite unconscious of speaking at all. "You are very wise in saying so."

"Ah, wisdom comes with age; generally too late for much good. If one could have it now in the wild-oat season; but that isn't to be expected. Speaking of Lady Rose, here comes her pony-carriage, and here comes herself, with Sir Noel, to put her in. Do you know, Ruth, I don't think the master has been quite himself since that night. There is an anxious look in his eyes that I never saw there before. It should go away now that Mr. Walton is better, but somehow it don't."

Ruth did not answer. She was looking through the window at the group of persons that stood near a pony-carriage, perfect in all its equipments, which was in front of the house. Lady Rose, who had come down the steps leisurely, side by side with Sir Noel, was loitering a little, as if she waited for something. She examined the buttons of her gloves, and arranged her draperies, all the while casting furtive glances up to a window, at which no one seemed to appear, as she had hoped. Sir Noel, too, glanced up once or twice, rather wistfully, and then Ruth saw that his face did indeed wear a look that was almost haggard.

"Tell me—tell me! Is he so very ill yet, that his father looks like that?" cried Ruth, struck by a sudden pang of distrust. "I thought he was getting better."

"And so he is, child. Who said to the contrary? But that doesn't take the black cloud out of his father's face."

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"Then he really is better?"

"Better? Why, he sat up an hour yesterday."

"Did he—did he, indeed?" cried Ruth, joyfully. "Did he really?"

"He did, really, and our lady reading to him all the time."

"Ah!"

"What did you say, child?"

"Nothing, nothing! But see, they are both going, I think!"

The housekeeper swayed her heavy person toward the window, and looked out.

"Yes. Lady Rose is persuading Sir Noel, who can refuse nothing she wants. It almost seems as if he were in love with her himself."

"Perhaps he is!" cried Ruth, eagerly.

"One might suspect as much, if one did not know," answered the housekeeper, shaking her head. "Anyway, he is going with her now, and I'm glad of it. The ride will do him good. Look, she drives off at a dashing pace."

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### UNDER THE IVY.

**R**UTH needed no recommendation to watch the beautiful little vehicle that flashed down the avenue, a perfect nest of bright colors, over which the sunlight shone with peculiar resplendence, while the spirited black horse whirled it out of sight.

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"Isn't she fit for a queen?" said Mrs. Mason, triumphantly, as she wheeled round, and sought her chair again.

Ruth heard, but did not answer. A man was passing across the lawn, who occupied her full attention.

"Isn't that Mr. Webb?" she questioned.

Mrs. Mason half lifted herself out of the chair she was always reluctant to leave, and having obtained a view of the man, settled back again.

"Yes, that is Webb; and I say, Ruth, you had better follow, and give him that letter. He will be going back to the young master's room, in less than half an hour. He only leaves it to get a mouthful of air at any time. Your letter is sure of a safe delivery with Webb."

"Thank you—thank you! It will be best. Good-morning, godmother! good-morning!"

A swift clasp of two arms about her neck, a fluttering kiss on her lips, and the good woman was left alone, resting back in her easy-chair, with half-closed eyes, while a bland smile hovered over her plump mouth.

"What a loving little soul it is!" she muttered. "Peaches, ripe for preserving, are not sweeter; and as for inward goodness, she has not her match in the three kingdoms."

Mrs. Mason might not have been quite so tranquil had she seen Ruth just then, for, with the speed of a lapwing, she had turned an angle of the house, where her own namesake, the ivy, had already clambered, wreathing a carved stone balcony with its greenness. Scarcely pausing to breathe, she pushed the vines aside, and treading some of the tender twigs under her feet, flew up the narrow steps which were but just made visible under the wreathing masses of foliage.

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"If she can mount them, I will find the way," was her swift and half-triumphant thought. "Oh, Heaven grant that the window is unfastened!"

Her foot was on the carved work of the balcony; her scarlet jacket gleamed through the plate-glass, and flashed its vivid red through the clustering ivy leaves. Breathless with excitement, she tried the window-sash with her hand. It gave way, and swung inward with a faint jar. She was in the room with her husband, yet afraid to approach him. There he was, lying upon a low couch, wrapped in the folds of an oriental dressing-gown, and pillowed on a cushion of silk, embroidered in so many rich colors, that the contrast made his white face ghastly.

What if, after all, he did not love her? What if he should wake up alarmed, and made angry by her intrusion?

There is no feeling known to a woman's heart so timid, so unreasoning, so exacting, as love: pride, devotion, humility—a dozen contending elements—come into action when that one passion is disturbed, and it would be rashness to say which of these emotions may predominate at any given time. Perfect confidence either in herself or the creature of her love is unusual in most characters—impossible in some.

Ruth had entered that room full of enthusiasm, ready to dare anything; but the sight of a sleeping man, one that she loved, too, with overpowering devotion, was enough to make a coward of her in a single moment. Still, like a bird fascinated by the glittering vibrations of a serpent, she drew toward the couch, and bent over the sleeper, holding her own breath, and smiling softly as his passed over her parted lips.

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Ah, how pale he was! How the shadows came and went across his white forehead! Was he angry with her even in his sleep? Did he know how near she was, and resent it?

No, no! If he knew anything in that profound slumber, the knowledge was pleasant, for a smile stole over his face, and some softly-whispered words trembled from his lips.

"My darling! oh, my darling!"

Ruth dropped on her knees by the bed, and pressed both hands to her mouth, thus smothering the cry of joy that rose to it. Her movements had been noiseless as the flutter of a bird—so noiseless that the sleeper was not disturbed. After a while she lifted her head, stole her arms timidly over that sleeping form, and dropped a kiss, light as the fall of a rose-leaf, on those parted lips.

"Oh, my love, my love," she murmured, in sounds scarcely louder than a thought. "Look at me, look at me, if it is only for one moment."

Hurst opened his eyes, and smiling vaguely, as sick men smile in dreams. That instant a noise was heard at the door, footsteps and voices. Ruth snatched the letter from her bosom, crushed it into the invalid's hand, left a passionate kiss with it, and fled out of the window, and down the ivy-choked steps. There, trembling and frightened, she shrunk into an angle of the stone window-case, and dragging the ivy over her, strove to hide herself until some chance of escaping across the garden offered. She had left the sash open in her haste, and could hear sounds from the room above with tolerable distinctness. The first was the sharp exclamation of a man's voice. He seemed to be walking hurriedly across the room, and spoke in strong remonstrance.

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"What, up, Mr. Walton, trying to walk, and the window wide open upon you? What will the doctor say? What shall I answer to Lady Rose, who bade me watch by you every minute, till she came back?"

Some faint words, in a voice that thrilled poor Ruth to the soul, seemed to be given in reply to this expostulation. But, listen as she would, the meaning escaped her.

Then a louder voice spoke again.

"Ah, but how am I to answer to her ladyship, or Sir Noel, either?"

"'Webb,' says she, 'they will all have it so. I must take the air, or be shut out from here when I am really most needed. But you will not leave him? There must be some one to answer when he speaks.'

"Well, I promised her. If any one could gainsay a wish of my Lady Rose, that one isn't old Webb. But you were sleeping so sweetly, sir, and I knew that the first word would be about Jessup: so I ran over to get the news about him."

Here a hurried question was asked, in which Ruth distinguished her own name.

"Nay, nay. The girl was away somewhere, no doubt, for I found the doors locked, and could get no sight of any one. But let me shut this window, the air will be too cold."

There seemed to be some protest, and a good-natured dispute, in which the sick man prevailed, for directly the couch on which he lay was wheeled up to the window, and Ruth caught one glimpse of an eager face looking out.

The girl would have given her life to run up those steps again, and whisper one word to the man whom she felt was watching for her. She did creep out from her covert, and had mounted a step, when Webb spoke again. [242]

"Nay, nay, sir. This will never do. The window must be closed. An east wind is blowing."

A noise of the closing window followed, and with a sigh Ruth shrunk back to her shelter against the wall, disappointed, but trembling all over with the happiness of having seen him.

What cared she for Lady Rose then? Had he not looked into her eyes with the old, fond glance? Had he not reached out his arms in a quick passion of delight as she fled from him? Was he not her husband, her own, own husband?

There, in the very midst of her fright, and her newly-fledged joy, the young wife drew the wedding-ring from her bosom, and kissed it, rapturously murmuring:

"He loves me! He loves me! and what else do I care for? Nothing, nothing, in the wide wide, world!"

But in the midst of this unreasoning outburst, poor Ruth remembered the father she had left a wounded prisoner in the cottage, and a spasm of pain shot through her. Ah, if she were sure, if she were only sure that no secret was kept from her there. But it must be right. Some great misunderstanding had arisen to distress her father beyond the pain of his wounds. But when the two beings she most loved on earth were well enough to meet and explain, all would be clear and bright again. Her husband had the letter safe in his hands. She would go home at once, and tell her father that, and afterward steal off alone, and feast on the happiness that made her very breath a joy.

Out, through the rose-thickets, the clustering honeysuckles, and the beds of blooming flowers, Ruth stole, like a bee, overladen with honey, and carried her happiness back to the cottage. [243]

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A STORM AT THE TWO RAVENS.

**J**UDITH HART, will ye just carry the ale-cans a little more on the balance? Can't ye mind that the foam is dripping like suds over yer hands, and wetting the sand on the floor till it's all in puddles?"

This sharp remonstrance came from the mistress of the house in which Judith was barmaid, and chief attraction. The public-room was crowded that night, not only with its old guests, but by strangers on their way from a neighboring town, where a monthly fair was held. The girl gave her head a toss, as this reprimand pointed out her delinquency, and sat the two ale-cups she carried down upon the nearest table, with a dash that sent both foam and beer running over it in ruddy rivulets.

"If you're not pleased with the way I serve customers, there's plenty more that would be glad of doing it better. I'm not to be clamored at, anyway, so long as there's other places ready for me."

"An' a pretty prize they'd get!" rejoined the landlady, putting her hands a-kimbo, and nodding her head with such angry vehemence, that the borders of her cap rose and fluttered like the feathers of a rageful bantam. "It's all well enough while there's none of the better-to-do sort wanting to be served; but when they come! Hoity-toity! My lady tosses her head at commoners, and scorns to heed the knock of a workman's can on the table, as if she were a born princess, and he a beggar. I can tell ye what, lass, this wasn't the way I got to be mistress, after serving from a girl at the tap." [244]

"And what if I didn't care that forever being mistress of a place like this!" cried Judith, snapping her fingers over the dripping cups, and shaking her own handsome head in defiance of the

fluttering cap, with all it surmounted. "As if I didn't look forward to something better than that, though I have demeaned myself to serve out your stale beer till I'm sick of it."

"Ah! ha! I understand. One can do that with half an eye," answered the irate dame, casting a glance over at young Storms, who sat at one of the tables, sipping his wine and laughing quietly over the contest. "But have a care of yourself. It may come about that chickens counted in the shell never live to pip."

Judith turned her great eyes full of wrathful appeal on Storms, and burst into a scornful laugh, which the young man answered by a look of blank unconcern.

"You hear her! You hear her, with her insults and her tyrannies; sneering at me as if I was the dirt under her feet!" the girl cried out, stamping upon the sanded floor, "and not one of you to say a word."

"How should we?" said Storms, with a laugh. "It's a tidy little fight as it stands. We are only waiting to see which will get the best of it. Who here wants to bet? I'll lay down half a sovereign on the lass."

As he tossed a bit of gold on the table, Storms gave the barmaid a look over his shoulder, that fell like ice upon her wrath. She shrunk back with a nervous laugh, and said, with a degree of meekness that astonished all in the room, "Now, I will have no betting on me or the mistress here. We are both a bit fiery; but it doesn't last while a candle is being snuffed. I always come round first; don't I now, mistress?"

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The good-hearted landlady looked at the girl with open-mouthed astonishment. Her color lost much of its blazing red, her cap-borders settled down with placid slowness. Both hands dropped from her plump waist, and were gently uplifted.

"Did any one here ever see anything like it?" she said. "One minute flaring up, like a house on fire, the next, dead ashes, with any amount of water on 'em. I do think no one but me could get on with the lass. But I must say, if she does get onto her high horse at times, with whip and spur, when I speak out, she comes down beautifully."

"Don't I?" said Judith, with a forced laugh, gathering up her pewter cups. "But that's because I know the value of a kind-hearted mistress—one that's good as gold at the bottom, though I do worry her a bit now and then, just to keep my hand in. If any of the customers should take it on 'em to interfere, he'd soon find out that we two would be sure to fight in couples."

With this pacific conclusion, the girl gathered up a half dozen empty cups by the handles, and carried them into the kitchen. The moment she was out of sight, all her rage came back, but with great suppression. She dashed the cups down upon a dresser with a violence that made them ring again; then she plunged both hands into the water, as if that could cool the hot fever of her blood, and rubbed the cups furiously with her palm, thus striving to work off the fierce energy of her passion, which the studied indifference of Storms had called forth, though its fiercest expression had fallen on the landlady.

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"I woke him up, anyway," she thought, while a short, nervous laugh broke from her. "He got frightened into taking notice, and that is something, though he kills me for it. Ah!"

The girl lifted her eyes suddenly, and saw a face looking in upon her through the window. His face! She dropped the cup, dashed the water from her hands, and, opening the kitchen-door, stole out, flinging the white apron she wore over her head.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### A PRESENT FROM THE FAIR.

**S**TORMS was waiting for her near the door, where he stood in shadow.

"Well, now, have you come round to take a fling at me?" said the girl, with more of terror than anger in her voice. "If you have, I won't bear it, for you're the one most to blame, coming here again and again, without so much as speaking a word, though ye know well enough how hungry I am for the least bit of notice."

"This way. We are too near the house," said Storms, seizing the girl's arm, and drawing her toward the kitchen-garden, that lay in the rear of the building. "Let us get under the cherry-trees; they cannot see us there."

"I musn't be away long," answered the girl, subdued, in spite of herself. "The mistress will be looking for me."

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"I know that; so we must look sharp. Come."

Judith hurried forward, and directly the two stood under the shadow of the cherry-trees sheltered by the closely-growing branches.

"What an impatient scold you are, Judith!" said the young man. "There is no being near you without a fear of trouble. What tempted you, now, to get into a storm with the mistress?"

"You did, and you know it. Coming in, without a look for one, and saying, as if we were a thousand miles apart, 'I say, lass, a pint, half-and-half mild, now.'"

Judith mimicked the young man's manner so viciously that he broke into a laugh, which relieved the apprehensions which had troubled her so much.

"And if I did, what then? Haven't I told you, more than once, that you and I must act as strangers toward each other?"

"But it's hard. What is the good of a sweetheart above the common, if one's friends are never to know it?"

"They are to know when the time comes; I have told you so, often and often. But what is a man to do when his father is hot for him marrying another, and she so jealous that she would bring both the two old men and Sir Noel down on me at the least hint that I was fond in another quarter?"

"But when is it to end? When will they know?"

"Soon, very soon, now. Have patience; a few weeks longer, say, perhaps months, and some day you and I will slip off and be wed safe enough. Only nothing must be said beforehand. A single word would upset everything. They are all so eager about Jessup's lass."

"I can keep a close lip; you know that. No matter if I do get into a tantrum now and again; no one ever heard me whisper a word about that. You understand?"

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"Yes, yes, of course. No girl was ever safer, but we must be cautious, very cautious. I mustn't come here often. It is too trying for your temper."

"It is. I agree to that. The sight of you sitting in the public, so calm and cold, drives me mad."

"Then I must not come."

"Oh, Richard! I can't live without seeing you."

"You shall see me, of course. I couldn't endure my life without seeing you. But it must be over yonder. You understand? You might be seen coming or going. Some one did see you in the wilderness the other night, and thought it was Jessup's daughter."

"Did he? Yes, every one says I look like her. Now, I like that."

"So do I. It just takes suspicion off you, and puts it on her. Won't the whole neighborhood be astonished when she is left in the lurch, knowing how she follows me up?"

"Oh, Richard, what a wonderful man you are!" said Judith, wild with delight. "Yes, I will be so sly that they never can find me out."

"They never shall. I mean to make that sure. See what I have brought you from the fair."

Here Storms unrolled a parcel that he had left under the cherry-trees before entering the house that evening, and cautiously stepping into the light of a window, unfolded a scarlet sacque and some dark cloth, such as composed the usually picturesque dress of Ruth Jessup.

"Oh, are these for me?" cried the girl, in an ecstasy of delight. "How soft and silk-like it is! Oh, Richard!"

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"For you! Of course; but only to be worn when you come up yonder!"

"Oh!"

"That is, till after we are wed. Then you shall wear such things every day of the week, with silk dresses for Sunday. But, till then, don't let a living soul see one of these things. Keep 'em locked up like gold, and only put them on when you come to the lake at night, remember. I wouldn't for the world that any man or woman should see how like a queen they will make you look till they will have to say, at the same time, she is Richard Storms' wife."

"Oh, how sorry I am for having that bout with the mistress!" said Judith, hugging the bundle which he surrendered to her as if it had been a child she loved.

"But you must promise me, on your life, on your soul, to keep my fairing a close secret."

"I will! I will!"

"Without that to lay the whole thing on Jessup's daughter with, it wouldn't be safe for you to come to the park. The mistress would turn you away, if she heard of it. Then where should we land?"

"I will be careful. Believe me, I will."

"Especially about the dress."

"I know. I will be careful."

"Judith! Judith Hart!"

"Hush! The mistress is calling!" whispered Judith. "It is time to shut up the house. I will run up to my room and hide these; then help her side up, and come out again."

"No, no! That would be dangerous; but I would like to see how the dress looks. What if you put it on after the house is still, and come to the window with a light. I will walk about till then, and shall go home thinking that my sweetheart is the daintiest lass in this village or the next."

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"Would you be pleased? I shall be sure to put the dress on. Oh, how I have longed for one like it! Yes, yes! I will come to the window."

Judith uttered this assurance, and darted into the house, in time to escape the landlady, who came to the back door just as she passed up the stairs.

Storms did linger about the house until the company had withdrawn from it, and the lights were put out, all but one, which burned in the chamber of Judith Hart. A curtain hung before this window, behind which he could see shadows moving for some minutes. Then the curtain was

suddenly withdrawn, and the girl stood fully revealed. The light behind her fell with brilliant distinctness on the scarlet jacket, and was lost in the darker shadows of her skirt. She had twisted back the curls from her face with graceful carelessness; but, either by art or accident, had given them the rippling waves that made Ruth Jessup's head so classical.

"By Jove, but she's the very image of her!" exclaimed Storms, striking his leg with one hand. "No two sparrows were ever more alike."

This flash of excitement died out while Judith changed her position, and flung a kiss to him through the window.

For minutes after he stood staring that way, while a dull shudder passed through him.

"She's too pretty, oh, too pretty for that!" he muttered. "I wish it hadn't come into my mind!"

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### A WILD-FLOWER OFFERING.

**W**HEN Webb entered his master's room, after the young wife had fled from it, he found the patient in a high state of excitement. The flash of his eye, and the vivid color in his cheeks, fairly frightened the good man, who dreaded, above all things, a second attack of the fever, which had already so nearly proved fatal.

"Help me to the couch; wheel it to the window. I want to look out; I want air!" said the young man, flinging himself half off the bed, and reeling toward the couch, on which he dropped, panting and so helpless that he could only enforce his first order by a gesture. Webb folded the dressing-gown over his master, and wheeled the couch close to the window.

"Open it! Open it!" gasped the young man, impatiently.

Webb threw open a leaf of the French window. Struggling to his elbow, young Hurst leaned out, scanning the flower-garden with bright and eager eyes. But the arm on which he leaned trembled with weakness, and soon gave way. His head fell upon the cushions, and his eyes closed wearily.

"I cannot see her," he murmured, under his breath. "I cannot see her. She could not have escaped if it had been real. Ah, me! Why should dreams mock one so?"

"Let me close the window," said Webb, anxiously. "The air is too much for you."

"Yes, close it," answered Hurst, with a sigh; "but first look out, and tell me if you see any one moving among the flowers."

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Webb stepped into the balcony and examined the grounds beneath it. As he did this, a gust of wind swept through the opposite door and carried with it a folded paper, which had fallen from the invalid's hand when he staggered up from the bed.

"No," said Webb, closing the window. "I see no one but a young woman going round to the servant's entrance."

"A young woman! Who is it? Who is it?"

"No one that I have seen before. Nay, now that I look again, it is the young woman from the public over in the village."

"What is she doing here?" questioned Hurst, impatiently.

"Come on some errand from her mistress to the housekeeper, most likely," answered Webb.

"At first I almost thought it was old Jessup's daughter; but for the lift of her head, and the swing in her walk, one might take her for that."

"Old Jessup's daughter! Don't talk like a fool, Webb," said the young man, rising to his elbow again, flushed and angry. "As if there could be a comparison."

Webb very sensibly made no reply to this; but thinking that his master might be vexed because Lady Rose had not brought her usual offering of flowers that morning, changed the subject with crafty adroitness.

"Lady Rose has gone out to drive in the pony carriage. Sir Hugh would have it so," he explained.

"Yes, I dare say," muttered Hurst, indifferently. "She stays about the house too much. It is very tiresome for her."

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The young man never closed his eyes after this, and, with both hands under his head, lay thinking.

"It was so real. I felt her kiss on my lips when I awoke. Her hand was in mine. She looked frightened. She left something. Webb! Webb!"

"Yes, Mr. Walton!"

"Look on the bed. I have lost something—a paper. Find it for me. Find it."

Webb went to the bed, flung back the delicate coverlet, and the down quilt of crimson silk: but found nothing either there or among the pillows.

"There is nothing here, sir!"

"Look again. There must be a paper. I felt it in my hand. There must be a paper."

"Really, Mr. Walton, there is nothing of the kind."

"Look on the floor—everywhere. I tell you it was too real. Somewhere you will find it."

Webb searched the bed again, and examined the carpet, with a feeling of uneasiness.

"The fever has come back," he thought. "He is getting wild, again. What can have done it? He seemed so quiet when I went out—was sleeping like a baby."

Troubled with these thoughts, the faithful fellow went on, searching the room, without the least shadow of expectation that he would find anything. At last he rose from his knees, and repeated, "There is nothing here, sir."

Hurst uttered a deep sigh, and turned his head away, weak and despondent.

"Dreams, dreams," he thought. "She is always coming, but never comes—never. Ah, this is too cruel. Can it be so clear, and yet a dream?"

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Webb came up to the couch, hesitating and anxious. The flush was still on his master's face. His eyelids were closed, but they were quivering, and the long, dark lashes were damp with tears the young man was unable to suppress in the extremity of his weakness.

"Something has happened. Who has dared to disturb you?" said Webb, touched and anxious.

"Dreams, Webb, dreams—nothing else. Help me back to bed."

Webb obeyed this request with great tenderness, and, in a few moments, Hurst lay upon the pillows he had left with such a burst of wild hope, completely prostrated.

"Don't let me sleep again," he murmured, wearily. "Not in the day-time. Such rest is a cheat."

"Ah, you will not care to sleep now," said the servant, "for here comes Lady Rose, with her carriage full of ferns and flowers, from the woods. She said, this morning, that the splendor of our roses only wearied you, and she would find something so fresh and sweet that no one could help admiring them. Ah, Mr. Walton, the young lady never tires of thinking what will please you best."

"I know—I know," answered Hurst, impatiently. "She is good to every one."

Just then a sweet, cheerful voice was heard in the hall. Directly the door opened softly, and Lady Rose came in, carrying an armful of ferns and delicate wild flowers close to her bosom.

"See, what I have brought you," she said, looking down upon her fragrant burden with child-like delight. "I saw how tired you were of those great standard roses, and the ragged snow of our Japan lilies. Arrange them as I would, they never made your eyes brighten. But these are so lovely; great, blue violets, such as only grow around the old summer-house on the black lake. And such ferns! You never saw anything so dewy and delicate. Sir Noel and I brought them away in quantities; one goes to the lake so seldom, you know. Really, Walton, I think such things thrive best in the shadows. See!"

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Lady Rose had seated herself on the couch which the sick man had just left, and while her soft, blonde hair was relieved by the purple velvet of the cushions, dropped the flowers into her lap. Then she began to arrange them into bouquets, and crowd them into vases which Sir Noel brought to her, with an attention that was both gallant and paternal.

As she was filling the vases, Lady Rose selected the brightest blossoms and the most delicate tufts of fern from the mass, and laid them upon the purple of the cushion, with a little triumphant glance at Sir Noel, which brought to his lips one of those rare smiles that came seldom to them in these days.

When all was done, the girl gathered these choice bits into a cluster, tied them with a twist of grass; and, gathering up the refuse stalks and flowers in her over-skirt, stole softly to the bed, and laid her pretty offering on Hurst's pillow.

The young man turned his head, as if the perfume oppressed him, and a slight frown contorted his forehead. Lady Rose observed this, and a flood of scarlet swept up to her face. Sir Noel observed it, also, and frowned more darkly than his son.

Without a word, though her blue eyes filled with shadows, and her white throat was convulsed with suppressed sobs, Lady Rose left the room. Once in her own apartment, she tore back the lace curtains from the open window, dashed all the remnants of her flowers through, and flinging herself, face downward, on a couch, shook all its azure cushions with a passionate storm of weeping.

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"He does not love me! He never will! All my poor little efforts to please him are thrown away. Ah, why must I love him so? Spite of it all, why must I love him so?"

Poor girl! Fair young creature! The first agony of her woman's life was upon her, an agony of love, that she would not have torn from her soul for the universe, though every throb of it was a pain.

"Why is it? Am I so disagreeable? Am I plain, awkward, incapable of pleasing, that he turns even from the poor flowers I bring?"

Wondering where her want of attractions lay, humble in self-estimation, yet feverishly wounded in her pride, the girl started up, pushed back the rich blonde hair from a face fresh as a blush rose with dew upon it, for it was wet with tears, and looked into the opposite mirror, where she made as lovely a picture as Sir Joshua ever painted. The tumultuous, loving, passionate picture of a young woman, angry with herself for being so beautiful and so fond, without the power to win one heart which was all the world to her.



"I suppose he thinks me a child," she said; and her lips began to tremble, as if she were indeed incapable of feeling only as children feel. "Oh, if I were—if I only could go back to that! How happy we were then. How gladly he met me, when he came home from college! I was his darling Rose of roses then—his little wife. But now; but now—Is that girl prettier than I am? Does he love her? I don't believe it. I will not believe it. She may love him. How could any woman help it? Poor girl! poor girl, I pity her! But then, who knows, she may be pitying me all the time! She almost seemed to claim him that awful night. Oh, I wish that look of her eyes would go out of my mind. But it seems burned in."

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Lady Rose had ceased to weep, though her superb blue eyes were still misty, and full of trouble, as these thoughts swayed through her brain. Something in the mutinous beauty of that face in the glass half fascinated her. She smoothed back the cloud of fluffy hair from her temples, and unconsciously half smiled on herself. Surely, the dark, gipsy-like face of the gardener's daughter could not compare with that. Then Walton Hurst was so proud; the only son of a family rooted in the soil before the Plantagenets took their title, was not likely to mate with the daughter of a servant. Looking at herself there in the mirror, and knowing that the blue blood in her veins was pure as his, she began to marvel at herself for the thought.

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## CHAPTER XL.

### SEEKING A PLACE.

**M**RS. HIPPLE came into the room and found Lady Rose among her azure cushions, on which she had sunk with a deep sigh, and a blush of shame, at being so caught in the midst of her wild thoughts.

"Dear, dear, I wonder how your ladyship got in without my knowing it," she said, picking up the jaunty little hat which the girl had flung on the carpet. "We thought Sir Noel had taken you for a long drive."

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"No matter, you need have been in no haste to come," said the young lady, turning her face from the light.

"But this poor hat. See how the lace and flowers are crushed together. Such a beauty as it was, and worn for the first time. But I do think it is past mending."

"Let them throw it aside, then," answered Rose, without looking at the pretty fabric of chip, lace, and flowers, over which Mrs. Hipple was mourning. "What is a hat, more or less, to any one?"

"Nothing to your ladyship, I know; but I haven't seen the young master admire anything so much this many a day."

"What! What were you saying, Mrs. Hipple?"

"Nothing; only what a pity it was that you would fling things about in this fashion."

"But something you said about—about—"

"No, nothing particular, only when your ladyship stopped at the door, and said 'good-morning' to the young gentleman, he observed that he had seldom seen you look so bright and pleasant; when I answered, that it was, perhaps, owing to the hat which had just come down, and was, to my taste, a beauty, he said, 'yes, it might be, for something made you look uncommonly lovely.'"

Lady Rose started up. She was no longer ashamed of her flushed face, but reached out her hand for the hat, which had, indeed, been rather severely crushed by its fall on the floor.

"It is a shame!" she said, eyeing the pretty fabric lovingly. "But I did not think it so very pretty. No, no, Mrs. Hipple, I will do it myself. Such a useless creature as I am. There, now, the flowers are as good as ever; it only wanted a touch or two of the fingers to bring them all right; and I rather like to do it."

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She really did seem to like handling those sprays, among which her fingers quivered softly, as butterflies search for honey-dew, until they subsided into a loving caress of the ribbons, which she smoothed, rolled over her hand, and fluttered out with infinite satisfaction.

"There, you fractious old Hipple, are you satisfied now?" she questioned, holding up the renovated hat on one hand; then, putting it on her head, she looked in the glass with new-born admiration of its gracefulness. "You see that it is none the worse for a little knocking about."

"It is just a beauty. No wonder Mr. Walton's eyes brightened up when he saw it."

Rose took the dainty fabric from her head, and put it carefully away with her own hands; at which Mrs. Hipple smiled slyly to her own shadow in the glass. Directly after this the kind old lady went down to the housekeeper's parlor, for she was not above a little family gossip with Mrs. Mason, and rather liked the cosy restfulness of the place. She found the good dame in an unusual state of excitement.

"A young woman had been there," she said, "after a place as lady's-maid. She had heard in the village that one would be wanted at 'The Rest,' and came at once, hoping to secure the situation."

"A lady's-maid!" cried Mrs. Hipple. "Why, the girl is distraught—as if we took servants who come offering themselves in that way at 'The Rest.'

"That was just what I told her," said Mrs. Mason, laughing as scornfully as her unconquerable good nature permitted. "I gave the young person a round scolding for thinking the thing possible. She answered that she thought no harm of seeking the place, as it was only in hopes of bettering herself; for she was disgusted with serving wine and beer at the 'Two Ravens.'"

"Serving wine and beer? Why, Mason, you astonish me," said Mrs. Hipple, lifting her hands in horror of the idea.

"Then I broke out," said the housekeeper, "and rated her for thinking that any one fresh from the bar of a public house could fill the place of a lady's gentlewoman, who should be bred to the duties; at which the girl gave her head a toss fit for a queen, and said that some day she might have a higher place than that, and no thanks to anybody but herself."

"This must have been a forward girl, Mason. I wonder you had patience with her."

"Oh, as to that, it takes something, and always did, to make me demean myself below myself," said the housekeeper, folding her arms firmly over her bosom; "besides, she came down wonderfully in the end, and pleaded for a housemaid's place, as if that was the thing she had set her heart on from the first; and it was more than I could do to make her understand that no such person was wanted at 'The Rest.' Then she wanted me to promise that she might have the first opening, if any of the maids should not suit, or might leave."

When Mrs. Hipple returned to the room where she had left Lady Rose, this singular event was in her mind, and she spoke of it with the freedom always awarded to the beloved governess who had now become the companion and friend of her pupil. Lady Rose gave but little attention to the subject. Her mind was too thoroughly occupied with other thoughts for any great interest in matters so entirely foreign to them; but she seemed to listen. That was enough for the kind old lady, who continued:

"The girl went off at last, quite disappointed, because she wasn't taken on at once. She was going over to Jessup's, she said, to have a chat with his daughter. I wonder that Ruth should not choose better company. She is a modest thing enough, and might look to be a lady's maid in time, without stepping very much out of her sphere, being, as it were, bred in the shadow of 'The Rest,' and gifted with more learning than is needful to the place."

Here Lady Rose was aroused to more vivid interest. She looked up, and listened to every word her companion uttered.

"You are speaking of Jessup's pretty daughter," she said.

"Yes, of that slender young thing, Mason's goddaughter. Some people think her almost beautiful, with her great black eyes, and cheeks like ripe peaches. Then her hair is quite wonderful, and she walks like a fawn."

"You make her out very beautiful," said Lady Rose, with a quick increase of color. "Perhaps she is—having seen her always since we were both little girls, I have not observed the change as others might."

"Of course, how should your ladyship be expected to think of her now that you are the first lady in the county, and the girl only what she has always been?"

Lady Rose shook her head in kindly reproof of this speech.

"We must not say that, Mrs. Hipple," she said. "Ruth was my playmate as a little girl, a sweet-tempered, pretty friend, whom you kindly allowed to study with me as an equal."

"No, no. Never as an equal. That was impossible. She was bright and diligent."

"More so than I ever was," said Lady Rose, smiling on the old woman.

"Ah, but you learned so quickly, there was no necessity for application with you. One might as well compare her dark prettiness with—"

Lady Rose held up her hands, with a childlike show of resistance.

"There, there. If you draw pleasant comparisons, dear Hipple, it is because you love me, but that takes nothing from Ruth, who must be remarkably good-looking, or people would not admire her so much."

"Admired, is she? Well, I know little of that. Of course, the servants rave about her beauty in the housekeeper's room; I rebuked one of them only yesterday, for saying that the gentlemen who visit at 'The Rest' go by the gardener's cottage so often only to get a look at the daughter, pretending all the time that it is the great show of roses that takes them that way."

"Were you not a little hard with the man, Hipple? Sir Noel's guests—those who joined in the hunt—certainly did seem greatly struck by her appearance as we rode by the cottage."

"No, no, the man deserved a reprimand for saying that his young master was made angry by their praises, when they saw her standing like a picture in the porch, for them to look at."

"You were right—excuse me, you were quite justified in rebuking him," said the lady, in breathless haste. "It was an impertinence."

"And, of all places, to say it in the housekeeper's room," added the old lady, "and Mason to permit it; but she thinks her goddaughter a paragon, and means to make her the heiress of all her savings. Indeed, she intends to give her something handsome when she is married to young Storms."

"Her marriage with young Storms!" faltered Lady Rose, going to a window in hopes of concealing her agitation; for the blood was burning in her face, and she dared not meet the eyes of that

shrewd old lady. "Is that anything but a childish romance?"

"It is a settled thing, my lady. We shall have a wedding at the cottage soon after Jessup gets well."

As Mrs. Hipple said this, she glided out of the room, clasping her hands softly together as she went down the corridor, and smiling as such women will, when conscious of happiness adroitly conferred.

Then Lady Rose looked shyly around, saw that she was quite alone, and, coming out of her covert, began to walk the room up and down, up and down, like some fawn let loose in a pasture of wild flowers. Then came a knock at the door. Lady Rose stole back to the window, determined that no one should see her radiant face before the intruder came in. It was a servant bearing a message from the sick-chamber.

"The young master was wholly awake now. Would Lady Rose come and read to him a while?"

Would Lady Rose come and read to the man she loved? Would she accept the brightest corner in Paradise, if offered to her? Ah, how her face brightened! How soft and glad was the smile that dimpled about the mouth, so sorrowful only a little time before! With a quick glance she looked into the mirror, and made an effort to improve the amber cloud of hair that was most effective in beautiful disorder. Struck with the loveliness of her own face, she gave up the effort and went away.

"He has sent for me," was her happy thought. "He did not mean to reject my violets. It was only because he was not quite awake. He has sent for me! He has sent for me!"

Poor girl! She did not know that Sir Noel had been pointing out the unkindness of his action to the invalid, and that this message was one of almost forced atonement.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

### THE FATHER'S SICK-ROOM.

**B**REATHLESS and wildly happy, Ruth Jessup almost flew along the shaded path which led from "The Rest" to her own humble dwelling. Now and then she would look up to a bird singing in the branches above her, and answer his music with a sweet, unconscious laugh. Again, her mouth would dimple at the sight of a tuft of blue violets, the flower she loved most of any. The very air she breathed was a delight to her, and the sunshine warmed her heart, as it penetrates the cup of a flower.

Up she came into her father's sick-room like a beam of morning light.

"I have seen him, father. I gave the letter into his own hands. He is not looking so very ill."

Jessup started to his elbow, eager and glad as the girl herself.

"Then he got it? He surely got it?"

"Oh, yes! I am very, very sure!"

"But how? How didst manage it, since he is not well enough to leave his room?"

"I went there!"

"You?"

"Yes, father; there was no other way, if I wished to put the paper into his own hand, as you bade me. So I went to his room."

"But, Sir Noel! Mrs. Mason! I marvel they let any one into his room so easily."

"Oh, they did not. I never dared to ask either of them," said Ruth, with a sweet, triumphant laugh, that sounded strangely in the lone sadness of the house. "I evaded them, and all the rest."

"But how?"

Ruth hesitated. The secret of the balcony stairs was too precious—she would keep it even from her father, as the angels guarded Jacob's ladder.

"Oh, I slipped in while Mr. Webb was away."

"Well! well! And he was not looking so very ill. He read my letter, and that brightened him up a bit, I'll be bound?" questioned the gardener.

"Not while I was there. I only had a minute. They were on the stairs, and there was no chance for a word."

"But he is getting better; you are sure of that?"

"Oh, yes. I feel quite sure, father."

"Well, I'm thankful for that. Mayhap he'll be able to come and see a poor fellow before long. Then we shall know more about it."

"About what, father?"

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"Oh, nothing much! Only I'd give all the money I have been so long hoarding for the wedding-day only to be sure—"

"Then he is not to blame about anything?" broke in Ruth, throwing her arms around the sick man, and kissing him wildly, as if she did not quite know what she was about. "Oh, father! father! How could you ever think ill of him?"

"Child, child! What is all this ado about? Who said that I did think ill of the lad? Him as I have always loved next to my own child! Come, come, now! What have I said to make you so shaky and so fond?"

Ruth gave him another kiss for answer, and, seating herself on the bed, looked down upon him with a glow in her great velvety eyes that brought a smile to his lips.

"Anyway, the walk has brightened this face up wonderfully. Why, here is color once again, and the dimples are coming back like bees around a rose. Yes! yes! Kiss me, lass! It does me good—it does me good!"

Ruth began to smooth the iron-gray hair on that rugged head, while the old man looked fondly upon her glowing face.

"Never mind. We shall be happy enough yet, little one," he said, smoothing her shapely hand with his broad palm. "Everything is sure to come out right, now that we understand one another."

Ruth drooped her head as the old man said this, and the bloom faded a little from her cheeks.

"Yes; oh, yes, father!" she faltered, drawing her hand away from his.

A look of the old trouble came into the deep, gray eyes, dwelling so fondly upon the girl; but before another word could be spoken, Ruth had left the bed, and lifting a vase full of withered flowers from the mantelpiece, flung them through the open window. [267]

"See what a careless girl I have been, never to think how you love the roses, and they in full blossom, all this time. I never forgot you so long before. Now did I, father?"

"I never thought of them," answered the old man, shaking his head on the pillow. "My mind was too full of other things."

"But we must think of them now, or the house won't seem like home when you are strong enough to sit up," answered Ruth, with a reckless sort of cheerfulness. "Everything must be bright and blooming then. I will go now, and come back with the roses. They will seem like old friends; won't they, father dear?"

Ruth had reached the door with the vase in her hand when a knock sounded up from the porch.

The color left her face at the sound, and she nearly dropped the vase, so violent was the start she gave.

"I wonder who it is?" she said, casting a look of alarm back at her father, but speaking under her breath. "Has *he* come to frighten away all my happiness?"

She went down-stairs reluctantly, and, with dread at her heart, opened the entrance door. A girl stood in the porch, carrying a basket on her arm, who entered the passage without ceremony, and walked into the little parlor.

"The mistress sent me to inquire after your father, Miss Jessup," she said, taking a survey of the room, which was furnished better than most of its class. "Besides that, I bring a jar of her best apricot jelly, with a bottle of port from the inn cellar, and her best compliments; things she don't send promiscuously by me, who only take them once in a while when it suits me, as it does now." [268]

"You are very kind," said Ruth, with gentle reserve. "Pray thank Mrs. Curtis for us."

"Of course, I'll thank her, but not till I've rested a bit in this pretty room. Why, it's like a grand picture, with a carpet and chairs fit for a gentleman's house; enough to make any girl lift her head above common people, as Mr. Storms says, when he goes about praising you."

"Mr. Storms!" faltered Ruth, shrinking from the name.

"Yes, Mr. Storms. It's only here and there one who thinks of calling him Dick; and they are uncommonly careful not to let him hear them; for he has a strong hand, slender and thin as he looks, has Storms. But I needn't tell you anything about him."

"No. It's not necessary," replied Ruth, scarcely knowing what she said.

"Of course not. He comes here often enough to speak for himself, I dare say," persisted the girl, in whose great dark eyes a sinister light was gleaming.

"Not often."

Judith Hart's eyes sparkled.

"Scarcely at all," continued Ruth, "since my father was hurt."

"Is it his keeping away or the watching that makes you look so white in the face?" said Judith, taking off her bonnet, and revealing a mass of rich hair, which she pushed back from her temples.

Ruth looked at the girl with a strangely bright, almost amused, expression.

"I think—I fear that my father will want me," was her sole reply.

"That's more than some other people do." This insolent retort almost broke from the girl's lips, but she checked it, only saying: "Here is your wine and the jelly." [269]

"Mrs. Curtis is very kind. Wait a little, and I will cut her some flowers," answered Ruth.

Judith's great eyes flashed as she gave up the parcel.

"Oh, yes, I can wait, since you are polite enough to give me leave."

"Pray rest yourself, while I go into the garden."

Judith folded her arms, leaned back in her chair, and said that she could wait; the mistress did not expect her to come back yet a while.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

### PROFFERED SERVICES.

**R**UTH went into the garden, which was lying in shadow just then; so she required no covering for her head, but rather enjoyed the bland south wind which drifted softly through her loose hair, as she stooped to pluck the roses.

Meantime Judith Hart lifted herself from the lounging attitude into which she had sunk, and in an instant became sharply alert. Upon a little chintz couch that occupied one side of the room she found the scarlet sacque and a dainty little hat, which Ruth had flung there before going up to her father, after her return from "The Rest." Quick as thought, Judith slipped on the sacque, and placed the hat with its side cluster of red roses on her head. After giving a sharp glance through the window, to make sure that Ruth was still occupied in the garden, she went up to a little mirror, and took a hasty survey of herself.

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"The jacket is as like as two peas," she thought, "and the hat is easy got. There'll be no trouble in twisting up one side like this. As to the roses, he must get them before the fair is over. If I could only wear them in broad daylight, before all their faces, it would be splendid; but he won't give in to that. Farther on, I'll show him and them, too, what a dash Richard Storms has in a wife. Oh, goodness, here she comes!"

Quick as lightning the girl flung off the sacque; tossed the hat down upon it, and ran to the seat she had left. When Ruth came in, she was sitting there, casting vague looks around her, as if she had been quietly resting all the time.

"Take these and this," said Ruth, giving her unwelcome visitor a great bouquet of flowers, and a little basket brimming over with strawberries; "and please take our thanks to your mistress."

"But, about the old man up-stairs. How is he getting on? She will be sure to ask."

"Better."

"He is mending, then?"

"Yes, slowly."

Judith arose, but seemed reluctant to go.

"You look pale yet."

"No, no; I may have done, but not now," answered Ruth, blushing as she thought why her strength and color had come back so suddenly. "I am not as anxious as I was."

"But the nursing, and the work, too, must come hard," persisted the girl.

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"Not now; I scarcely feel it now."

"But if you should, remember, I'm both ready and willing to give a helping hand."

"Thank you."

"And the mistress will be glad to spare me now and then, when she knows that it is for this place I'm wanted. So there would be no fear of asking."

"Your mistress is very good."

"Good as gold; especially where you are the person that wants help. 'Judith,' says she, calling me into the bar, 'take these things over to Jessup's and mind you ask particular about the old man. He should 'a' been about by this time; perhaps it's nursing he wants most, so, if you can be of use, don't mind coming back in a hurry, but give the lass a helping hand. Poor thing, she's been brought up o'er dainty, and this sickness in the house is sure to pull her down.' That's what the mistress said, and I'm ready to abide by it, and help you at any time."

Ruth was touched by this persistent kindness, that was so earnest and seemed so real, and her rejection of it was full of gratitude.

"All the worst trouble is over now," she said, and a gleam of moisture came into her eyes. "Say this to your mistress. As for yourself, a thousand thanks; but I need no help now, though I shall never forget how kindly you offered it."

"Oh, as for the kindness, that's nothing," answered the girl, with a slight toss of the head, on which she was tying her bonnet, for she was far too bold for adroit hypocrisy. "One always stands ready to help in a case of sickness; but never mind, you will be sure to want me yet; when you come to that, you'll find me ready; and you are sure to come to it."

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"I hope not. Indeed, I am sure of it. Father is doing so well."

"Would you mind my going up to see for myself?" said Judith, sharply, as if the wish were flung

off her mind with an effort. "The mistress will not be content with less, I warrant."

"If you wish. Only he must not be disturbed," answered Ruth, after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh, I'll flit up the stairs like a bird, and hold my breath when I get there," said Judith, eagerly.

She did follow Ruth with a light tread, and moved softly across the sick man's chamber when she reached it. Jessup turned on his pillow as she approached, and held out his hand, with a smile. The sight of a familiar face was pleasant to him.

"The mistress sent me to ask after you," said Judith, quite subdued by the stillness and the pallor of the sick man's face, "and I just stepped up to see for myself. She's so anxious to make sure that you are mending."

"Tell her I am better. A'most well," said Jessup, grateful for this attention from his old neighbor.

"That's something worth while," answered the girl, speaking with an effort. "The mistress 'll be glad to hear it, and so will be many a one who comes to the house. As for me, if I can do anything to help the young lady, she has only to say so, and I'll come, night or day, for she doesn't look over strong."

Unconsciously to herself, the girl had been so impressed with the gentle bearing of Ruth Jessup, that she spoke of her as superior to her class, even against her own will. Jessup noticed this, and turned a fond look on Ruth.

"She's not o'er strong," he said, "but I think Ruthy wouldn't like any one but herself to tend on her father."

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"No, no, indeed, I wouldn't," said Ruth, eagerly.

"But I might help about the work below," urged Judith, with singular persistency.

Jessup looked at his daughter questioningly.

"There is so little to do," she said, "but I am obliged all the same."

"Yes, yes. We are both obliged. Don't forget to say as much to the mistress," said Jessup.

Judith seized his hand, and shook it with a vigor that made him cry out with a spasm of pain. Then her face flushed, and a strange, unholy light shot into her eyes.

"Not so well as you think, or a grip of the hand like that wouldn't have made you wince so. You may have need of me, yet," she said, turning upon Ruth; "to my thinking, it's more than likely."

"I hope not," answered Ruth; "and I am sure that all who love my father hope so too."

"Of which I am one," was the quick reply. "You may make sure of that. No one wants to see Jessup about more than I do. Though he does come so seldom to the public, it will be a holiday when he orders the next can of beer at the 'Two Ravens.' So, hoping for the best, good-day to both of you."

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

### THE LOST LETTER.

**J**UDITH HART took her way straight for the wilderness. She passed along the margin of the black lake, made at once for the summer-house, and looked in, then turned away with an exclamation of disappointment.

"I thought he would 'a' been here, so sharp as he was for news," she muttered, tearing off a handful of rushes, and biting them with her teeth, until they rasped her lips. "There's no depending on him; but wait till we're wed. Then he'll have to walk a different road. Ha!"

The report of a gun on a rise of ground beyond the lake brought this exclamation from her, and she hastened on, muttering to herself, "It's his gun. I know the sound of it, and I thought he had forgotten."

Directly she came in sight of a figure walking through the thick undergrowth.

"Richard! Richard Storms!"

The man came toward her, moving cautiously, and holding up one hand.

"Hush! Can't you speak without screaming?" he said, hissing the words through his teeth. "It's broad daylight, remember, and by that, there's no passing you off for the other one, if a gamekeeper should cross us."

"Why not? I've just seen Ruth Jessup and myself in the glass at the same time, and we're like as two peas. Only for her finikin airs, I defy any one to say which was which."

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"But she would never have called out so lustily."

"Oh, that was because I was o'erjoyed to see you, after finding the little lake-house empty!" answered the girl, laying her hand on his shoulder.

Storms shook the hand off.

"Don't do that, if you want to pass for a lady," he said, rudely.

"A lady, now! As if I was not as good as Ruth Jessup, any day, and more of a lady, too," retorted the girl, with passionate tears in her eyes.

"Ruth Jessup isn't the girl to lay her hands on a man's shoulder without his asking," said Storms, setting down his gun, and dusting his coat, as if her touch had soiled it. "Who knows that some one may not be looking on?"

"And if it chanced, what harm, so long as we are to be man and wife so soon?" pleaded the girl, now fairly crying.

"What harm! Do you think I want every gamekeeper on the place to be jibing about the lass I mean to make a lady of, if she's only careful of herself?"

"If!" repeated the girl, dashing away her tears. "What 'ifs' are there between you and me? Before we go another step, I want to hear about that."

Storms laughed, and said, carelessly,

"Never mind. What news do you bring me?"

"None—not a word, while there are 'ifs' in the way, let me tell you that; though I have found something that you would give a hundred guineas down to get hold of, and the young master a thousand to keep back."

"You have! What is it?"

"Nothing that has an 'if' in it."

"There, there! Don't be silly. I mean no 'ifs.' Have I not said, as plain as a man can speak, what shall be between us?"

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"Well, when we are settled in the farm up yonder, I will give you something that Sir Noel would sell his whole estate to get from me."

"As if I believed that."

"But you may believe it. The more time I have for thinking, the more worth it seems."

"But what is it?"

"Only a penny's worth of paper."

"Bah!"

"With writing on it that proves who shot old Jessup!"

Storms turned fiercely upon her.

"Proves what?"

"That Walton Hurst shot old Jessup."

"A paper! Who wrote it?"

"Jessup himself."

"You have such a letter signed by Jessup?"

"I just have that!"

"Give it to me, lass! Give it to me!"

"Not yet. I'm thinking it just as well to keep the bit of paper in my own hands," was the sharp answer. "'Ifs' might come up again, you know!"

A look of shrewd cunning stole over the features Judith's suspicious eyes were searching. Storms turned from her with a contemptuous gesture.

"There, there! I'm not to be taken in with such chaff. Try something better. If you had such a paper it wouldn't be kept back from a true sweetheart one minute. You've got a man of sense to deal with."

"I haven't got it, have I? Look here!" cried Judith, drawing back, and unfolding a paper she took from her bosom. "The letters are large enough. You can read from here. Is that Jessup's name or not?"

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Storms did read enough to see how important the paper might become. He glanced from it to the firmly set and triumphant features of the girl.

"You brought it for me. You will give it to me!"

"No!" answered Judith, folding the paper. "Not till we come from the church."

With the leap of a tiger Storms sprang upon the girl, and snatched at the paper; but she, wary and agile as himself, leaped aside, and fled like a deer down the declivity, sending a ringing laugh, full of mockery, back to the baffled man.

In an instant, he was flying after her, his teeth set hard, his eyes gleaming, and every leap bringing him nearer to her, and her nearer to the lake.

## THE HOUSEKEEPER'S VISIT.

**R**UTH JESSUP was almost happy, now. From a place of care and dread her father's sick-room had become a pleasant little haven of rest to her. Perfect confidence had returned between the father and child, broken only by a consciousness of one secret. Sooner or later, he should know the secret of her marriage, and rejoice over the son it had given him. Of course, the girl thought all things must be well, now that her father had communicated with the young master; otherwise, that look of calm tranquillity would never have settled so gently on the face that seemed to have given up its pain; from the moment she had gone forth with that letter. All was right between those two, and, knowing this, the girl felt her secret only as a sweet love-burden, which, sooner or later, should make that dear father proud and happy, as she hoped to be herself. Thus, all the day long, the girl flitted about the cottage, doing her humble household work with dainty grace. One particular morning she was sitting on her father's bed, dropping strawberries into his mouth, giving a little start, when he made a playful snap at her stained fingers, which was pleasant, though the effort brought a twinge of pain to him, and a pretty affected cry, often broke into a laugh, from her.

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"There, now, you shall not have another," she said, taking the hull of a luscious berry between her thumb and finger, and holding it out of reach, tempting his thirsty mouth with its red ripeness. "Bite the hand that feeds you—oh, for shame!"

"Nothing but a false hound does that," said the sick man, far more seriously than the occasion demanded.

"A hound! oh, father, that is too bad. I meant nothing like that. See, now, here is the plumpest and ripest of all. Wait till I dip it in the sugar. It seems like rolling it in snow, don't it?"

The invalid opened his mouth and smiled, as the rich fruit melted on his feverish tongue.

"What is it, father?" questioned the girl, as a shadow chased away the smile. "What is the matter, now?"

"Nothing; really nothing, child; only I thought there was a step under the window."

Ruth listened, and the color left her face. She bent down to her father, and stole an arm around his neck. Then he felt that the arm was trembling like a reed in the wind.

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"Oh, father, you will not let him come here again? It will kill me, if you do."

"Hush, hush, lass! Remember, he has my promise."

"But not mine. Oh, father, do not be so cruel."

A step sounded in the lower passage. Ruth grew pale as she listened. The footsteps paused near the stairs, and a voice called out, "Ruthy! I say, Ruthy!"

Ruth sprang from the bed with a little cry of joy, and flinging open the door, looked over the banister.

"Is it you? Is it only you, godmother? Come up, come up!"

Mrs. Mason accepted the invitation, planting her feet so firmly on the narrow stairs that they shook under her.

"Of course, I know he is better by the look of your face," said the dame, pausing to draw a deep breath before she entered the sick man's room. "You need not trouble yourself to ask; all is going on well at 'The Rest.' The young master walks across the room now, and lies on the couch near the window, looking out as if he pined for the free air again, as who wouldn't, after such a bout of illness?"

Ruth did not speak, but her face flushed, and her eyes sparkled through the droop of their long lashes. She knew that the window her godmother spoke of looked across the flower-garden to their own cottage, and her fond heart beat all the faster for the knowledge.

"So, at last, an old friend can win a sight of you," said dame Mason, crossing over to the bed where Jessup lay, and patting the great hand which rested on the coverlet with her soft palm; "and right glad I am to find you are looking so well."

Jessup looked at Ruth, and smiled.

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"She takes such care of me, how can I help it?" he said.

"Aye, truly. It will be hard when you have to part with her, I must say that; but such is human nature. We rear them up, get to loving them like our own hearts, and away they go, building nests for themselves. Her mother did it for you, remember; and so it will be while human nature is human nature."

Jessup heaved a deep sigh, and looked at his daughter with wistful earnestness. She answered him with a glance of tender appeal, from which he turned to the dame with a little gleam of triumph.

"There is the rub, Mrs. Mason. My lass will not listen to leaving her old father, but fights against it like a bird that loves its cage, all the more fiercely now that I am down."

Mrs. Mason wheeled round, and looked at Ruth from under her heavy eyebrows, as if she doubted what the father had been saying.

"Aye, little one, we know better than that," she said. "But I don't quite like this. Cheating a sick man may be for his good; but I don't like it, I don't like it."

"Cheating," faltered Ruth, conscience-stricken. "Oh, godmother."

"Well, well, the old saying, that all things is fair in love or war, may be true; but I don't believe it. According to my idea, truth is truth, and nothing can be safer or better, in the long run. Mark



this, goddaughter, the first minute you get out of the line of truth, casts you, headforemost, into all sorts of trouble. One must wind and turn, like a fox, to get out of a deceit, if one ever does get out, which I'm not sure of."

Ruth stood before the good housekeeper, as she promulgated this homely opinion, like a detected culprit. Her color came and went, her eyelids drooped, and a weight seemed to settle, like lead, upon her shoulders. This evident distress touched the housekeeper with compassion. [281]

"There, there," she said, "I did not mean to be hard. Young folks will be young folks—ha, Jessup? You and I can remember when more sweethearting was done on the sly than we should like to own up to; and young Storms is likely to be heir to the best farm on Sir Noel's estate, though, I must say, he was never much to my liking. These sharp-faced young men never were. Mason was of full weight and tallness, or he never would have fastened a name on me."

Ruth was no longer blushing one instant and paling the next, for a vivid flush of crimson swept her whole face.

"What are you talking about, godmother?" she questioned, with a little, scornful laugh, which irritated the good dame.

"What am I talking of? Nay, nay, I have made you blush more than is kind already. Never heed my nonsense. It is natural that I should think no one good enough, and feel a little uppish that things have gone so far without one word to the old woman that loved you as if you were her own."

"What do you mean? What can you mean, godmother?" cried Ruth, with unusual courage.

"Oh, nothing. The news was over the whole neighborhood before I heard of it; but that's nothing."

"What news? Do tell me?"

"Why, that young Storms and my goddaughter would be married as soon as friend Jessup, here, is well enough to be at the wedding." [282]

"Father, father, do you hear that? Who has dared to slander me so cruelly?" cried the girl, bursting into a passion of tears.

Jessup was greatly troubled by his daughter's grief.

"Nay, nay, it has not come to that as yet," he said, "and, mayhap, never will."

"Oh, father, how good you are!"

In her passionate gratitude the girl might have shaken the wounded man too sorely, for her arms were around him, and her face was pressed close to his; but even then she was thoughtful, and, lifting her face, said, with a sort of triumph:

"You see, godmother, how impossible it is that this story can be anything but scandal?"

"Scandal? But Sir Noel believes it," answered the puzzled dame.

"No! no!"

"But he does, and Lady Rose was consulting with me this very day about the present she would give. I never saw her so interested in anything."

"She is very good," said Ruth, with bitter dryness.

"Indeed she is. A sweeter or more kindly young lady never lived. 'The Rest' would be gloomy enough without her."

"I suppose you all think so?" questioned Ruth, with feverish anxiety.

"It would be strange if we did not. I'm sure Sir Noel loves her as if she was his own child, which, please God, she will be some of these days."

"Godmother! godmother! don't make me hate you!"

"Hoity-toity! What is the meaning of this? I didn't think there was so much temper in the child. Why, she is all afire! Oh, friend Jessup! friend Jessup! this comes of rearing her all by yourself! If you had sent her to me at 'The Rest,' a little wholesome discipline would have made such rough words to her mother's friend impossible!" [283]

Ruth dashed the tears from her eyes, and held out both her hands.

"Godmother, forgive me! I am so sorry!"

Mrs. Mason turned half away from that imploring face.

"I was wrong—so wrong."

"To talk about hating me. The child she laid in my bosom almost in her dying hour."

"The wicked, cruel child! Oh, if you only knew how sorry she is! Godmother, oh, godmother, forgive me for her sake!"

Mrs. Mason wheeled round, and gathered the penitent young creature to her bosom; then turning her head, she saw that Jessup was greatly excited and had struggled up from his pillow.

"There, there! Lie down again. This is no affair of yours," she said, hastily waving her hand, which ended in a shake for the pretty offender. "Can't I have a word with my own goddaughter without bringing you up from your bed, as if something terrible was going on? Looking like a pale-faced ghost, too! No wonder the poor child gets nervous. I dare say you just worry her to death."

"No, no! godmother! He is patient as a lamb," cried Ruth. "Don't blame him for my fault."

"Fault! What fault is there? Just as if a poor child can't speak once in a while, without being blamed for it. I never knew anything so unreasonable as men are—magnifying mole-hills into mountains. There now, go and sit by the window while I bring your exasperating father to [284]

something like reason. No one shall make you cry again, if I know it."

Ruth went to the window, rather bewildered by the suddenness with which the good housekeeper had shifted the point of her resentment to the invalid on the bed. But Mrs. Mason seemed to have entirely forgotten that she had been sharply dealt with. Seating herself on the bed, which creaked complainingly under her weight, and settling her black dress with a great rustle of silk, she dropped into the most cordial relations with the invalid at once.

"Better and getting up bravely. I can see that. Sir Noel will be more than glad to hear it. As for the young master, I know the thought of you is never out of his mind. 'When shall I be well enough to walk out?' he says, each day, to the surgeon. 'There was another hurt at the same time with me, and I want to know how he is getting on.'"

"Did he say that, did he?" questioned Jessup, with tears in his eyes; for sickness had made him weak as a child, and at such times tear-drops come to the strongest eyes tenderly as dew falls. "Did he mention me in that way?"

"He did, indeed. Often and often."

"God bless the lad. How could I ever think—"

Jessup broke off, and looked keenly at the housekeeper, as if fearful of having said too much. But she had heard the blessing, without regard to the half-uttered conclusion, and echoed it heartily.

"So say I. God bless the young gentleman! For a braver or a brighter never reigned at 'The Rest,' since its first wall was laid. Well, well! what is it now?" she added, addressing Ruth, who had left the window, and was stealing an arm around her neck. [285]

"Nothing, godmother, only I love to hear you talk."

"Well, we were speaking, I think, of the young master. It was he that persuaded me to come here, and observe for myself how you were getting on."

"Did he indeed?" murmured Ruth, laying her burning cheek lovingly against the old lady's.

"Yes, indeed. The weather is over warm for much walking; but how could I say no when he would trust only me? 'Women,' he said, 'took so much more notice, being used to sick-rooms,' and he could not rest without news of your father—something more than 'he is better, or he is worse,' which could only be got from a person constantly in the sick-room."

"How anxious! I—I—How kind he is!" said Ruth.

"That he is. Had Jessup been akin to him, instead of a faithful old servant, he couldn't have shown more feeling."

Ruth sighed, and her sweet face brightened. The housekeeper went on.

"We were by ourselves when he said this, and spoke of the old times when I could refuse him nothing, in a way that went to my heart, for it was the truth. So I just kissed his hand—once it would have been his face—and promised to come and have a chat with you, and see for myself how it was with Jessup."

"You will say how much better he is."

"Yes, yes! He seems to be getting on famously. No reason for anxiety, as I shall tell him. Now, Ruth, as your father seems quiet, let us go down into the garden. I was to bring some fruit from the strawberry-beds, which he craves, thinking it better than ours." [286]

"Go with her, and pick the finest," said Jessup. "I feel like sleeping."

"Yes, father, if you can spare me."

The housekeeper moved toward the door, having shaken hands with Jessup, cautioned him against taking cold, and recommending a free use of port wine and other strengthening drinks, which, she assured him, would set him up sooner than all the medicines in the world.

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## CHAPTER XLV.

### EXCELLENT ADVICE.

**W**HEN once in the garden, Mrs. Mason grew very serious, and stood some time in silence watching Ruth, who, bending low, was sweeping the green leaves from a host of plump berries, clustering red ripe in the sunshine. At last she spoke, with an effort, and her voice was abrupt if not severe.

"Ruth," she said, "I have a thing to say which troubles me."

Ruth looked up wistfully.

"Why is it that you try to keep secrets from your sick father?"

"Secrets!" faltered the girl.

"If you mean to wed this young man, why not say so at any rate to your own father? It is the best way out of this difficulty."

"Difficulty!"

"There, there! I can see no use in all this blushing, as red as the strawberries one minute, and denying it the next. Ruth, Ruth! deception and craft should not belong to your mother's child. I don't pretend to like this young man over much, but, under the circumstances, I have nothing to say. If your father is against it, a little persuasion from Sir Noel will set all that right."

"What—what do you mean, grandmother?" questioned Ruth, hoarse with dread.

"I mean to stop people's mouths by an honest marriage with a man, who, after all, is a good match enough. If you have ever been uplifted to thoughts of a better, it has come from too much notice from gentle people at 'The Rest,' and from too much reading of poetry books. But for that, there would never have been these meetings in the park, and moonlight flittings about the lake, to scandalize people. Think better of it, Ruth, or worse mischief than the scandal that is in everybody's mouth may come out of it. Nothing but an honest marriage can put an end to it."

"Scandal!" whispered the girl, rising slowly, and turning her white face on the housekeeper. "What scandal?"

"Such as any girl may expect, Ruthy, who meets young men in the park, and, worst of all, by the lake."

"The lake! The park!" repeated the poor girl, aghast with apprehension; for every walk or chance meeting she had shared with young Hurst rushed back upon her, with accusing vividness. "Who has said—who has dared?"

Here the frightened young creature burst into a passion of tears. The walks, the chance meetings, each a romance and an adventure, to dream of and hoard up in her thoughts, like a poem got by heart. Who could have torn them from their privacy, and bruited them abroad to her discredit? In what way would she deny or explain them? More and more pale her face grew, and her slender figure drooped with humiliation.

"There, there, little one, do not look so miserable. I did not mean to hurt your feelings. Of course, I remember you have no mother to say what is right or wrong. Only this, never meet the young man again. It breeds scandal."

Ruth looked up in amazement.

"I know, I know your father is ill, but that should keep you in-doors."

"Godmother, I do not understand. How is it possible?"

"It is not possible for you to meet him in out-of-the-way places without casting your good name in the teeth of every gossip in the village. Nay, I have my doubts if the young man has not helped it on, else, how did that brazen-faced maid at the inn know about it, and taunt him with it before a half-score of drinkers?"

The eyes of Ruth Jessup grew large with wonder.

"Among drinkers! He at the public inn! Godmother, of whom are you speaking?"

"Who should I speak of, but the young man himself, Richard Storms?"

As a cloud sometimes sweeps suddenly from the blue sky, the shame and the fear left that young girl's face.

"Oh, godmother, were you only speaking of him?"

"Who else should I be speaking of, Ruth? As if his name and yours were not in every one's mouth, from the highest to the lowest."

A faint, hysterical laugh broke through the sobs that had almost choked the girl, and alarmed the good woman.

"There, there," she said, "only be careful for the time to come; an honest marriage will set everything right. I only wish the young man were of a better sort, and went less to the public; but he will mend, I dare say. That is right, you have had a good cry, and feel better."

Ruth had wiped the tears from her face, and, after drawing a deep breath, was stooping down to the strawberry-bed again, and dashing the thick leaves aside with her hands, was gathering the fruit in eager haste. So great was her sense of relief, that she could feel neither resentment nor annoyance regarding the scandal that had so troubled the good housekeeper. Though she still trembled with the shock which had passed, this lesser annoyance was nothing to her. In and out, through the clustering leaves, her little hand flew, until the great china-bowl, into which the gathered fruit was dropped, brimmed over with its mellow redness. Meantime the housekeeper pattered on, bestowing a world of advice and matronly cautions of which Ruth never heard a syllable until the name of her lover-husband was mentioned. Then her hand moved cautiously, that it might not rustle the leaves as she listened.

"He took Mr. Webb up, scornfully, as you did me, when he mentioned the gossip, and would not hear of it, calling young Storms a hind and a braggart, of whom the neighborhood should be rid, if he were master. So Webb said nothing more, though his news had come from some of the gamekeepers who had seen you once and again in company with the young man."

The blood began to burn hotly in Ruth's cheeks.

"I wonder only that you should have believed such things of me, godmother, and almost scorn myself for caring to contradict them," she said, placing the bowl of strawberries in a shady place, while she began to cut flowers for a bouquet.

By this time, Mrs. Mason had unburdened her mind of so many wise sayings, and such hoards of good advice, that her goddaughter's indiscretions seemed to be quite carried away. She was weary of standing, too, and seating herself in a rustic garden-chair, over which an old cherry-tree

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loomed, waited complacently, while Ruth flitted to and fro among the rose-bushes, singing softly as a dove coos, while she plundered the flower-beds, and grouped buds and leaves into a sweet love-language, which her own heart supplied, and which he had studied with her, when their passion was like a poem, and flowers were its natural expression.

"He will read these," she thought, clustering some forget-me-nots around a white rose-bud, which became the heart of her sweet epistle. "Let him only know that they come from me, and every bud will tell him how my very soul craves to see him. Ah, me, it seems so long—so long, since that day."

As she twined each flower in its place, a light kiss, of which she was half-ashamed, was breathed into it as foolishly fond women will let their hearts go out, and still be wise, and good. Indeed, the fact of doing it, proves such women far superior to the common herds, who have no rare fancies, and scorn them, because of profound ignorance, that such gentle follies can spring out of the deepest feeling.

When all was ready, and that bouquet, redolent of kisses, innocent as the perfume with which they were blended, was laid, a glowing web of colors, on the strawberries, Mrs. Mason prepared to depart. With the china bowl held between her rotund waist and the curve of her arm, she entered into the shaded path, promising Ruth to deliver both fruit and flowers to the young master with her own hands, and tell him how well things were going on at the cottage.

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"You will do everything that is kind, godmother, that I know well enough; only never mention that dreadful man's name to me, let people think what they will. I can bear anything but that."

"First promise me never to see him again till he comes like an honest man and asks you of your father."

"That I promise; nor then, if I can help it. Oh, godmother, how can you think it of me?"

The good lady shook her head, kissed the sweet mouth uplifted to hers, and went away muttering, "I suppose all girls are alike, and think it no harm to keep back their love-secrets. I haven't forgot how it was with me and Mason. How many times I met him on the sly, and hot tongues wouldn't have forced me to own it. So, thinking of that, I needn't be overhard on our Ruthy, who has no mother to set her right, poor thing."

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

### THE SERPENT IN HER PATH.

**W**HEN Ruth left her father, he was overtaxed by the excitement of seeing his old friend, the housekeeper, and more than usually disturbed by the drift of her conversation. Kind of heart, and generous in his nature, he could not witness the repugnance that his daughter exhibited to the marriage he had arranged for her without tender relenting. Still, no nobleman of the realm was ever more tenacious of his honor, or shrunk more sensitively from a broken promise. Languid and weary, he was thinking over these matters, when some one, stirring in the hall below, disturbed him.

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"Ruth, Ruth, is it you?" he called, in a voice tremulous with weakness.

Some one opened and shut the parlor door, then steps sounded from the passage and along the stairs. A man's step, light and quick, as if the person coming feared interruption.

"Ruth, Ruth," repeated the gardener.

"It is only I, Jessup," answered Richard Storms, stealing into the room. "There was no one below. I heard voices up here, and took the liberty of an old friend."

"You are welcome," answered the sick man, reaching out his hand, which had lost its ruddy brown since his confinement. "I think Ruth has gone out with Mrs. Mason."

"So much the better that she can leave you, I suppose," answered Storms, still holding the sick man's hand, with a finger on the pulse, while a slow cloud stole over his face. "The fever all gone? Why, man, we shall have you about in another week."

Jessup shook his head, and laid the hand he released from the young man's grasp on his breast.

"I fear not. There is a weakness here," he said.

"And pain?" questioned Storms, eagerly.

"Yes, great pain, at times; but you must not say as much to Ruth: it would fret her."

A glitter, like that of disturbed water, flashed into the young man's eyes.

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"Then, as to the fever," continued the sick man, "it comes, on and off, with a chill, now and then; not much to complain of, so I say nothing about it, because of the lass."

"Oh, that is nothing, I dare say; but the people in the village hear that you are quite strong again."

Jessup smiled, a little sadly.

"So, being more than anxious, I dropped in to have a little chat with you. It's hard waiting so long, when a man is o'er fond of a lass, as I am of your daughter. One never gets a look of her in the regular way."

"Ruth has been with me so much," said Jessup, with a feeble effort at apology. "It has been hard on her, poor child."

"Yes, but you are so much better now, and father is getting vexed. He thinks Sir Noel is putting off the new lease because nothing is settled about the marriage. Things are going crosswise with us, I can tell you. It will never do for us to put matters off in this way."

Jessup was greatly disturbed. He moved restlessly, clasping and unclasping his hand on the coverlet with nervous irritation. At last he spoke more resolutely than he had yet done.

"Storms, your father and I have been neighbors and friends ever since we were boys together, and we had set our minds on being closer still; but Ruth's heart goes against it, and I cannot force her."

Storms drew close to the bed and bent his frowning face over the sick man.

"I have been expecting this. Like father like child. But a man's pledged word isn't to be broken through with by a girl's whim; or, if so, I am not the one to put up with it."

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"You were always a hard one," answered Jessup, and a little strength flamed up into his gray eyes. "From a child you were that, and I have, more than once, had misgivings; but I did not think you would be bent on marrying with a lass against her will."

"Yes, I would, and like it all the better, when her will was broken."

Jessup shrunk down in his bed. There was something savage in that stern young face that terrified him. Storms saw the feeble movement, and went on:

"Never fear, man, I will find a way to bend her will, and make her love me afterward."

"I would rather have her placed by my side in the same coffin," answered the old man.

"You take back your word?" repeated Storms, savagely.

"Yes, I take back my word."

Storms turned on his heel, and without a syllable of farewell left the house. He paused a moment under the porch, and a glint of Ruth's garments caught his eye, as she was coming down the shaded wood-path, after parting with Mrs. Mason.

Ruth saw him coming, and stopped, looking around for some chance of escape, like a bird, threatened in its cage.

There was no way of escape, however. On one hand lay a deep ravine, with a brooklet at the bottom, and clothed with ferns up the sides; on the other, wild thickets, such as made that portion of a park called the wilderness picturesque.

"So, sweetheart, you were waiting for me. I thought it would come to that," said Storms.

Ruth moved on one side without answering. Storms could see that a shudder passed through her as he came near, and the evil light that had almost died out of his eyes when they fell upon her came back with fresh venom.

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"So you think to escape, ha! You shy on one side, as if a wild beast blocked the path. Be careful that you don't make one of me."

"Let me pass. I wish nothing but that," faltered the girl, moving as far from her tormentor as the path would permit.

"Not till we have come to an understanding. Look you, Ruth Jessup, if you think to pull me on and off like an old glove, I am not the man for your money."

"I—I have no such thought. I have no wish to see you at all."

"Indeed!" sneered the young man.

"After what has passed it is better that we should be strangers!"

"Nay, sweetheart. I think it is better that we should be man and wife."

A disgustful shudder shook the girl where she stood.

Storms saw it, and a cold smile crept over his face.

"That is what I have been telling your father."

"My father! Surely, surely you have not been torturing him!"

"Torturing him! No. But we have come to an understanding at last."

Ruth grew pallid to the lips.

"An understanding! How?"

The terror that shook her voice was triumph to him. At least he had the power to torment her, and would use it to the utmost.

"You ask? I thought you might know what manner of man old Jessup is, without asking."

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"I know that he is just but never cruel."

"Cruel! Oh, far from it. Go ask him, if you doubt."

"Let me pass, and I will," answered the girl, desperately. "At any rate, he would not sanction your rudeness in keeping me here."

"Rudeness! Of course you have never been here before. Oh, no! I haven't seen you, over and over again, watching the path. Only it wasn't rudeness when he came. There was no trembling then—nothing but blushes."

"Let me pass, I say," cried the girl, tortured into courage, "if you would not force me to tell the whole world what I know of you. Let me pass, and never dare to look upon me again."

Storms started, and a grayish pallor spread over his face. What did she know? What did she mean?

Ruth shrank from the cowardly glitter of his eyes, and wondered at the sudden pallor. What had she said to daunt him so? Directly, the coward recovered himself.

"And what would you tell?" he said, with forced audacity. "Is it a terrible sin for a man to stop the lass he is to wed, for a word wherever he chances to find her? What worse can you say of me than that?"

Ruth saw the dastardly anxiety in his face; but did not comprehend it. He seemed almost afraid of her.

"Is it nothing that you force your company upon me, when it has become hateful to me? Is it nothing that you harass a sick man with complaints, and thrust him back with unwelcome visits, when he might otherwise get well? Is it manly to come here at all, when I have told you, again and again, that your presence is the most repulsive torment on earth to me?"

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The man absolutely laughed again. He was once more at ease. Her words had meant nothing more than the old complaint. Still he stood in the girl's path.

"Why will you torment me so?" she pleaded, with sudden tears. "What have I ever done that you should haunt me in my trouble?"

"I only give you trouble for hate, harsh acts for bitter words, insult for insult. You can stop them all with a word."

"A word I will never speak!" answered the girl, firmly. "Hear me once for all, Richard Storms. There was a time when you were dear to me as a playfellow, and might have been my life-long friend—"

"Friend!" repeated Storms, with a disdainful fling of the hand. "You might say that much of a hound."

"But now," continued Ruth, desperately, "there is not a thing which creeps the earth that I loath as I do the sight of you."

This was a rash speech, and the most bitter that had ever burned on those young lips. She felt that on the moment, for the man's face turned gray, as if invisible ashes had swept over it. For a while he stood motionless, then his lips parted, and he said, in a deep, hoarse voice, that made her shrink in every nerve, "There is one other sight that shall be yet more loathsome to you!"

Ruth attempted to speak, but her lips clove together. He saw a paleness like his own creeping over her face, and added, with ferocious cruelty, "Shall I tell you what it is? That of your lover—of the man who has stolen you from me—in a criminal's box, with half the county looking on."

If the fiend had intended to say more, he was prevented, for the poor girl sank to the earth, turning a wild look on his face, like a deer that he had shot.

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There might have been some relenting in the man's heart, hard as it was, for he partly stooped, as if to lift his victim from the earth; but she shrunk from his touch, and fell into utter insensibility.

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## CHAPTER XLVII.

### NIGHT ON THE BALCONY.

**I** MUST see him. I will see him. No one will tell me the truth but himself. I must know it or die!"

Ruth stood alone under the shadow of the trees, white as a ghost, and rendered desperate by words that had smitten her into insensibility. How long she had lain in that forest path the girl scarcely knew. When she came to herself, it was with a shudder of dread, lest that evil face should be looking down upon her; but all was silent. The birds were singing close by her, and there was a soft rustle of leaves, nothing more. She lifted her head, and with her hands searched for marks of the blow that seemed to have levelled her to the earth. A blow! She remembered now it was a word that she had sunk under—a coarse, cruel word, that brought a horrid picture with it, from which every nerve in her body recoiled.

She was very feeble, now, and could scarcely walk. It seemed as if she never would get to the house; the distance appeared interminable. She could not keep in the narrow paths that coiled along the flower-beds, but wavered in her steps from weakness, as her enemy had done from wrath, until her feet were tangled in the creeping flowers and strawberry-vines.

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Her father was lying with his eyes closed when she went in, and a smile was upon his mouth. Even in his feeble state, he had found strength to free his child from a hateful alliance, and the thought made him happy. Ruth stooped down, and kissed him with her cold lips. The touch startled him. He opened his eyes, and saw how wan and tremulous she was.

"Do not fret!" he said, tenderly. "Why should you, darling? I have sent him away. I have told him that the child God gave to me shall never be his!"

At another time this news would have thrilled the girl with unutterable joy; but she scarcely felt it now. The fear that a marriage with Storms might be urged upon her seemed a small trouble, while the awful possibility he had fastened on her fears was so vivid and so strong.

"I thought it would please you," said the sick man, disappointed. "I did."

"And so it does, father; but we will not talk of it now. His coming has tired you, and I—I, too, am wanting a little rest. If you do not care, I will go away, while you sleep, and stay in my own room."

"There is wine on the table. Drink a little. I suppose it may be shadows from the ivy, but you look pale, Ruth."

"Yes, it is the shadows, but I will drink some wine."

She poured some wine into a glass, and drank it thirstily; but it brought no color into her cheeks, and none came there until she stood in the porch, after night-fall, and repeated to herself, "I must see him! I will see him! I must know the truth, or die!"

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This resolve had made her stronger; perhaps the wine had helped, for she was not used to it, and so the effect was all the more powerful. At any rate, she drew the hood over her face, wrapped a dark mantle about her, and went out across the garden, into the path of the wilderness, and on to the home of which she might some day, God willing, become the mistress. When she thought of this, the shadow of that other picture, which had taken away so much of her life in the path she had trod only a few hours before, came with it, and that which had been to her a proud hope was blotted out.

"I will believe it from no lips but his," she thought, looking out from the shadows at the vast gray building that held her heart in its chambers. "Oh, that I knew what was in my father's letter!"

She left the shelter of the park, and walked cautiously across the lawn, concealing her progress as best she could among flowering thickets, or a great tree that spread its branches here and there in forest grandeur.

She entered the flower-thickets under that window, the only one she cared for in all that vast building. A faint light came through it, softened by falls of lace, tinted red by the glow of silken curtains, and broken into gleams by the ivy leaves outside. Her heart gave a wild leap as she saw that the shutters were unclosed; then a great fear seized upon her; some person might be within the chamber, or lingering in the grounds. Cautiously, and holding her breath, she crept toward the masses of ivy that wound its thick foliage up to the balcony. If it stirred in the wind she shrunk back terrified. Where it cast deep shadows downward, she fancied that some man was crouching.

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Still the girl crept forward, her anxiety half lost in womanly dread of being misunderstood, even by the beloved being she sought. But, for the great agony of doubt at her heart, she would have turned even then, so strong was the delicacy of her pride.

She was under the balcony now, behind the ivy, which covered her like a mantle. Up the narrow steps she crept, and crouching by the window, looked in. No one was moving. A night-lamp shed its soft moonlight on a marble console, on which some wine and fruit cast shadows. In the middle of the room stood the couch she had seen but once, shaded with rich silk and clouds of lace, snow-white and filmy, seeming to cool the air, it was so frost-like. These curtains were flung back at the pillows, and there she saw her husband in a sound sleep. She held her breath, she laid her face close to the window. Then, with impotent fingers, tried the sash. It was fastened on the inside.

What could she do? How arouse the sleeper? Impatiently she beat her hand on the glass. Still more recklessly she called her husband's name.

"Walton! Walton!"

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### WATCHING HER RIVAL.

**O**N the same night that Ruth had taken a desperate resolve to see her husband, Richard Storms was waiting in the lake house for the coming of Judith Hart, who had promised to meet him there. The presence of this girl in the neighborhood had at first been a great annoyance to him; but now he both feared and hated her, so, coward-like, cajoled and deceived her by forced professions of love, while, with the same false tongue, he could not refrain from such hints of another as drove the poor creature half mad with jealous rage.

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Though her presence was hateful to him, he dared not offend her beyond a certain point, and had no power to drive her back into her former isolated life; or in revenge she might, as she had often threatened, find out Ruth Jessup, and give both her and the father a good reason for forbidding him the house forever. He knew well enough, that in her reckless daring, she would not hesitate

to accuse herself of any offence so long as the odium reached him also.

Thus shackled in his desire to free himself from the girl altogether, it mattered not to him how roughly, Storms waited for her at the lake house that night, lying at full length on the bench which ran along one end of the crazy old building.

Judith came in, at length, full of turbulent excitement. She had been walking rapidly, and swept through the long grass like a rush of wind.

"Ah, you are here!" she said, seating herself on one end of the bench as Storms swung his feet to the floor; "I thought you would be waiting, but it isn't you that oftenest gets here first, but I have seen some one you'll like to hear about."

"Seen some one? Of course, one of the gamekeepers."

"No. I have seen that girl, Ruth Jessup."

"Ruth Jessup in the park at this time of night? You cannot make me believe that."

"In the park and at 'Norston's Rest,' down upon her knees by a window, with ivy all around it, looking in upon the sick heir like a hungry cat watching a canary." [303]

"You saw this, Judith—saw it with your own eyes?" cried Storms, sitting upright on the bench.

"Saw it! I should think so. She was so busy trying to open the window, that I went close under the balcony and could see her face plain enough by the light that came through the glass."

"Trying to open the window—did you say that?"

"Yes, again and again. She grew desperate at last, and shook it, calling out, 'Walton! Walton!'"

"She called that name?"

"Yes, more than once. It didn't wake the young man inside though, but some one else must have heard, for the door opened and a man came into the chamber."

"What did she do then?"

"Do! Why she shrunk back and came down some stone steps that are hid away in the ivy, and was half across the flower garden before I dared to move."

"But you overtook her?"

"Of course I did; though my feet got tangled in with the ivy, and I almost fell down; but, once safe on the ground, I tracked her swift enough, for she seemed to scorn moving beyond a walk."

"But she did not see you?"

"No, I can move quietly enough when it suits me. So she knew nothing of me, though I longed to give her a sharp bit of my tongue."

"I'll be bound you did," said Storms, with a disagreeable laugh.

The girl took this as a compliment, and gave the hand, which was dropped listlessly into hers, a grateful pressure. [304]

"It was awful ungrateful of the young gentleman, though, to be so sound asleep,' I was longing to say. If it had been my Richard, now."

"Did you think to say that?" cried Storms, starting up in sudden wrath. "Would you have dared to say that to her?"

Judith started to her feet also. He had jerked his hand from hers, and stood frowning on her in the moonlight, while defiance kindled in her eyes.

"That's just what I would 'a' been glad to say; not that she would have cared a brass farthing, for my opinion is, that girl hates your very name, for all your talk that she's dying for you. But such words from her would have been red-hot coals to me."

"Do you think she would stoop to bandy words with such as you?" said Storms, softening his wrath into a malicious enjoyment of her jealous passion.

"Such as me, indeed! What is the difference, I should like to know? Only this. I come here because you ask me and urge me to it, while she hasn't the courage, but sits worshipping her sweetheart like a rabbit peeping into a garden it has not the spirit to enter."

"Worshipping! As if she cared for the man!" said Storms, with supreme disdain. "There is nothing in it. She only wants to make me jealous, thinking to bring me back again in that way."

"It seems to me as if you were jealous."

"Jealous!" repeated the young man, growing cautious on reflection. "As if I cared enough for Ruth Jessup for that!"

"I am not so sure," answered Judith, as if talking to herself; "but when I am, it will be a dark day for one of us." [305]

Storms laughed.

"Always threatening some terrible thing," he said, "as if there were any need of that; but how came you, my own sweetheart, Judith Hart, to be wandering about 'The Rest?'"

"I saw her as I was coming this way. She was standing in the cottage porch, giving frightened looks around. The moon was not up yet, though it is climbing into the sky now, but a light streamed through the passage, and I saw her plain enough. Then she stole out, as if in search of some one. I thought she was going into the wilderness."

"Ah, ha! Who was jealous then?"

"Who denies it? That minute I could have killed her. She turned toward 'The Rest.' I followed, thinking—"



"Thinking that I might come that way."

"Well, yes. I did think just that; and followed her softly as one of your own hounds would have crept. When I saw where she was going, the fire all went out of my heart. I could have cried for joy that—that it was no worse."

"Still you hated her!"

"Because she dared to love where I did."

"Do you indeed love me so, Judith?"

"Do I love myself, so common and worthless, compared to you? Do I love the air I breathe? Do I love sleep, after a hard day's work? Oh, oh, Richard, why ask such silly questions?"

"Why? Oh, because one is never certain. Girls are so fickle now-a-days."

"As if any girl who ever loved you could be fickle."

Storms looked into the girl's face as she nestled close to him, and a strange, fond glow came into his eyes. He was thinking how much she looked like Ruth Jessup, with that warm love-light in her face—how beautiful she really was in the lustre of that rising moon. Tenderness with him at the moment was not all a pretence. But Storms was a man to bring the worst as well as the best passions of a heart down to his own interests, and never, for a moment, since he had seen old Jessup's letter in Judith's hand, had he ceased to devise some means of gaining possession of it.

"Words are so easily spoken," he said; "but I like deeds. I want the girl I love to trust me."

"And don't I trust you? What other girl would be here at this time of the night, risking her character, when she has nothing else in the world, just because you want things to be kept secret, while I can't for the life of me see the reason of it?"

"That is what I complain of. True love asks no questions."

"How can you say that when you have done nothing but ask questions ever since I came here? All about her too," retorted the quick-witted girl.

"That is because I am interested in everything you do," was the prompt answer. "How could I watch here half an hour, and at last see you rush in so wildly, half out of breath and panting, to tell all that you had seen, without feeling some curiosity?"

"Yes, indeed, I can understand that."

"Then there is another thing."

"Well," said Judith, more quietly; for she guessed what was coming. "What is it?"

"That paper. It is of no use to you, and might help me a good deal."

"How?"

The girl spoke seriously, and he could tell by her voice that her lips closed with a firm pressure when she ceased.

"It might help me about the lease."

Judith seemed to reflect a moment, then she looked up quietly, and said:

"When we are married, Richard."

"Why, child, it is only a scrap of paper that no one but Sir Noel will ever care for."

"I know that, and sometimes wonder you are so sharp after it. My arm is all sorts of colors yet where you grasped it after that race down the banks of the lake. If the game-keeper had not come in sight, I don't know what might have chanced. Oh, Richard, your face was awful that day. It frightened me!"

"Too much, I fear, and that makes you so obstinate. I dare say that you never keep the bit of paper about you?" questioned Storms, with a dull, sinister look, which was so perceptible in the moonlight that the girl shrunk from him unconsciously.

"No," she answered. "I never keep it about me, and never shall till we are wed."

"And then?"

"I will give it to you, as you crave it so much, and in its stead take the marriage lines. If it were worth a thousand pounds, I would rather have the lines."

"A thousand pounds! Why, lass, what are you thinking of? Who ever heard of giving money for a scrap of writing like that?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Only you wanted it so much, and if you were to play me false, as people say you have done with many a sweetheart before me, it might be put to a bad use."

"But they slander me. I never yet betrayed a sweetheart," said Storms, eagerly.

"Then it is true that Ruth Jessup was the first to give you up. No, no, do not say it. No woman on earth could do that. I would rather think you false to her than not. The other I never could believe—never."

"Well, believe what you like; but do not come here again without that bit of paper. I did not fairly read it."

The suppressed eagerness in his voice aroused all the innate craft in the girl's nature. He had outdone his part, and thus enhanced the advantage that she held over him to a degree that made her determined to keep the paper. In her soul she had no trust in the man; but was willing to win him by any means that promised to be most effectual. Still she was capable of meeting craft with deception, and did it now.

"Well, if I think of it."

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Storms read the insincerity of her evasion, and seemed to cast the subject from his mind. But he felt the thralldom of this girl's power with a keenness that might have terrified her, had she comprehended it. Besides, the news she had brought to him that evening was of a kind to make him hate the bearer and intensify his thirst for vengeance on young Hurst.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

### BROODING THOUGHTS.

**W**HAT are you thinking of, Richard, with your eyes wandering out on the water and your mouth so set?" asked the girl, after some moments of silence that began to trouble her.

Storms started as if a shot had passed him.

"Thinking of—Why nothing that should trouble you."

"But you don't care to talk, and me sitting by!"

"What is the difference, so long as you were in my mind? I was thinking that there might as well be an end of this. We could have the matter over, and no noise about it, you know."

Judith's heart made a great leap.

"Were you thinking of that, Richard? Oh, tell me!"

She was sitting on the floor, leaning her elbow on the bench, where Storms had flung himself with an utter disregard to her comfort. Now she leaned forward till her head rested on his bosom, and she clasped him fondly with her firm, white arms.

"Were you thinking of that now, really, darling?"

Storms did not actually push her away; but he turned over with his face to the wall, muttering:

"Don't bother. What else should it be?"

"Then I must be getting ready, you know. The mistress must have warning," said the girl, too happy for resentment.

"The mistress! There it is. You cannot expect me to take a wife from the bar-room. No, no! We must manage it in some other way."

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Judith drew a deep breath.

"I will do anything you tell me—anything at all," she said. "Only let me make sure that you are as happy as I am."

"Happy! Of course I'm happy. Why not?" answered the young man. "Now, you'd better be going home. It is getting late."

Judith arose, drew her scarlet sacque closer around her, pulled the jaunty little hat over her eyes, and stood in the moonlight waiting for her lover. He arose heavily, and dropping both clasped hands between his knees, sat in the shadow, regarding her with sullen interest. She could not see his face, but there was a glitter of his eyes that pierced the shadows with sinister brightness. The picture of the girl was so vivid, framed in the old doorway, with that deep background of water over which the moonlight seemed to leap, leaving that in darkness, and herself flooded in light, so fearfully vivid, that the man whom she hoped to marry could never afterward sweep it from his brain.

"Come," she said, "I'm ready."

"And so am I," he answered, starting up and dashing his hands apart, as if a serpent had entangled them against his will. "What are you waiting for?"

"What have I been long and long waiting for?" said the girl; "but it has come at last. Oh, Richard, say that it has come at last."

"Yes, it has come at last," broke forth the man, almost savagely. "You would have it so. Remember, you would—"

"Why, how cross you are. Was it I that first made love?"

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"You? Yes. It always is the woman."

"Oh, Richard, dear—how you love to torment me!"

The girl took his arm, as she said this, and held to it caressingly, with both hands, while her eyes, half-beaming, half-tearful, sought in his face some contradiction of his savage mood.

"Is the torment all on one side?" he muttered, enduring her caressing touch with surly impatience.

"There, Dick, only say for once that you are happy."

"Oh, wonderfully happy. There, now, let us walk faster."

They did walk on; now in the moonlight, now in deep shadow, she leaning upon him with fond dependence, which he appeared to recognize, though few words were spoken between them.

Once, as they passed a sheltered copse half-way between the lake and Jessup's cottage, both saw the figure of a man retreating from the path, and knew that he was regarding them from under covert. Then Storms did meet the girl's bright glance, and they both laughed with subdued merriment.

"He is following us. I hear his step in the undergrowth," whispered Judith, and Storms answered back:

"Give him plenty of time."

When they reached Jessup's cottage, the little building was quite dark, except the faint gleam of a night-lamp in the sick man's room. At the gate they both paused. Judith turned with her face to the moonlight, and offered her lips for the kiss Storms bent lovingly to give her. Then they stood together, hand-in-hand, as if reluctant to part for a minute, and he went away, looking back now and then, as if anxious for her safety, while she stood by the gate watching him.

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When the young man was quite gone, Judith opened the gate, without even a click of the latch, and stole like a thief toward the porch, which was so laden with ivy and jasmines that no one could see her when once in its shelter. Still she shrunk back, and dragged the foliage over her, when the gamekeeper came out from his concealment, and walked back and forth before the cottage. At last his steps receded, and, peering through the ivy, Judith saw him move away toward the lake. Then she stole out of the porch, crept with bent form to the gate, and darted in a contrary direction with the speed of a lapwing. Somewhat later, the girl stole through the back yard of the inn, tried her key in the kitchen door, and crept up to her room in the garret, where she carefully put away her outer garments, and went to bed so passionately happy that she lay awake all night with both hands folded over her bosom, and the name of Richard Storms trembling now and then up from her heart.

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## CHAPTER I.

### YOUNG HURST AND LADY ROSE.

**I**T was a bright day at "Norston's Rest," when the young heir came from his sick-chamber, for the first time, and, leaning on Webb, entered the pretty little parlor in which Lady Rose had made his bouquet the evening he was hurt. She sat waiting for him now, demurely busy with some trifle of richly-tinted embroidery, which, having a dainty taste, she had selected, I dare say, because it gave a touch of rich color to her simple white dress, looped here and there into soft clouds by a broad blue sash, which might have lacked effect but for this artistic device. Perhaps the invalid understood this, for he smiled when the fair patrician just lifted her eyes, as if his coming had been quite unimportant to her, and settled down into one of the loveliest pictures imaginable, working away at her tinted silks with fingers that quivered among them, and eyes that no whiteness of lid or thickness of lash could keep from beaming out their happiness.

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There had been a time when this fair girl would have sprung from her seat and met him at the threshold; but now, she bent lower over her work, fearing that he might see how warmly-red her cheek was getting, and wonder at it. Indeed he well might wonder, for what word of love had he ever spoken that should have set her heart to beating so, when she first heard his uncertain step on the stairs?

All at once the young lady remembered that she was acting strangely. Starting up, she gave him her place among the blue cushions of her own favorite couch; then sat down on a low ottoman, and fell to work again.

"How natural everything looks!" said the young man, gazing languidly around. "I could be sworn, Rose, that you were working on that same bit of embroidery the day I was hurt."

Lady Rose blushed vividly. She had snatched the embroidery from her work-table, as she heard him coming, and was in fact working on the same leaf in which her needle had been left that day.

"We have all been so anxious," she said, gently.

"And all about me—troublesome fellow that I am. It may be fancy, Lady Rose, but my father seems to have suffered more than I have."

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"He has, indeed, suffered. One month seems to have aged him more than years should have done," said the young lady.

"Have I been in such terrible danger then?"

"For a time we thought you in great danger, and were in sad suspense." She spoke with hesitation, and Hurst noticed it with some surprise.

"Why, Rose," he said, "it seems to me as if you had changed, also. What has come over you all?"

"Nothing, but great thankfulness that you are better, Walton."

"And do you care so much for me? I hardly thought it," said the young man, a little sadly.

"Oh, Walton, can you ask?"

The great blue eyes, lifted to his, were swimming in tears, yet the quivering lips made a brave effort to smile.

A painful thought struck him then, and his heart sunk like lead under it.

"It would be a strange thing if you had not felt anxious, Rose; for no brother ever loved an only sister better than I have loved you."

As he uttered these words, Hurst was watching that fair young face with keen interest. He saw the color fade from it, until the rich red of the beautiful mouth had all died away. Then he gathered the silken cushion roughly together, so as to shade his own face, and a faint groan came from him.

"Are you in pain?" questioned the young lady, bending over him. "Can I do anything?"

Her breath floated across his mouth, her loose curls swept downward, and almost touched him.

The young man turned his face to the wall, and made no answer. He was heart-sick.

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And so was she even to faintness.

He lay minute after minute, buried in thought. The young lady had no other refuge for her wounded pride, so she fell to work again; but not on the same object. Now she sat down to a drawing of the Black Lake. The old summer-house was a principal object in the foreground, and the banks, heavy with rushes, and broken with ravines, completed a gloomy but picturesque scene, which had a wonderfully artistic effect.

"What are you doing there?" questioned Hurst, after a long silence.

"It is a sketch of the lake which I am trying to finish up at once, in case pretty Ruth Jessup takes us by surprise."

There was something in the girl's voice, as she said this, that made Hurst rise slowly to his elbow.

"Takes us by surprise! What do you mean, Rose?"

"Oh, haven't you heard? I forget. Webb was told not to disturb you with gossip; but Ruth's little flirtation with young Storms has been progressing famously since you were hurt, and I am thinking of this for a wedding gift."

"For a wedding gift! Ruth Jessup—young Storms. What romance is this?"

The young man spoke sharply, sitting upright, his face whiter than illness had left it, and his eyes shining with more than feverish lustre.

"I do not know that it is a romance," answered Lady Rose. "At any rate, I hope not. Ruth is a good, sweet girl, and would never encourage a man to the extent she does, if a marriage were not understood; besides, old Storms was here only a day or two ago wanting more land included in his new lease, because his son thought of setting up for himself."

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"Setting up for himself! The hound!" exclaimed Hurst, between his teeth. "And Sir Noel. I dare say he gave the land. He has always been exceptionally eager to portion off pretty Ruth. Of course, old Storms got the lease."

"I do not know," answered Lady Rose.

"But I mean that this farce shall go no farther. This man Storms is a knave, and should be dealt with as such."

"I am inclined to think Ruth Jessup does not believe this, for scarcely a night passes that she is not seen with him in the park."

"Seen with him! What! My—With him!"

"So it is understood in the servants' hall."

"The servants' hall!"

Hurst fairly ground his teeth with rage. Had Ruth's good name fallen so low that it was a matter of criticism in the servants' hall?

"You know Mrs. Mason is her godmother?"

"Well!"

"And, of course, takes a deep interest in the matter. She talks all her troubles over with Mrs. Hipple, and even came to me about the wedding gifts. Of course, I took an interest. Ruth has so long been the pet of the house, and I love her; that is, there was a time when I loved her dearly."

"Loved her dearly? And now you speak with tears in your voice, as if that pleasant time had passed. Why is that, Lady Rose?"

The young lady's voice sunk low as she answered,

"I—I think we have both changed."

"But there must be some reason for this. What has Ruth done that you should shrink away from her?"

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"Perhaps she feels the difference of position," faltered Rose.

"But that has changed in nothing, at least in her disfavor," answered Hurst, flushing red with a remembrance of that day in the little church.

"She was so dainty, so sweetly retiring. It seemed to me impossible that she could ever have been brought to care for a man like young Storms. Now, that it is so, can I help feeling separated?"

"By Heavens! Lady Rose—" The young man checked himself suddenly, adding, with haughty decision, "We have dropped into a strange discussion, and are handling the name of a young girl with less delicacy than becomes me, at least. Shall we speak of something else?"

A flood of haughty crimson, and a struggle against the tears that rose in spite of herself, was all the reply this curt speech received from Lady Rose. The poor girl was not quite sure of her own disinterested judgment. For the world, she would not have said a word against Ruth, believing that word false; but she was conscious of such infinite relief when the news came to her of the engagement between Ruth Jessup and Storms, that the joy of it made her self-distrustful. How could she be glad that a creature so bright, so delicate, and thoroughly well-bred, should be mated with this keen, sinister man, whom no one loved, and who was held, she knew well, in little respect by his own class? Was she willing to see this sacrifice, that her own jealous fears might be appeased, and did Walton Hurst suspect the feelings which were a wound to her own delicacy? Were his last brief words a reproach to her?

Tears of wounded pride, and bitter self-distrust, rose to her eyes, so thick and fast, that the lady almost fled from the room, that Hurst might not hear the sobs that she had no power to suppress.

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## CHAPTER LI.

### THE GODMOTHER'S MISTAKE.

**YOUNG HURST** was scarcely conscious that he was left alone. His feeble strength was taxed to the utmost. That one burst of indignant feeling had left his breath in thrall, and his limbs quivering. At length he became conscious that Lady Rose was gone, and starting up, with a sudden effort of strength, flung open the glass door, which led out upon a flower-terrace, and would have passed through on his way to the cottage, for his brain was all on fire, but that Mrs. Mason stood there chatting to one of the under-gardeners, who was trimming the rose-bushes, while he talked with her.

"Mercy on me!" cried the dame, breaking off her stream of gossip, with a cry of amazement, "if there isn't the young master, looking like the beautiful tall ghost of his own dear self. Never mind cutting the flowers now. I'll be back for them presently."

Young Hurst had forced his strength too far; a swift dizziness seized upon him, and, but for a garden-chair, that stood near, he must have fallen before the good housekeeper reached him. As it was, he half lay upon the iron seat, grasping it with his hands, or he would have entirely dropped to the ground.

"My master! My dear young master!" cried the good woman, half-lifting him to a sitting posture. "What could have tempted you out in this state? No wonder you were taken faint, and this the first time down-stairs. There, now, the fresh wind is doing you good. Dear me, it gives one a pleasure to see you smile again."

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"The air is sweet, and you are very kind, Mason. I felt so strong a minute ago; but see where it has ended."

"Oh, that is nothing. The first step always counts for the most. To-day across the terrace—tomorrow in the park!"

"Do you think so, Mason? Do you really think so?"

"Think so? Of course! Young people get up so quickly. If it were me now, or that old man at the garden cottage, there would be no telling."

"You have seen him, then? Is he better? Is he—"

"Seen him? Of course I have. It is a heavy walk, but Webb told me how eagerly you took to the strawberries; so I bade Ruthy save the ripest for you every morning; not that she needed telling, for she has picked every one of them, with her own fingers, and the flowers, too."

"Indeed!" murmured the young man, and he smiled as if the strawberries were melting in his mouth.

"Yes, indeed, this morning, when she got here with her little basket full, her fingers were red with them; for she came directly from the beds, that you might have them in their morning-dew, as if they would be the better for that, foolish child."

"Is she well? Is she looking well, Mason?"

"What, Ruthy? No; I can't just say that. With so much sickness in the house, how should she? But a rose is a rose, whether it be white or red."

"Does she ever inquire about me, Mason? We used to be play-fellows, you know."

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"Inquire? As if those great eyes of hers had done anything but ask questions; but then years divide people of her rank and yours. Children who play together as equals are master and servant as they become men and women, and my goddaughter is not one to forget her place."

A faint smile quivered over Hurst's lips.

"No, she is not one to forget her place," he murmured, tenderly. Then, remembering himself, he said, with an attempt at carelessness, "But is there not some foolish story afloat about young Storms? That might trouble her, I should think."

"Trouble her? Why, the child only laughs, as if it was the most maidenly thing on earth to be roaming about with the young man by moonlight and starlight, for that matter, and protesting to her best friends that there is nothing in it; that she has no thoughts of marrying him, and never leaves the cottage on any pretence after night-fall. Of course young women think such things no lies, and never expect to be believed; but Ruthy has been brought up better, and need not attempt to throw sand into her godmother's eyes, whatever she does with the rest of the world."

"You speak as if you believed all this nonsense," said Hurst, with quick fire in his eyes.

"Believe it? Why, there isn't a man on the estate who has not seen them, over and over again. Not that there is harm in it, because old Storms and Jessup have agreed upon it while they were children, and Ruth was ever obedient. Only I don't like her way of denying what everybody knows, especially to me, who have been a mother to her. It isn't just what I had a right to expect, now, is it, Master Walton?"

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"I cannot tell; your statement seems so strange."

"Oh, it is only the old story. Girls never will tell the truth about such matters; besides, I do not wonder that my goddaughter is just a little shamefaced about her sweetheart. He isn't one to boast of overmuch; though, they tell me, no needle was ever so sharp on money. There he beats old Storms, out and out. Jessup has laid by a pretty penny for his child, to say nothing of what I may do. So Ruthy will not go away from home empty-handed, and one may be sure he knows it."

Walton Hurst broke into a light laugh, but he became serious at once, and, looking kindly on the genial old woman, said, "You always were good to her, God bless you!"

"Thank you, for saying so; but who could help it, the pretty little orphan? It was like taking a bird into one's heart."

"It was, indeed," answered Hurst, thinking of himself, rather than the old woman.

"And then to think that she must fly off into another nest. Well, well, girls will be girls. Speaking of that, here comes my Lady Rose, looking more like a lily to my thinking, so I will go my way."

Mrs. Mason did go her way, leaving the young man for a while perfectly alone, for, though Lady Rose was hovering about her own pretty boudoir, she did not come fairly out of its shelter, waiting, in her maidenly reserve, for some sign that her presence out of doors would be welcome.

No such sign was given her, for Hurst was greatly disturbed by what he had heard, and almost frantic with desire to see Ruth, and hear a contradiction of these base reports from her own lips. Not that he doubted her, or gave one moment's credence to rumors so improbable, but, with returning health, came a feverish desire to see the young creature for whom he had been willing to sacrifice everything, and redeem her, so far as he could, from the snare into which he had guided her. In his hot impetuosity, he had involved himself and her in a labyrinth of difficulties that led, as he could not help seeing, in his calmer moments, to deception, if not dishonor.

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"I will atone for it all," he said to himself. "The moment I am strong enough to face his just resentment, my father shall know everything. God grant that the disappointment will only rest with him," he added, as his disturbed mind turned on Lady Rose with a thrill of compunction. "In my mad haste I may have; but no, no! she is too proud, too thoroughbred for a grand passion. It is only such reckless fools as I am that risk all at a single throw. But Ruth, my sweet young wife, how could I force this miserable deception on her? Had I but possessed the courage to assert my own independent manhood, my dear father would have had less to forgive, and I—But no matter, I have made my bed, and must lie in it, which would be nothing if she did not suffer also."

Thus the young man sat thinking, while Lady Rose flitted in and out of the little boudoir, striving to trill soft snatches of song and hide under music the anguish that made her so restless.

Hurst heard these soft gushes of melody, and mocked his previous anxiety with a smile.

"What a presumptuous cad I am, to think that she will know a regret," he muttered, with a sense of relief.

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Lady Rose opened the glass door, and looked out smiling, as if care had never touched her heart.

"Shall I come and read to you?" she said.

"No," he answered, rising. "I will come to you."

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## CHAPTER LII.

### SITTING AT THE WINDOW.

**R**UTH JESSUP had no courage to attempt another interview with her bridegroom. Every morning she made an excuse to visit "The Rest" with fruit from her own garden, always accompanied by the choicest flowers arranged with a touch of loving art, which he began to read eagerly, now that he knew from whom they came. Once or twice she met Sir Noel, who, for the first time in his life, seemed to avoid her. The pleasant greeting which her rare beauty and brightness had been sure to win from him, no longer welcomed her; but was exchanged for a

grave bow, and sometimes—so her tender conscience read the change—by a look of reproach. Lady Rose she purposely shunned; partly because a sense of deception hung heavily upon her, and partly because of the restless jealousy, which sprang out of her own intense love, that admitted no other worshipper near her idol.

Mrs. Mason, too, had taken to lecturing her, making her discourse offensive by constant allusions to young Storms, and the household arrangements which must soon be made at the farm. No denial or protest left the least impression on the good dame, who had made up her mind that such things were to be expected from over-sensitive girls like Ruth, and must not be set down against them as falsehoods, being, at the worst, only a forgivable exaggeration of natural modesty. Besides, she had taken an opportunity to speak to the young man himself, who had laughed knowingly when she told him of Ruth's denial of all engagement between them, and replied that a woman of her age ought to be old enough to understand that a girl's "no" always meant "yes" when the time came. For his part, he was only waiting for the lease to be signed. Anyway, Ruth would set no day till that was done, and no blame either. So if Mrs. Mason wanted to do her goddaughter a good turn and stop people from talking, she had better help that on. Everybody knew that she had great influence with Sir Noel, and the lease was all that was wanted to make things go smoothly between him and her goddaughter.

Against all this evidence it is not wonderful that the housekeeper went quietly on with her preparations, and gave no heed to Ruth's denials, tearful and even angry as they often were.

All this was very hard on Ruth, who found herself miserably baffled at every point. All her friends seemed to have dropped away from her. Their very affection was turned into mockery by persistent disbelief of all she said. She still hovered about the great house each morning as a frightened bird flutters around its nest, but with little chance of satisfaction, for, except the housekeeper's room, all the establishment seemed closed to her.

One day the poor girl saw her husband on the flower-terrace, moving slowly up and down among the roses, and a cry of such exquisite delight broke from her, that Mrs. Mason rose from her easy-chair and came to the window, curious to know what had called it forth.

What was going on? What had she seen to brighten her face so? Had the sullen old peacock at last spread himself, or was she wondering at the great bloom of roses? Something out of the common had happened to set that pale face into such a glow. Would Ruth tell her what it was?

No, Ruth could not tell her, for the color had all died out of her face while the old woman was talking, and the glorious show of flowers had turned to a misty cloud, in which a beautiful young woman was floating, angel-like, toward her husband, and he went to meet her.

Lifting both hands to her face, Ruth shut out the sight, and when Mrs. Mason insisted on questioning her, turned upon the good woman like a hunted doe, and, stamping her foot, declared, with great tears flashing in her eyes, that nothing was the matter. Only—only so much watching made her nervous, hysterical, some people might call it; but that did not matter. Laughing and crying amounted to the same thing. She would go home. There nobody would trouble themselves about her.

With this reckless burst of feeling, Ruth flung herself away from the outstretched arms of her half-frightened godmother, and ran home, sobbing as she went. Would this miserable state of anxiety never end? Must she go on forever with this awful feeling gnawing at her heart? Would this longing for protection, this baffled tenderness, ever meet with a response? Ah, she understood now the depths of God's punishment to poor Eve, when the angel was placed at the gates of Paradise to keep her out. Was Lady Rose chosen to guard her Paradise, because of the sin through which she had entered it? How like a glorious angel she looked in the soft whiteness and tender blue of garments that floated around her like a cloud. How bright and rich were the waves and curls of her hair! Surely no angel ever could be more beautiful!

This passion of feeling, which combined so many elements of unrest, was thrown into abeyance when Ruth got home; for, looking up, with her hand on the gate, she saw her father sitting at the chamber-window waiting for her. It was the first time he had crossed the floor since his illness. The thought that he had made the dangerous attempt alone struck her with dismay.

"Oh, father, how could you?" was her first anxious question as she entered the room. "Have I been gone so long that you got impatient?"

"No, no! I felt better, and took a longing to look on the garden. I never was so many days without seeing it before," said the old man. "I think it has done me good, child."

"I hope so. I hope so, father!"

"See how well I walk. Never fear, lass. The old father will soon be about again."

The gardener got up from his chair with some difficulty and walked across the room, waving Ruth aside when she offered to support him.

"Nay, nay, let me try it alone," he said, with feeble triumph. "To-morrow I shall be getting downstairs. I only hope the young master is as strong."

"Oh, father, he is better; I saw him on the terrace this morning."

"Ah, that is brave. But how did he look? Thin, like me?"

"No, not like you, father. He was always more slender, you know; but I think he was pale."

"Of course, of course. He has a hard bout. Not this, though, and I'm thankful for it."

Jessup put one hand to his wounded breast as he spoke, and Ruth observed, with anxiety, that he breathed with difficulty.

"You must not try to walk again, father," she said, arranging his pillows and wiping the drops

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from his forehead. "It exhausts you."

"Nothing of the kind, lass. I shall be all the stronger in an hour. Why, at the end of three days, I mean to walk over to 'The Rest,' and have a talk with the young master."

"Oh, how I wish you could!"

"Could? I will. I thought he would have answered my letter by a word, if no more. But I have no doubt he is o'er weak for writing. Anyhow, we shall soon know."

Again Ruth breathed freely. The father was right. In a few days she would hear directly from her husband—perhaps see him. If he wished it, as she did, nothing could keep him away, now that he had once gone into the open air. Surely she was brave enough to bear her burden a little longer.

It was growing dark, now. Jessup had been at rest most of the time; for, in his feeble state, crossing that room had wearied him as no journey could have done in health.

Ruth had been restless as a caged bird all day. Her load of apprehension regarding her father had been relieved only that the keener trouble, deep down in her woman's heart, should come uppermost with new force. Those two persons among the roses on the terrace haunted her like one of those pictures which the brain admires and the heart loathes. Was not this man her husband? Had he not sworn to love her, and her alone? What right had Lady Rose by his side? How dared she look into those eyes whose love-light was all her own only a few weeks ago? Alas! those weary, weary weeks! How they had dragged and torn at her life! How old she had grown since that circlet of gold had been hidden in her bosom!

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Ruth was very sad that evening,—sad, and strangely haunted. It seemed to her that, more than ever, she was waiting for some great catastrophe. Black clouds seemed gathering all around her; difficulties that she had no strength to fathom or combat seemed to people the clouds with ruin. Yet all was vague and dreary. The poor child was worn out with loneliness and watching.

All at once she heard a footstep. Not the one she dreaded, but the slow, faltering walk of some person who hesitated, or paused, perhaps, for breath.

Up to her feet the girl sprang, leaned forward, and listened, holding down her heart with both trembling hands, and checking the breath on her parted lips.

The door opened softly.

"Ruth!"

She sprang forward, her arms outstretched, a glorious smile transfiguring her face.

"Oh, my beloved! My husband!"

She led him to the little couch on which so many bitter tears had told of her misery. He was worn out with walking, and fell upon it, smiling as she raised his head from the cushions, and pillowed it on her bosom, folding in his weakness with her young arms.

"It may kill me, but I could not keep away. Oh, my darling, how I have longed for a sight of you!" said the young husband.

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Ruth gathered him closer in her arms, and, forgetting everything but his presence, kissed the very words from his smiling lips.

"Ah, you have come. It is enough! It is enough!"

Something startled her; a faint noise near the door. She lifted her head, and there stood her father, looking wildly upon her—upon him.

Before she could move or speak, the old man swayed, uttered one faint moan, and fell across the threshold.

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## CHAPTER LIII.

### DEATH.

**W**HILE Ruth had thought her father resting from his dangerous exertions, that poor man had been aroused into keen wakefulness which brought back all his old powers of thought. His brain had been cleared from the dull mists of fever, and the haze that had gathered over his memory was swept away by the physical effort he had made. He began to see things clearly that had seemed fantastic and dreamlike till then. The events of that night, when he received his wound, came out before him in pictures. The great cedar of Lebanon, the face he had seen for a moment gleaming through the darkness, everything came to his memory with the vividness of thoughts that burn like fire in an enfeebled brain, driving out sleep and everything but themselves.

Slowly and surely dreams melted away into nothingness. For, in the state of nervous excitement which sometimes comes with returning powers, after long mental wanderings, all his ideas were supremely vivid.

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One by one he arranged past events in his mind. From the time that he met young Storms in the



park on his way home that fatal night, and received the first cruel idea of his daughter's shame, for which he cast the young man to the earth in his rage, as we wrestle with a mad dog, which leaves its poison in our veins. He traced events down to the moment when a flash of fire seemed to pass through him under the cedars, and he awoke, helpless, in the little chamber whose walls enclosed him now. Then he remembered the letter he had written to young Hurst; hours before, he could not have given its import, or have repeated a word of it. But now, it came before him like the rest, a visible substance. He saw the very handwriting, uneven and irregular, such as he had left in copy-books years before, and it rose up clearly in judgment against him now. Reading these great, uncouth letters in his mind, he groaned aloud.

That which, in his fever, he had resolved to keep secret forever, he had written out in a wild effort to spare anxiety to another, suffering like himself. What if that letter should fall into the hands of an enemy? It conveyed a charge. It hinted at something that might bring terrible suspicions on the young man who had been dear to him almost as his own child. The evil he had tried to prevent had been drawn ominously near by his own hand.

The old man lay there, wounding himself with the most bitter reproaches. Into what mad folly had the fever thrown him!

William Jessup started up in bed, as these thoughts came crowding to his brain. He would at once redeem the evil that had been done. That letter should be revoked. [331]

Yes, he would do it that moment; then, perhaps, he might sleep, for the intense working of his brain was more than he could endure. It was like the rush and thud of an engine, over which the master-hand had lost control.

Ruth Jessup's little desk lay open on the table close by the bed, where she had been using it. Pen and paper lay upon it, inviting the sick man to act at once. He was still wrapped in a long flannel dressing-gown, and his feet were thrust into slippers, which the hands of his child had wrought with scrolls of glittering bead-work and clusters of flowers—soft, dainty slippers, which made no noise as he dropped his feet over the bedside, and drew the table toward him with hands nerved to steadiness by a firm resolve.

Truly, that great hand shook, and the pen sometimes leaped from the paper as some sharp, nervous thrill for a moment disabled it. But for a time excitement was strength, and to that was added a firm will: so the pen worked on, linking letter to letter, and word to word, until the white surface of a page was black with them. Then he turned the sheet over, pressed it down with both hands, and went on until his task was done.

By this time his eyes were heavy with fatigue, and a dusky fever-flush burned on his cheeks. He folded the sheet of paper, which was well written over, and directed it on the blank side to "Walton Hurst," then he pushed the table aside, leaned back upon the pillow, and gave way to the exhaustion which this great effort had brought upon him. Still, the poor man could not sleep, the brain had been too much disturbed. While his body lay supine, and his hands were almost helplessly folded in his flannel dressing-gown, those deep-set eyes were wide open, and burning with internal fires. [332]

Thus the sun went down, and a glory of crimson gold and purple swept through the window, slowly darkening the room.

All this time, Ruth was below, sad and thoughtful, gleaning a little pleasure from the fact that all was silent overhead, which indicated a long, healthful sleep for her father, after his first effort to cross the room. She was very careful to make no noise that might disturb the beloved sleeper, and thus sat hushed and watchful, when the sweet shock of her husband's presence aroused her.

This noise had reached the chamber where Jessup lay.

"She is below," he thought, struggling up from his bed. "This very hour she shall carry my letter to 'The Rest.' Will she ever forgive me for doubting her, my sweet, good child? Ah, how did I find heart to wrong her so?"

With the letter clasped in one hand, and that buried in the pocket of his dressing-gown, the old man moved through the dusky starlight that filled his room, and down the narrow stairs slowly, for he was weak, and softly, for his slippers made no noise. He paused a moment in the passage, holding by the banister, then, guided by an arrow of light that shot through the door, which was ajar, stood upon the threshold, struck through the heart by what he saw—wounded again and unto death by the words he heard.

"It was true! it was true!" The words said to him by that vile man in the park that night was a fact that struck him with a sharper pang than the rifle had given. His child—his Ruth, his milk-white lamb—where was she? "Whose head was that resting upon her bosom? Whose voice was that murmuring in her ear?" [333]

The pain of that awful moment made him reel upon his feet, a cry broke to his lips, bringing waves of red blood with it. His hands lost their hold on the door-frame, and his body fell across the threshold.

For a moment two white, scared faces looked down upon the fallen man, then at each other, dazed by the sudden horror. Then Ruth sank to the floor, with a piteous cry, lifted his head to her lap, and moaning over it, besought her father to look up, to speak one word, to lift but a finger, anything to prove that he was not dead.

Hurst bent over her, feeble and trembling. He had no power to lift the old man from her arms, but leaned against the door-frame paralyzed.

"Oh, wipe his lips, they are so red! Help me to lift him up," cried Ruth, with woeful entreaty. "He is not dead, you know. Remember how he fainted before, but that was not death. Help me! Oh,

Walton, help me, or something dreadful may come to him."

The agony of this pleading aroused all that remained of strength in the young husband's frame. He stooped down, and attempted to remove the old man from the girl's clinging arms.

"No, no!" she cried. "I can take care of him best. Bring me some brandy—brandy, I say! You will find it in—in the cupboard. Brandy, quick—quick, or he may never come-to!"

Hurst went to the closet, brought forth a flask of brandy, and attempted to force some drops between those parted lips, through which the teeth were gleaming with ghastly whiteness. [334]

"He cannot drink! Bring a glass. Father! father! try to move—try to swallow. It frightens me so! Ah, try to understand! It frightens me so!"

All efforts were in vain. Hurst knelt down, and, with a hopeless effort, felt for the pulse that would never beat again.

"His head is growing heavier. See how he leans on me! Of course, he knows—only—only—Oh, Walton! There is no breath!" whispered the poor girl. "What can I do—what can I do?"

"Ruth, my poor child, I fear he will never breathe again."

"Never breathe again! Never breathe again! Why, that is death!"

"Yes, Ruth, it is death," answered the young man, folding the dressing-gown over the body, reverently, as if it had been the vestment of some old Roman.

"Then you and I have killed him," said the girl, in a hoarse whisper. "You and I!"

The young man made no answer, but kindly and gently attempted to remove the body that rested so heavily upon her.

"Not yet—oh, not yet! I cannot give him up! He might live long enough to pardon me."

"If good men live hereafter, and you believe that, Ruth, he knows that concealment is all the sin you have committed against him," answered Hurst, gently.

"But that has brought my poor—poor father here," said the girl, looking piteously up into the young man's face.

"Ruth—Ruth, do not reproach me! God knows I blame myself bitterly enough," he said, at last.

"Blame yourself? Oh, no! I alone am to blame. It was I that tempted you. I that listened—that loved, and made you love me. Father—father! Oh, hear this! Stay with us! Oh, stay in your old home long enough for that! He is not in fault. He never said a word or gave me a look that was not noble. He never meant to harm me, or—or offend you. I—I alone am the guilty one." [335]

"Ruth, Ruth! you are breaking my heart!" whispered Hurst.

"Breaking your heart! Oh, I have done enough of that, miserable wretch that I am!" answered the girl, speaking more and more faintly. "If I could only make him understand how sorry I am; but oh, Walton! I think he is growing cold. I have tried to warm him here in my arms, but his cheek lies chilly against mine, and my—my heart is cold as—as his."

The head drooped on her bosom; her arms slackened their hold, and fell away from the form they had embraced, and she settled down by her father, lifeless, for the time, as he was—for William Jessup was dead. A great shock had cast him down with his face in the dust. Blasted, as it were, by a sudden conviction of his daughter's shame, he had gone into eternity as if struck by a flash of lightning. [336]

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## CHAPTER LIV.

### THE GARDENER'S FUNERAL.

**A** FUNERAL moved slowly from the gardener's house. Out through the porch, under the clustering vines he had planted, William Jessup was carried by his own neighbors, with more than usual solemnity. His death had been fearfully sudden, and preceding circumstances surrounded it with weird interest. That which had been considered a mysterious assault, which no one cared to investigate too closely, now took the proportions of a murder, and many a sun-browned brow was heavy with doubt and dread as his friends stood ready to carry the good man out of the home his conduct had honored, and his hands had beautified.

Many persons out of his own sphere of life were gathered in the little cottage, seeking to console the poor girl, who was left alone in it, and to show fitting respect to the dead. Among these were Sir Noel and his household. Lady Rose came, subdued and saddened with womanly pity. Mrs. Mason, full of grief and motherly anxiety, took charge within doors, pausing in her endeavors every few moments to comfort Ruth, whose sorrow carried her to the very brink of despair.

Many people came from the village, where Jessup had been very popular, and among them old Storms, who, with his son, kept aloof, looking darkly on the crowd that passed into the dwelling.

No one seemed to remark that the young heir of "Norston's Rest" was absent; for it was known that he had taxed his strength too far, and was now paying the penalty of over exertion by a [337]

relapse which threatened to prostrate him altogether.

In the throng of villagers that came in groups through the park was the landlady of the public house, and with her Judith Hart, who was too insignificant a person for criticism, or the eager excitement of her manner might have arrested attention. But safe in her low estate, the girl moved about in the crowd, until the house was filled, and half the little concourse of friends stood reverently on the outside waiting for the coffin to be brought forth. Then she drew close to young Storms, who stood apart from his father, and whispered, "You beckoned me—what for?"

Storms answered her in a cautious whisper. Nodding her head, the girl replied:

"But after that, will you come to the public, or shall I—"

"To the Lake House, after the funeral," was the impatient rejoinder.

"I will be there, never fear."

With these words Judith glided off through the crowd, and passing around the house, concealed herself in the thickets of blooming plants in which the garden terminated.

From this concealment she watched the funeral train file out from the porch and wind its way down the great chestnut avenue on its course to the churchyard. She saw Ruth, the last of that little household, following the coffin with bowed head, and footsteps that faltered in her short walk between the porch and the gate. Wicked as the girl was, a throb of compassion stirred her heart for the young creature whom she had so hated in her jealous wrath, but could pity in such deep affliction.

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Slowly and solemnly the funeral procession swept from the house, and passed, like a black cloud, down the avenue. The park became silent. The cottage was still as death, for every living thing had passed from it when the body of its master was carried forth. Then holding her breath, and treading softly, as if her sacrilegious foot were coming too near an altar, Judith Hart stole into the house. The door was latched, not locked. She felt sure of that, for, in deep grief, who takes heed of such things? A single touch of her finger, and she would be mistress of that little home for an hour at least. Still her heart quaked and her step faltered. It seemed as if she were on the threshold of a great crime, but had no power to retreat.

She was in the porch; her hand was stretched out, feeling for the latch, when something dragged at her arm. A sharp cry broke from her; then, turning to face her enemy, she found only the branch of a climbing rose that had broken loose from the kindred vines, whose thorns clung to her sleeve.

"What a fool I am!" thought the girl, tearing the thorny branch away from her arm. "What would he think of me? There!"

The door was open. She glided in, and shut it in haste, drawing a bolt inside.

"Bah! how musty the air is! With the shutters closed, the room seems like a grave. So much the better! No one can look through."

The little sitting-room was neatly arranged. Nothing but the chairs was out of place. Judith could see that, through all the gloom.

"Not here," she thought. "Nothing that he wants can be here. Her room first: that is the place to search."

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## CHAPTER LV.

### SEARCHING A HOUSE.

**U**P the crooked staircase the girl turned and shut herself into a little chamber, opposite that in which Jessup had suffered his days of pain—a dainty chamber, in which the windows and bed were draped like a summer cloud, and on a toilet, white as virgin snow, a small mirror was clouded in like ice. Even the coarse nature of Judith Hart was struck by the pure stillness of the place she had come to desecrate, and she stood just within the threshold, as if terrified by her own audacity. "If he were here, I wonder if he would dare touch a thing?" she thought, going back to her purpose. "I wish he had done it himself; I don't like it."

She did not like it; being a woman, how could she? But the power of that bad man was strong upon her, and directly the humane thrill left her bosom. She was his slave again.

"Something may be here," she said, sweeping aside the delicate muslin of the toilet with her rude hands. "Ladies keep their choice finery and love-letters in such places, I know; and she puts on more airs than any lady of the land. Ah, nothing but slippers and boots that a child might wear, fit for Lady Rose herself, with their high heels and finikin stitching. Such things for a gardener's daughter! Dear me, what is the use of a toilet if one cannot load it with pincushions, and things to hold ear-rings, and brooches, and such like! Nothing but boots—such boots, too—under the curtains, and on the top a prayer-book, bound in velvet. Well, this is something."

A small chair stood by the toilet, in which Judith seated herself, while she turned over the leaves

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of the book, and, pausing at the first page, read, "Ruth Jessup, from her godmother."

"Oh, that's old Mason. Not much that he wants here. No wonder the lass is so puffed up. Velvet books, and a room like this! Well, well, I never had a godmother, and sleep in a garret, under the roof. That's the difference. But we shall see. Only let me find something that pleases him here, and this room is nothing to the one he will give me. Thin muslin. Poh! I will have nothing less than silks and satins, like a born lady. That much I'm bent on."

Flinging down the prayer-book, without further examination, Judith proceeded to search the apartment thoroughly. She examined all the dainty muslins and bits of lace, the ribbons and humbler trifles contained in the old-fashioned bureau. She even thrust her hand under the snowy pillows of the bed, but found nothing save the pretty, lady-like trifles that awoke some of the old, bitter envy as she handled them.

"Now for the old man's room. Something is safe to turn up there," she thought, conquering a superstitious feeling that had kept her from this room till the last. "It's an awful thing to ask of one. I wonder how he would feel prowling through a dead man's chamber like a thief, which I shall be if I find papers, and taking them amounts to that; but he would give me no peace till I promised to come."

The room from which Jessup had been carried out was in chilling order. A fine linen sheet lay on the bed, turned back in a large wave as it had been removed from the body when it was placed in the coffin. A hot-house plant stood on the window-sill, perishing for want of water. The stand upon which Ruth's desk was placed had been set away in a corner, and to this Judith went at once. She found nothing, however, save a few scraps of paper, containing some date, or a verse of poetry that seemed copied from memory; two or three sheets of notepaper had a word or two written on them, as if an impulse to write had seized upon the owner, but was given up with the first words, which were invariably, "My dear—" The next word seemed hard to guess at, for it never found its way to paper; so Judith discovered nothing in her pillage of Ruth's desk, and the failure made her angry.

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"He'll never believe I looked thoroughly, though what I am to find, goodness only knows. Every written paper that I lay my hands on must be brought to him. That is what he said, and what I am to do. But written papers ain't to be expected in a house like this, I should say. How am I to get what isn't here, that's the question? Anyway, I'll make a good search. Not much chance here, but there's no harm in looking."

Judith flung the closet-door open, and peered in, still muttering to herself, "Nothing but clothes. Jessup's fustian-coat. Poor old fellow! He'll never wear it again. His Sunday-suit, too, just as he left it hanging. No shelf, no—Stay, here is something on the floor. Who knows what may be under it?"

Judith stooped down, and drew a long garment of gray flannel from the closet, where it seemed to have been cast down in haste. It was Jessup's dressing-gown, which had been taken from him after death.

"Nothing but the poor old fellow's clothes," she thought, growing pale and chilly, from some remembrance that possessed her at the sight of those empty garments. "I will throw the old dressing-gown back, and give it up. The sight of them makes me sick. Well, I've searched and searched. What more can he want of me?"

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Judith Hart gathered up the dressing-gown in her hands, and was about to replace it, when a folded paper dropped to her feet. She snatched the paper, thrust the dressing-gown back to the closet, and turned to a window, unfolding her prize as she went.

"His writing. The same great hooked letters, the same hard work in writing! 'To Walton Hurst.' It might be the same, only there is more of it, and the lines ain't quite so scraggly." Even as she talked, Judith held Jessup's letter to an opening in the shutter, and read it eagerly.

More than once Judith read the letter that Jessup had written with his last dying strength, at first with surprise deepening into terror as she went on. Then she fell into solemn thoughtfulness. Being a creature of vivid imagination, she could not stand in that death-chamber with a writing purloined from the murdered man's garments in her hand without a shiver of dread running through all her frame.

In truth, she was fearfully disturbed, and the very blood turned cold as it left her face when she thrust the paper into her bosom, shrinking from it with shudderings all the time.

After this, she remained some minutes by the window, lost in thoughts that revealed themselves plainer than language as they passed over her mobile features.

Then a sound, far down in the park, startled her and she left the house absorbed and saddened. It was well for her chances of escape that the girl left Jessup's cottage at once; for she was hardly out of sight when a group of neighbors from the funeral cortege came back, haunting those rooms with sorrowful countenances, and striving with great kindness to win the lone girl, thus suddenly made an orphan, from the terrible grief into which she had fallen.

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## CHAPTER LVI.

### A MOTHER'S HOPEFULNESS.

**A**MONG the persons who had come to the gardener's funeral old Mrs. Storms was most conspicuous, not only from her high position among the tenants, but because of the relations her son was supposed to hold with the daughter, who was beloved by them all. After the funeral several neighbors offered to stay with Ruth, but in her wild wretchedness she refused them all—kindly, sweetly, as it was in her nature to do, but with a positiveness that admitted of no further urgency.

Even Mrs. Mason, who now considered herself as something more than friend or godmother, felt constrained to go away and leave the poor girl to the isolation she pleaded for; though with some little resentment at the bottom of her kind heart.

Mrs. Storms was not to be dissuaded from all kindness so easily. When the neighbors were gone she came into the room where Ruth was sitting, and in a gentle, motherly fashion, sat down by the mourner and strove to comfort her.

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"Come," she said, taking the girl's cold hands in the clasp of her hard-working fingers, "come, lass, and stay with me. This house is so full of gloom that you will pine to death in it. Our home is large, and bright with sunshine. You shall have the lady's chamber, which will be all your own some blessed day, God willing."

The good woman caught her breath here, for something like an electric shock flashed through the hands she clasped, and Ruth made a struggle to free herself from the thralldom of kindness that was torturing her.

"I know—I know this isn't the time to speak of weddings; but you have no mother, and I never had a girl in the house; so if you would only come now, and be company for me—only company for the old woman—it would be better and happier for us all."

Ruth did not answer this loving appeal. She only closed her eyes and shuddered faintly. Great emotions had exhausted themselves with her.

"Be sure, Ruth, it is not my son alone who loves you. From the first I have always looked upon you as my own lass, and a prettier no mother need want, or a better, either."

"No, no, you must not say that," Ruth cried out; for the anguish of these praises was more than she could bear. "He thought me pretty—he thought me good, and how have I repaid him? Oh, my father, my poor dead father, it was love for me that killed him!"

Mrs. Storms was silent a while. She understood this piteous outcry as a burst of natural grief, and gave it no deeper significance; but she felt the task of comforting the poor girl more difficult than she had imagined. What could she say that would not call forth some new cause of agitation? The subject which she had fondly trusted in seemed to give nothing but pain. Yet no hint had ever reached the woman that the attachment of her son was not more than returned by this orphaned girl. Perhaps Ruth was wounded that Richard was not there in place of his mother. With this possibility in her mind the matron renewed her kindly entreaties.

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"You must not think it strange, dear, that Richard left the funeral without coming back to the cottage. It was that his heart was full of the great trouble, and he would not darken the cottage with more than you could bear. The father, too—for you must think of him as that, dear child—has well nigh broke his heart over the loss of his old friend. He's eager as can be to have a daughter in the house, and will be good as gold to her."

Ruth did not listen to the subject of these words, but the kindly voice soothed her. This old housewife had been a good friend to her ever since she could remember, and was trying to comfort her now, as if anything approaching comfort could ever reach her life, fearfully burdened as it was. Still, there was soothing in the voice. So the matron, meeting no opposition, went on:

"We must not talk of what is closest to our hearts just yet; but the time will soon come when the old man and I will flit to some smaller home, and you shall have the house all for your two selves. It will be another place then; for Richard can afford to live more daintily than we ever cared for. The garden can be stocked with flowers and made pretty as this at the cottage. The barley-field can be seeded back to a lawn, and that parlor with the oriel window, where the good man stores his fruit, can be made rarely grand with its pictured walls and carved mantelpiece."

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Still Ruth did not listen; only a fantastic and vague picture of some dream-like place was passing through her mind, which the kind old neighbor was endeavoring to make her understand. Now and then she felt this hazy picture broken up by a jar of pain when Richard Storms was mentioned; but even that hated name was so softened by the loving, motherly voice that half its bitterness was lost.

"Tell me," said the matron, "when will you come? I made everything ready this morning before we left, hoping you would go back with us."

Ruth opened her great sad eyes, and looked into the motherly face bending over her.

"You are kind," she said, "so kind, and you were his dear friend. I know that well enough; but I cannot fix my mind on anything—only this: your voice is sweet; you are good, and wish me to do something that I cannot think of yet. Let me rest; my eyes ache with heaviness. I have no strength for anything. This is a sad place, and I am sad like the rest; if you would leave me now, in all kindness I ask it; perhaps the good God might permit me to sleep. Since the night he died I have been fearfully awake, sitting by him, you know. Now—now I would like to be alone, quite alone. There is something I wish to ask of God."

Mrs. Storms yielded to this sad pleading, laid the girl's hands into her lap, kissed her forehead and went away, thinking, in her motherly innocence:

"The child is worn out, dazed with her great sorrow. I can do nothing with her; but Richard will be going to the cottage, and she loves him. Ah, who could help it, now that he is so manly and has given up the ways that we dreaded might turn to evil! She will listen to him, then John and I will have a daughter."

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## CHAPTER LVII.

### WAITING AT THE LAKE HOUSE.

**D**URING the time that his mother was so kindly persuading Ruth to accept a home with her, Richard Storms was pacing the Lake House to and fro, like a caged animal waiting for its feeder.

The triumph of his revenge and his love seemed near at hand now. Before Jessup's death his power was insufficient, his influence feeble, for no one was in haste to take up a wrong which the sufferer was the first to ignore. But now the wound had done its work. A man had been shot to death, and any subject of Her Majesty had the right to call for a full investigation before a magistrate. This investigation the young man had resolved to demand.

All that the man wanted now, to complete his power of ruin, was the letter which Judith Hart had found drifting through the shrubbery on the day she had visited "Norston's Rest," at his own suggestion, in order to get a foothold in the establishment and become his willing or unconscious spy, as he might be compelled to use her.

That letter was so important to him now that he was ready to do anything, promise anything, in order to get possession of it, and prowling around and around the old Lake House, he racked his brain for some power of inducement by which he could win it from her, and perhaps other proofs that she might find in the cottage.

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Thus urged to the verge of desperation, by a thirst for revenge on young Hurst, and the craving love which Ruth Jessup had rejected with so much scorn, the young man awaited with burning impatience the coming of his dupe; for up to this time he had failed in making her entirely an accomplice.

Judith came down to the lake in great excitement. Storms saw that, as she turned from the path and waded through the long, thick rushes on the shore, without seeming to heed them.

"You have found something! I see that in your face," he said, as the girl darkened the Lake House door. "Give it to me, for I never was so eager to be at work. Why don't you speak? Why don't you tell me what it is?"

Judith pushed her way into the house and seated herself on the bench, where she sat looking at him with an expression in her eyes that seemed to forbode revolt.

"Tell me," he said, sitting down by her, "tell me what you have discovered. I hope it is something that will clear the way to our wedding, for I am getting impatient for it. Nothing but the want of that paper has kept me back so long."

The strange expression on Judith's face softened a little. Some good was in the girl. The firm hold she had kept on Jessup's dangerous letter had been maintained as much from reluctance to bring ruin on an innocent man as for her own security. On her way from the gardener's cottage, she had taken a rapid survey of the situation, and for the first time felt the courage of possessed power.

"You are in terrible haste," she said, "as if the paper I have was not enough to win anything you want from Sir Noel."

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"But you will not trust me with it. You do not love me well enough for that."

"I loved you well enough to give up my home, my poor old father, my good name with the neighbors, and become the meanest of servants, only to be near you," answered the girl, with deep feeling; "and I love you now, oh God, forgive me! better, better than my own wicked soul, or you never would have seen me again."

"Still you refuse to give me the one scrap of paper that can bring us together," said Storms, reproachfully.

"If I did give it up what would you do with it?"

"Do with it! I will take it to Sir Noel, break down his pride, threaten him with the exposure of his son's crime, and wring the lease I want from him, with enough money beside to keep my wife a lady."

"But what if I take the paper to Sir Noel, and get all these things for myself?"

For an instant Storms was startled, but a single thought restored his self-poise.

"There is one thing Sir Noel could not give you."

"What is that?"

"A husband that loves the very ground you walk on."

"Oh, if I could be sure that you loved me like that."

"I do—I do; but how can I wed you without some chance of a living? The old man wouldn't take us in without the new lease, and without more land I can do nothing."

"Dick! Oh, tell me the truth now. Is that all the use you mean to make of this paper?"

"Yes, all! I will swear to it if that will pacify you. The lease, and money, down at the time; for a handsome wife must have something to dash her neighbors with. That is all I want, and that the paper in your bosom will bring me."

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Judith lifted a hand to her bosom, and kept it there, still hesitating.

"You do not mean to harm the young gentleman? Oh, Richard, you could not be so bad as that."

"Harm him! No! I only want to frighten Sir Noel out of his land and money. If I once gave the paper to a magistrate, it would be an end of that."

"So it would," said Judith, thoughtfully. "Besides—besides—"

"Come, come! Make up your mind, girl!"

"Swear to me, that you will never show the paper to any one but Sir Noel—never use it against the young gentleman!"

"Swear! I am ready! If there were a Bible here I would do it now."

"Never mind the Bible! With your hand here, and your eyes looking into mine, swear to your promise."

Storms gave a returning grasp to the hand which had seized his, and his eyes were lifted for a moment to the bold, black orbs that seemed searching him to the soul; but they wavered in an instant, and returned her gaze with furtive side-glances, while he repeated the oath in language which was profane rather than solemn.

After holding his hand for a minute, in dead silence, Judith dropped it, and taking the old portemonnaie from her bosom, gave up old Jessup's first letter, but without a word of the other paper.

"There! Remember, I have trusted you."

Storms fairly snatched the paper from her hand, for the cruel joy of the moment was too much for his caution.

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"Now," he said, with a laugh more repulsive than curses, "I have them all in the dust."

"But remember your oath," said Judith, uneasily, for the fierce triumph in that face frightened even her.

"I forget nothing!" was the bitter answer, "and will bate nothing—not a jot, not a jot."

Storms was half way to the door, as he said this, with the paper grasped tightly in his hand.

"But where are you going?" pleaded Judith, following him. "Is there nothing more to say?"

"Only this," answered Storms, struck by a shrewd after-thought; "it is better that you leave the 'Two Ravens' at once. It is not from the tap-room of an inn that a gentleman must take his wife."

Judith looked at him searchingly. There seemed to be reason in his suggestion; still she doubted him.

"Where would you have me go, Richard? Back to the old home?"

Storms reflected a moment before he answered.

"It isn't a palace or a castle, like the one you mean to get out of that paper," Judith said, impatient of his silence, "but, poor as it was, you liked to come there, and the old father would be glad and proud to be standing by when we are wedded."

"Yes, I dare say he would be that," answered Storms, with an uneasy smile. "Well, as you wish it, the old home is perhaps as safe a place as you could stay in."

"But it will not be for long—you promise that?" questioned the girl, anxiously.

"Not if Sir Noel comes down handsomely, but I must not be bothered while this work is on hand. You will give the landlady warning and go at once. Say nothing of where you are going; or perhaps, as she is sure to ask questions, it is better to speak of London. You can even take the train that way for a short distance, and turn back to the station nearest your home. The walk will not be much."

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"What, from the station?" said Judith, laughing. "Why the old home is a good twenty miles from here, and I walked it all the way, having no money."

"Ah, that was when you were fired with jealousy, and I'll be bound you did not feel the walk. But we must have no more of that. There is money enough to take you home, and something over."

"No, no. I shall have my wages," said the girl, drawing back.

In her mad love she could leave her home and follow this man on foot without shame, but something of honest pride withheld her from receiving his money.

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Storms, wondering at the color that came into her face, while he dropped the gold back into his pocket. "But you must give notice at once. We have no time to lose. Now I think of it, how much did the landlady know about you at the 'Two Ravens?'"

"Nothing. She thinks I came down from London."

"Not the name? I cannot remember ever hearing it."

"No one but the mistress knew it," said Judith. "My father was of the better sort till misfortune came on him, and I wouldn't drag his name down in that place. I am only known as Judith among the customers."

"That is fortunate, and makes your going up to London the thing to say. You can be home to-morrow."

"But you will not be long away? You will come?"

"Surely; three days from this at our old place in the orchard. I do not care to see your father at first. It will be time enough when we can tell him everything. There, now, I must go. You will forget nothing?"

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Storms held out his hand. Judith took it reluctantly.

"Are you leaving me now?"

"Yes, I am going yonder," he answered, waving his hand toward "Norston's Rest."

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## CHAPTER LVIII.

### SIR NOEL'S VISITOR.

**I**T is not the old man, Sir Noel, but young Storms, who says he must and will see you!"

"Did the hind send that message to me?"

"No, Sir Noel, he only said it to me, and impudent enough in him to do it. His message to you was soft as silk. He had important business which you would like to hear of, and could not wait. That was what made him bold to ask," answered the servant, who had been greatly disturbed by the manner of young Storms, who was no favorite at "The Rest."

"You can let him come in," said Sir Noel, with strange hesitancy; for over him came one of those chilly presentiments that delicately sensitive persons alone can feel, when some evil thing threatens them. "Let the young man come in."

The servant went out of the library, and Sir Noel leaned back in his chair, subdued by this premonition of evil, but striving to reason against it.

"He has come about the lease, no doubt," he argued. "I wish the question was settled. After all, its consequence is disproportionate to the annoyance. I would rather sign it blindly than have that young man ten minutes in the room with me."

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It was a strange sensation, but the baronet absolutely felt a thrill of dread pass through him as the light footsteps of Richard Storms approached the library, and when he came softly through the door, closing it after him, a slow pallor crept over his face, and he shrunk back with inward repulsion.

Storms, too, was pale, for it required something more than brute courage to break the wicked business he was on to a man so gentle and so proud as Sir Noel Hurst. With all his audacity he began to cringe under the grave, quiet glance of inquiry bent upon him.

"I have come, Sir Noel—that is, I am wanting to see you about a little business of my own."

"I understand," answered the baronet. "Your father wishes a new lease to be made out, and some additional land for yourself. I think that was the proposition."

"Yes, Sir Noel, only the old man was backward in saying all that he wanted, and so I came to finish the matter up, knowing more than he does, and feeling sure that your honor would want to oblige me."

"I am always ready to oblige any good tenant," answered Sir Noel, smiling gravely at what he considered the young man's conceit; "but think that wish should apply to your father rather than yourself, as he is in reality the tenant; but if you are acting for him, it amounts to the same thing."

"No, Sir Noel, it isn't the same thing at all. I came here on my own business, with which my father has nothing to do. His lease is safe enough, being promised; but I want the uplands, with a patch of good shooting-ground, which no man living will have the right to carry a gun over without my leave."

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"Anything else?" questioned Sir Noel, with quiet irony, smiling in spite of himself.

"Yes, Sir Noel, there is something else," rejoined the young man, kindling into his natural audacity. "I want a house built on the place. No thatched cottage or low-roofed farm-house, but the kind of house a gentleman should live in, who shoots over his own land, for which he is expected to pay neither rent nor tithes."

"That is, you wish me to give you a handsome property on which you can live like a gentleman? Do I understand your very modest request aright?"

"Not all of it. I haven't done yet."

"Indeed! Pray, go on."



"There isn't land enough out of lease to keep a gentleman, whose wife will have all the taste of a lady, being educated as the chief friend and associate of Sir Noel Hurst's ward. So I make it a condition that some fair income in money should be secured on the property."

"A condition! You—"

"Yes, Sir Noel, it has come to that. I make conditions, and you grant them."

Sir Noel's derisive smile deepened into a gentle laugh.

"Young man, are you mad? Nothing short of that can excuse this bombast," he said at last, reaching out his hand to ring the bell.

"Don't ring!" exclaimed Storms, sharply. "You are welcome to the laugh, but don't ring. Our business must be done without witnesses, for your own sake."

"For my own sake? What insolence is this?"

"Well, if that does not suit, I will say for the sake of your son!"

The blow was struck. Sir Noel's face blanched to the lips; but his eyes kindled and his form was drawn up haughtily.

"Well, sir, what have you to say of my son?"

"This much, Sir Noel. He has been poaching on my grounds, which I don't think you will like better than I do, letting alone the Lady Rose."

Sir Noel rose to his feet.

"Silence, sir! Do not dare take that lady's name into your lips."

Storms stepped back, frightened by the hot anger he had raised.

"I—I did but speak of her, Sir Noel, because the whole country round have thought that she was to be the lady of 'Norston's Rest.'"

"Well, sir, who says that she will not?"

"I say it! I, whose sweetheart and almost wedded mate he has made a by-word, and I do believe means to make his wife, rather than let the bargain settled between William Jessup and my father come to anything."

"What—what reason have you for thinking so?" questioned the baronet, dismayed by this confirmation of fears that had been a sore trouble to him.

"What reason, Sir Noel? Ask him about his private meetings with Ruth Jessup in the park—in her father's house—by the lake—"

"I shall not ask him. Such questions would insult an honorable man."

"An honorable man! Then ask him where he was an hour before William Jessup was shot. Ask him why the old man went out in search of him, and why a discharged gun, bruised about the stock, was found under that old cedar-tree. If your son refuses to answer, question the girl herself, my betrothed wife. Ask her about his coming to the cottage, while the old man was away. These are not pleasant questions, I dare say; but they will give you a reason why I am here, why the land I want must be had, and why I am ready to pay for it by marrying the only girl that stands in the way of your ward, without asking too many questions. You would not have the offer from many fellows, I can tell you."

Sir Noel had slowly dropped into his chair, as this coarse speech was forced upon him. His own fears, hidden under the habitual reserve of a proud nature, gave force to every word the young man uttered. He was convinced that a revolting scandal, if not grave troubles, might spring out of the secret this young man was ready to sell and cover for the price he had stated. But great as this fear was, such means of concealment seemed impossible to his honorable nature. He could not force himself into negotiations with the dastard, who seemed to have no sense of honor or shame. The dead silence maintained by the baronet made Storms restless. He had retreated a little, when Sir Noel sat down; but drew near the table again with cat-like stillness, and leaning upon it with both hands, bent forward, and whispered:

"Now I leave it to you, if the price I ask for taking her, and keeping a close mouth, isn't dog-cheap?"

"Yes, dog-cheap," exclaimed the baronet, drawing his chair back, while a flush of unmitigated disgust swept across the pallor of his face. "But I do not deal with dogs!"

Storms started upright, with a snarl that seemed to come from the animal to which he felt himself compared, and for a moment his face partook of the resemblance.

"Such animals have been dangerous before now!" he said, with a hoarse threat in his voice.

Sir Noel turned away from that vicious face, sick with disgust.

"If a harmless bark is not enough to start you into taking care of yourself, take the bite. I did not mean to give it yet, but you will have it. If you will not pay my price for your son's honor, do it to save his life, for it was he who killed William Jessup."

Sir Noel arose from his seat, walked across the room and rang the bell. When the servant answered it he pointed toward the door, saying very quietly, "Show this person out."

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## CHAPTER LIX.

### PLEADING FOR DELAY.

**H**AD her sin killed that good old man? Was the penalty of what seemed but an evasion, death—death to the being she loved better than any other on earth save one, that one suffering also from her fault? Had she, in her fond selfishness, turned that pretty home-nest into a tomb? Had God so punished her for this one offence, that she must never lift her head to the sunlight again?

Sitting there alone in the midst of the shadows that gathered around her with funereal solemnity, Ruth asked herself this question, pressing her slender hands together, and shivering with nervous cold as she looked around on the dark objects in the little room, linked with such cruel tenderness to the father she had lost, that they seemed to reproach her on every side.

"Ah, me! I cannot stay here all alone—all alone, and he gone! It is like sitting in a well. My feet are like ice. My tears are turning to hoar-frost. But he is colder than I am—happier, too, for he could die. One swift trouble pierced him, and he fell; but they shoot me through and through without killing. After all, I am more unhappy than the dead. If he knew this, oh, how my poor father would pity me! How he would long to take me with him, knowing that I have done wrong, but am not wicked! Oh, does he understand this? Will the angels be merciful, and let him know?"

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The poor child was not weeping, but sat there in the shadows of that home from which she had sent away her best friends, terrified by the darkness, dumb and trodden down under the force of her own reproaches, which beat upon her heart as the after swell of a tempest tramples the resistless shore. It seemed as if existence for her must henceforth be a continued atonement, that could avail nothing. In all the black horizon there was, for this child, but one gleam of light, and that broke upon her like a sin.

Her husband! She had seen him for one dizzy moment; his head had rested on her bosom. While panting with weakness, and undue exertion, he had found time to whisper how dear she was to him. Yes, yes! there was one ray of hope for her yet. It had struck her father down like a flash of lightning, and the very thought of it blinded her soul. Still the light was there, though she was afraid to look upon it.

A noise at the gate, a step on the gravel, a wild bound of her wounded heart, and then it fell back aching. Hurst came in slowly; he was feeble yet, and excitement had left him pale. Ruth arose, but did not go forward to meet him. She dared not, but stood trembling from head to foot. He came forward with his arms extended.

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"Ruth! My poor girl; my dear, sweet wife!"

She answered him with a great sob, and fell upon his bosom, weeping passionately. His voice had lifted her out of the solemnity of her despair. She was no longer in a tomb.

"Do not sob so, my poor darling. Am I not here?" said the young man, pressing her closer and closer to his bosom.

She clung to him desperately, still convulsed with grief.

"Be tranquil. Do compose yourself, my beloved."

"I am so lonely," she said, "and I feel so terribly wicked. Oh, Walton, we killed him. You and I. No, no; not that. I did it. No one else could."

"Hush, hush, darling! This is taking upon yourself pain without cause. I come to say this, knowing it would give you a little comfort. I questioned the doctor. They sent for him again, for I was suffering from the shock, and nearly broken down. Ill as I was, this death preyed upon me worse than the fever, so I questioned the doctor closely. I demanded that he should make sure of the causes that led to your father's death. He did make sure. While you were shut up in your room, mourning and inconsolable, there was a medical examination. Your father might have lived a few hours longer but for the sudden shock of my presence here; but he must have died from his wound. No power on earth could have saved him. That was the general opinion."

Ruth hushed her sobs, and lifted her face, on which the tears still trembled; for the first time since her father's death a gleam of hope shone in her eyes.

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"Is this so, Walton?"

"Indeed it is. I would have broken loose from them all, and told you this before, but my presence seemed to drive you wild."

"It did—it did."

"That terrible night you sent me from the house, with such pitiful entreaties to be left alone. You preferred to be with the dead rather than me."

"That was when I thought we had killed him. That was when I felt like a murderess. But it is over now. I can breathe again. He is gone—my poor father is gone, but I did not kill him—I did not kill him! Oh, Walton, there is no sin in my kisses now; nothing but tears."

The poor young creature trembled under this shock of new emotions. The great horror was gone. She no longer clung to her husband with the feeling of a criminal.

"You have suffered, my poor child. We have both suffered, because I was selfishly rash; more than that, a coward."

"No, no. Rash, but not a coward," broke in Ruth, impetuously. "You shrunk from giving pain, that is all."

"But I shrink no longer. That which we have done must be publicly known."

"How? What are you saying?"

"That you are my wife, my honored and beloved wife, and as such Sir Noel, nay, the whole world, must know you."

Then Ruth remembered Richard Storms, and his dangerous threats. She was enfeebled by long watching, and terrified by the thought of new domestic tempests.

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"Not yet, oh, not yet. Walton, you terrify me."

"But, my darling!—"

"Not yet, I say. Let us rest a little. Let us stop and draw breath before we breast another storm. I have no strength for it."

"But, Ruth, this is no home for you."

"The dear home—the dear old home. I was afraid of it. I shuddered in it only a little while ago; but now it is no longer a prison, no longer a sepulchre. I cannot bear to leave it."

"Ruth, your home is up yonder. It should have been so from the first, only I had not the courage to resist your pleadings for delay; but now—"

"But now you will wait because I so wish it. Oh, Walton, I have not the courage to ask a place under your father's roof. Give me a little time."

"It is natural that you should shrink, being a woman," said Hurst, kissing the earnest face lifted to his. "But it shames me to have set you the example."

Ruth answered this with pathetic entreaty, which she strove to render playful.

"Being two culprits. One brave, the other a poor coward, you will have compassion, and let her hide away yet a while."

"No, Ruth! We—I have done wrong, but for the hurt that struck me down, I should have told my father long ago. I meant to do it the very next day. It was his entreaties that I dreaded, not his wrath. I doubted myself, more than his forgiveness. Had he been less generous, less noble, I should not have cared to conceal anything from him."

"But having done so, let it rest a while, Walton; I am so weary, so afraid."

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Ruth wound her arms around the young man's neck, and enforced her entreaties with tearful caresses. She was, indeed, completely broken down. He felt that it would be cruelty to force her into new excitements now, and gave way.

"Be it as you wish," he said, gently. "Only remember you have no protector here, and it is not for my honor that the future lady of 'The Rest' should remain long in any home but that of her husband."

"Yes, I know, but this place has been so dear to me. Remember, will you, that the little birds are never taken from the nest all at once. They first flutter, then poise themselves on the side, by-and-by hop off to a convenient twig, flutter to a branch and back again. I am in the nest, and afraid, as yet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, darling, I understand."

"And you will say nothing, as yet. Hush!" whispered Ruth, looking wildly over his shoulder. "I hear something."

"It is nothing."

"How foolish I am! Of course it is nothing. We are quite alone; but every moment it seems as if I must hear my father's step on the threshold, as I heard it that night. It frightened me, then; now I could see him without dread, because I think that he knows how it is."

"Before many days we shall be able to see the whole world without dread," answered Hurst, very tenderly. "Till then, good-night."

"Good-night, Walton, good-night. You see that I can smile, now. I have lost my father, but the bitterness of sorrow is all gone. I had other troubles and some fears that seemed important while he was alive; but now I can hardly remember them. Great floods swallow up everything in their way. I have but just come out of the storm where it seemed as if I was wrecked forever. So I have no little troubles, now. Good-by. I shall dream after this. Good-by."

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## CHAPTER LX.

### LOVE AND HATE.

**R**UTH did sleep long and profoundly. A stone had been rolled from her heart, and the solemn rest of subsiding grief fell upon her. Early in the morning she arose and went down-stairs, feeling, for the first time for days, a keen want of food. There was no fire in the house: gray ashes on the hearth, a few blackened embers, and nothing more. The house was very lonely to her that

bright morning, for the shutters had kept it in gloomy twilight since the funeral, and she had not heeded the semi-darkness, having so much of it in her own soul.

"He has forgiven me. He knows," she thought, with a deep, deep sigh, "there is no reason why his child should cower in darkness now, and he loved the light."

Ruth pushed open the shutters, and almost smiled as a burst of sunshine came streaming in through the ivy, embroidering the floor all around her with flecks of silver.

"Yes," she thought, "he loved the light, and it is so beautiful now, I will have some breakfast. It seems strange to be hungry."

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Ruth opened a cupboard, and took from it some fruit, a biscuit, and a cup of milk. While she had been lost in the darkness, some kind hand had placed these things where she would be sure to find them when a craving for food made itself felt through her grief. She became conscious of this kindness, and her eyes filled with softer tears than she had shed for many a day. After spreading the little table with a white cloth, Ruth sat down near the window, and began to drop the berries, which some pitying child had brought her, into the milk. Just as the old china bowl was full, and she had taken up her spoon, a black shadow came against the window, shutting out all the silvery rain of light, and looking up, with a start, the girl saw Richard Storms leaning into the room.

Ruth dropped her spoon, both hands fell into her lap, and there she sat stupefied, gazing at him as a fascinated bird looks into the glittering eyes of a snake. There had been no color in her face from the first, but a deeper pallor spread over it, and her lips grew ashen.

"I would have come before, as was the duty of a man when his sweetheart was in trouble," said Storms; "but the house seemed empty. This morning I saw a shutter open, and came."

"What did you come for? Why will you torment me so?" said Ruth, hoarse with dread.

"Torment! As if the sight of one's own true love ever did that, especially when he comes to comfort one. Mother, who is so anxious to have you for a daughter, sent me."

"You cannot comfort any one against her will," said Ruth, striving to appear calm. "As for me, I only want to be left alone!"

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"As if any man, with a heart in his bosom, could do that; especially one so fond of you as I am," answered Storms; "besides, I have a fear that you may not always want to be alone. Last night, for instance!"

Ruth had for a moment rested her hands on the table, resolved to be brave; but they fell downward, and were wrung together in a spasm of distress.

The fiend at the casement saw this and smiled.

"Nay, do not let me keep you from breakfast. I love to see you eat. Many a day you and I have plucked berries together. It won't be the first time I have seen your pretty mouth red with them."

Ruth pushed the bowl of fruited milk away from her.

"I cannot eat," she said, desperately. "Your presence kills hunger and everything else. Cannot you understand how hateful it is to me? Leave that window! You block out all the pure light of heaven!"

"I will," answered Storms, with a bitter laugh. "You shall have all the light you want," and, resting his hand on the window-sill, he leaped into the room.

"Audacious!" cried Ruth, starting up, while a flash of anger shot across her face as scarlet sunset stains a snow bank.

"While girls are so tantalizingly coy, men will be audacious," said Storms, attempting to draw her toward him. "And they like us all the better for it. Shilly-shallying won't do when a man is in earnest."

"Leave me! Leave the house!" commanded Ruth, drawing back from his approach.

Any one who had seen the girl then would have thought her a fit chatelaine for the stately "Old Rest," or any other proud mansion of England.

"Not yet. Not till I have told you where you stand, and what danger lies in a storm of rage like this. It makes you beautiful enough for a queen, but you must not dare to practise your grand airs on me. I won't have them! Do you understand that, my lass? I won't have them! Come here and kiss me. That is what I mean to have."

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"Wretch!"

"Go on, but don't forget that every word has got to be paid for on your knees. I can afford to offer kisses now, because you are pretty enough to make any man stoop a bit. But wait a while, and you shall come a begging for them, and then it'll be as I choose."

Ruth did not speak, but a look of such disgustful scorn came over her face that it abashed even his insolence. He made an effort to laugh off the confusion into which that look had thrown him.

## HUNTED DOWN.

**Y**OU don't believe me! You think to escape, or put me down with these fine-lady airs. Perhaps you mean to complain to the young man up yonder, and set him to worrying me again. Try that—only try it! I ask nothing better. Let him interfere with me if he dares. Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing!" answered Ruth, with quiet dignity, for contempt had conquered all the terror in her.

"Nothing! Then I will make you speak, understand this. You cannot put me down. No one can do that. Father and son, I am the master of them all!"

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"Go!" said Ruth, wearied with his bombastic threats, for such she considered them. "Go!"

"Go! Do I frighten you?"

"You weary me—that is all."

"Then you do not believe what I say?"

"No!"

"You think the young man up yonder everything that is good."

"Yes!"

"Well, I think—But no matter. You will soon learn more than you want to hear. This is enough. I can tear the Hurst pride up by the roots. I can make them hide their faces in the dust, and I will, if you drive me to it."

"I?"

"Yes, you! It all depends on you. That young fellow's blood will be on your own head if I am brought to strike him down!"

"His blood on my head! His! Are you mad, or only fiendish, Richard Storms?"

"This is what I am, Ruth Jessup—the man who can prove who killed your father. The man who can hang your sweetheart on the highest gallows ever built in England. That is what I am, and what I will do, if you ever speak to him again."

"You! You!"

It was all the poor girl could say, this awful threat came on her so suddenly.

"You believe me. You would give the world not to believe me, but you do. Well, instead of the world you shall give me yourself. I want you enough to give up revenge for your sake. Isn't that love? I want you because of your obstinacy, which I mean to break down, day by day, till you are humble enough."

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Ruth smiled scornfully. She had been so often terrified by such language that it had lost its force.

"I do not believe you," she said. "Would not believe an angel, if he dared to say so much."

"Will you believe your father's own handwriting?"

Storms took from an inner pocket of his vest a folded letter. Ruth knew it in an instant. It was the letter she had placed in her husband's hand that day when she saw him for one moment asleep in his chamber at "The Rest."

"Ha! ha! You turn white without reading it! You guess what it is. The handwriting is large enough to read at a safe distance. Make it out for yourself."

Ruth fastened her burning eyes on the paper, which he unfolded and held between his two hands, so near that she could make out the great crude letters; but it was beyond her reach had she attempted to possess herself of it, which he seemed to fear.

"Does that mean anything? Is that a confession?"

Ruth did not answer, but dropped into a chair, faint and white, still gazing on the paper.

"Do you want more proof? Well, I can give it you, for I saw the thing done. Do you want the particulars?"

"No! no! Spare me!" cried the poor girl, lifting both hands.

"Of course, I mean to spare you. One doesn't torment his wife till he gets her!"

"Spare him!" pleaded the poor girl. "Never mind me, but spare him. He has never harmed you."

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"Never harmed me! Who was it that he hurled, like a dog, from that very door? Whose sweetheart was it that he stole? Never harmed me! Spare him! That is for you to do. No one else on this earth can spare him!"

"But how?"

The words trembled, coldly, from her white lips.

"How? By marrying the man you were promised to."

A faint moan was her only answer.

"By carrying out your murdered father's bargain. That is the only way. Shudder down, twist and wind as you will, that is the only way."

Ruth shook her head. She could not speak.

"I have got some matter to settle with Sir Noel, for you are only half my price. There must be land and gold thrown in on his part, a wedding on yours, before I promise to hold my tongue, or give up this paper. Love, money, or vengeance. These are my terms. He takes it hard—so do you, quaking like a wounded hare in its form. The sight of it does me good. Gold, land, the prettiest wife on this side of England, who shall give me a taste of vengeance, too, before I have done with

her. All these things I mean to enjoy to the full."

Still Ruth did not utter a word. The horror in her position struck the power of speech from her.

"I see. Nothing but love for this murderer could make your face so white. Nothing but hate of me could fill your eyes with such frightened loathing. But I mean to change all that, before you have been my wife a twelvemonth. Only remember this: you must never see Walton Hurst again—never. I shall keep watch. If you look at him, if you speak to him before we are wedded, I will give him up to the law that hour. If he ever crosses my path after that, I shall know how to make my wife suffer."

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Still Ruth did not speak.

"You know my terms, now. The moment Sir Noel signs the deeds I'm getting ready, he seals my lips. When our marriage certificate is signed, I give up this paper. Then there is nothing for us but love or hate. I have a taste for both. Come, now, say which it shall be."

While he was speaking, Storms had drawn close to the chair on which Ruth sat, still and passive. With the last audacious words on his lips, he stooped down, pressed them to hers, and started back, for they had met the coldness of snow.

"Fainting again? I will soon cure her of these tricks," he muttered, looking down into the still, white face he had desecrated with a kiss. "Well, she knows what to depend on now, and can take her own time for coming to. I only hope Sir Noel will be as easily settled; but he fights hard. I half wish he would say no, that I might pull him down to his knees. It would be rare sport. Only I'd rather take revenge on the young master. That comes with the wife, and the old baronet's money thrown in."

With these thoughts weaving in and out of his brain, Storms left the house, for he had no hesitation in leaving that poor girl to recover from her dead insensibility alone. It was perhaps the only mercy he could have awarded her.

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## CHAPTER LXII.

### STORMS AND LADY ROSE.

**S**TORMS returned home, triumphing in his success over that helpless girl, and confident that Sir Noel would accept his terms at last, haughtily as he had been dismissed from the house. All the next day he remained at home, expecting some message from the baronet, but none came. On the second day anxiety overcame his patience, and he set out for "The Rest," determined to push his object to the utmost, and, instead of vague insinuations, lay his whole proof before the baronet.

With all his audacity and low cunning, this man—a dastard at heart—was thinking how he might evade this interview, and yet obtain its anticipated results, as he came slowly through the wilderness. All at once he stopped, and a sudden flash shot across his face.

"The Lady Rose, the woman Sir Noel has chosen for his son's wife, she has access to him always. Her entreaties will touch his heart, and break down his pride. There she is among the great standard roses. Proud and dainty lady as she is, I will set her to work for me. By heavens, she comes this way!"

The young man was right. That young lady came out from among her sister roses, and turned toward the wilderness, in whose shadows Storms was lurking. She wanted some tender young ferns to complete a bouquet intended for the little sitting-room that Walton was sure to visit during the morning.

As Lady Rose was moving down the shaded path with that slow, graceful motion which was but the inheritance of her birth, she seemed to be whispering something to the flowers in her hand. Once she paused and kissed them, smiling softly, as their perfume floated across her face like an answering caress. She was stooping to rob a delicate species of fern of its tenderest shoots, when Storms flung his shadow across her path.

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The lady arose, with a faint start, and gazed at the man quietly as one waits for an inferior to speak. With all his audacity, the young man hesitated under that look of gentle pride.

"Did you wish to ask something?" she said, at length, remarking his hesitation.

The sound of her voice emboldened him, but he spoke respectfully, taking off his hat.

"No, Lady Rose, I want nothing. But I can tell you that which it is perhaps best that you should know."

"Is it of the wedding? Is it of Ruth you would speak?"

"Of her, and of others, nearer and dearer to you than, she ever was, or can be, Lady Rose."

The soft flush of color, that was natural to that lovely face, deepened to a rich carnation, and then to scarlet.

"I do not understand!"

"I am wanting to speak of Walton Hurst, the heir of 'Norston's Rest.'"

"And what of him? Nothing serious can have happened since I saw him," said Lady Rose, at first with a swift, anxious glance; then she smiled at her own fright; for half an hour before she had seen Hurst walking upon the terrace.

"Lady Rose, have you seen Sir Noel this morning?"

"Sir Noel! Why, no. He breakfasted earlier than the rest, or in his room."

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"That is it. He is in trouble, and would not let you see it in his face."

"In trouble! Sir Noel!"

"He has heard bad news."

"Bad news! How? Where did it come from?"

"I took it to him, lady. It has been a burden on my conscience too long. The murder of a man is no light thing to bear."

"The murder of a man!" repeated Lady Rose, horrified.

"I speak of William Jessup, whom we buried yesterday, and who was murdered in the park, one night, by Walton Hurst." Storms spoke with slow impressiveness, while Lady Rose stood before him with blanched lips and widely distended eyes.

"Murdered in the park by Walton Hurst! Man, are you mad?"

"Lady, I saw the shot fired. I saw the gun twisted from the murderer's hands, and the stock hurled at his head before the old man fell. He was found lying across the path lifeless, the brain contused, while Jessup lay shot through the lungs a little way off, where he had dropped after that one spasm of strength."

"You saw all this with your own eyes?"

"I saw it all, but would never have spoken, had the old man lived. Now that he is dead—"

"You would have another life—his life!"

"Do not tremble so, lady! Do not look upon me as if a wild beast were creeping toward you. I want no man's life—"

"Ah!"

"Though the young master up yonder has wronged me."

"Wronged you? Walton Hurst wronged you? Impossible!"

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"Yes, me! I was engaged to wed old Jessup's daughter. It was a settled thing. She loved me!"

"Well?"

"But the young master stepped in!"

"I do not believe it," cried the lady, with a disdainful lift of the head, though all the color had faded from her face. "No person on earth could make me believe it."

Storms allowed this outburst to pass by him, quietly, while he stood before the lady, hat in hand.

Then he spoke:

"Lady, it was this that caused the murder. The young master was in the cottage, as he had been many a time before that night, but this time Jessup was away in London. I was going there myself; saw him and her through the window, and turned back, not caring to go in, while he was there, though I thought no great harm of it—"

"There was no harm. I will stake my word, my life, my very soul; there was no harm in it," cried Lady Rose. "If an honorable man lives, it is Walton Hurst."

"It may be, lady. I do not dispute it. But perhaps old Jessup thought otherwise. I do not know. There must have been hard words when he came in and found those two in company, for in a few minutes the young gentleman came dashing through the porch with a gun in his hand. He may have been out shooting and stopped at the cottage on his way home. I cannot tell that; but he came out with a gun in his hand; then Jessup followed, muttering to himself, and overtook the young master just as he got under the shadow of the great cedar of Lebanon. Some hot words passed there. I could not hear them distinctly, for they were muffled with rage; but I came up just in time to see Walton Hurst level his gun and fire. Then Jessup leaped out from the shadows, wrenched the gun from the hand that had fired it, and, turning it like a club, knocked Hurst down with it. This was done in the moonlight. I saw it all. Then Jessup dropped the gun, staggered backward into the darkness of the cedar, and fell. They were found so—one lying in the blackness cast down by the cedar branches, the other with his face to the sky, as he had been thrown across the path where the moonlight shone."

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"Ah, yes, I remember—I remember," moaned Lady Rose. "He looked so white and cold; we thought he was dead."

"She was there. She went to the young man first. I marked that. Her father lay in the shadows bleeding to death, but she went to the young man first."

"She did. I remember it," flashed through the brain of Lady Rose. But she said, bravely, "It was nothing. He lay in the light, and she saw him first. It was natural."

"I thought so afterward. She was my sweetheart, lady, and I was glad to believe it," answered Storms, who had no wish to excite the lady's jealousy beyond a certain point; "but after that, she grew cold to me. How could I help thinking it was because his kindness had turned her head a little?"

"Kindness! Perhaps so. We have all been kind to Ruth. It is well you charge my guardian's son

with nothing but kindness. Anything else would have been dishonor, you know, and it would offend me if you charged that upon him."

"Lady, I charge him with nothing, save the murder of William Jessup."

"But that is impossible. You can make no one believe it. I wonder you will insist on the wild story."

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It was true Lady Rose really could not take in this idea of murder—it was too horrible for reality. She put it aside as an incomprehensible dream.

"I saw it," persisted Storms, staggered by her persistent unbelief.

"Oh, I have dreamed such things, and they seemed very real," answered the lady, with a slight wave of the hand.

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## CHAPTER LXIII.

### THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

**L**ADY, I have other proof. Read that. Perhaps you have seen William Jessup's writing. Read that."

Lady Rose took the letter and read it. Now, indeed, her cheek did blanch, and her blue eyes widened with horror.

"This is strange," she said, growing whiter and whiter. "Strange, but impossible—quite impossible!"

"Coupled with my evidence, it is enough to hang any man in England," said Storms, reaching out his hand for the paper, which she returned to him in a dazed sort of dream.

"What do you want, young man? How do you mean to use this letter?"

"I have told Sir Noel what I mean, Lady Rose. I am a poor man, he is a rich one. I only asked a little of his wealth in exchange for his son's life."

"Well?"

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"He would not listen to me. He ordered me from the house. He tried not to believe me, so tough is his pride. It might have been disbelief; it might have been rage that made him so white; but he looked like a marble man, face, neck, and hands. That was after the first hint. He gave me no chance to tell the whole, though I had this letter in my pocket."

"Then you gave him no proof?" questioned Lady Rose, eagerly.

"Proof? He did not wait for that. No dog was ever ordered from a door as I was. But he shall have the letter; he shall hear all that I have told you. Then he will come to terms."

"He never will!" murmured Lady Rose. "Not even to save his son's life!"

This was said under the lady's breath.

"And if he does not?" she questioned. "If he refuses to pay your price?"

"Then Sir Noel cannot expect me to be more merciful to his son than he is."

"What is it—tell me exactly—what is it you demand for your silence, and that paper?"

Storms took a folded sheet of foolscap from his pocket, and handed it to Lady Rose, who made an attempt to read it, but her hand shook so violently that the lines mingled together, like seaweed on a wave.

"I cannot read it; tell me."

Storms took the paper which he had prepared for Sir Noel, and read it aloud. His hand was firm enough; the agitation that shook the frame of that brave, beautiful girl, reassured him. He was certain of her influence with Sir Noel.

"Land, free hunting, the house of a gentleman. I wonder he asks so little. Does he know what a life like that is worth to us?" she thought.

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"There is one thing more," said Storms. "Those things I demand for my silence. The paper I only give up when Ruth Jessup is my wife."

Lady Rose seemed to waive the subject aside as an after-consideration.

"Land and house," she said, drawing a deep breath, as if some idea had become a resolution in her mind. "Tell me, must they be in this county?"

"If Sir Noel had land in another part of England I should like it better. One might set up for a gentleman with more success among strangers," was the cool reply.

"I can give you all these things in a part of England where you have never been heard of," said the lady. "Only remember this: there must be no more appeals to Sir Noel. He must never see that paper. It must never be mentioned again to any human being. That is my condition."

"But, lady, can you make this certain? Sir Noel is your guardian."



"Not as regards this property. Have no fear, I promise it."

"And Ruth—Ruth Jessup? Without her all this goes for nothing."

"Ah, if, as you say, she loves you, that is easy. To a woman who loves, all things are possible."

"She did love me once," muttered Storms, beginning to lose heart.

"Then she loves you yet. Ruth is an honest girl, and with such change is impossible. To love once is to love forever; knowing her, you ought to be sure of this. Besides, it is understood that she is promised to you."

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"She is promised to me," answered Storms, with some show of doubt, "and if it had not been—"

The young man broke off. The blue eyes of Lady Rose were fixed on him with such shrinking wistfulness that he changed the form of his speech.

"If it had not been for the hurt her father got, we might have been wedded before now."

A pang of conscience came over Lady Rose when she thought of pretty Ruth Jessup as the wife of this man who was even then trading on the life of a fellow-being. But a course of reasoning, perhaps unconsciously selfish, blinded her to the misery she might bring on that young creature, should it chance that the union was distasteful to her. She even made the property, with which the bridegroom would be endowed, a reason for wishing the marriage. "Ruth is such a sweet little lady," she reasoned, "that the life of a man who worked on his own grounds would be coarse and rude to her. In some sort we are giving her the place of a gentlewoman. Besides, she must love the man. Everything goes to prove that—their walks in the park, his own word. Yes, I am doing good to her. It is a benefaction, not a bribe."

All these thoughts passed through the mind of Lady Rose swiftly, and with a degree of confusion that baffled her clear judgment. Having resolved to redeem the good name of her guardian's son on any terms, she sought to reconcile those terms with the fine sense of honor that distinguished her above most women.

"Remember," she said, with dignity, "I will give you the property you demand, partly for the benefit of Ruth Jessup, and partly because I would save my guardian from annoyance. Not that I for one moment believe the horrid thing you have told me. I know it to be an impossibility."

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"The courts will think their own way about that," answered Storms. "An honest man's oath, backed with this letter, will be tough things to explain there."

"It is because they are difficult to explain that I have listened to you for a moment," said Lady Rose. "For twice the reward you demand, I would not have a suspicion thrown on my guardian's son. Of any more serious evil I have no fear."

"Well, my lady, take it your own way, believe what you like. So long as I get the property, and the wife I want, we won't quarrel about what they are given for. Only both those things I am bound to have."

"But I cannot force Ruth Jessup to marry any man," said Lady Rose.

"All the same. It is your business now to see that she keeps to her old bargain. Or all we have agreed upon goes for nothing."

The man was getting more familiar, as this conversation went on. The sensitive pride of the young lady was aroused by his growing demands, and she dismissed him, almost haughtily.

"Go now," she said. "I will think of a safe method by which this transfer can be made. In a day or two I will see you again. Till then be silent, and prepare yourself to deliver up that paper."

"But Ruth Jessup. What of her?"

"I will see Ruth. She has a kind heart. I will see Ruth."

"Then good-day, my lady. You shall see that I know how to hold my tongue, and remember kindness too! Good-day, my lady."

Lady Rose watched the young man as he glided off through the wilderness, with flashing eyes and rising color. Up to this time she had held her feelings under firm control. Now terror, loathing, and haughty scorn kindled up the soft beauty of her face into something grandly strange.

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"Slanderer! Wretch! The lands I do not care for. But that I should be compelled to urge pretty Ruth Jessup on a creature like that. Can she love him? I will go at once, or loathing of the task will keep me back forever."

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## CHAPTER LXIV.

### JUDITH'S RETURN.

**T**HE poor father, whom Judith Hart had so cruelly abandoned, sat alone in the old house, patient in his broken-heartedness and more poverty-stricken than ever. He had no neighbors near enough to drop in upon his solitude, and all wish for reading had left him, with the thankless

girl he had worshipped.

When he came home and found himself alone in the saddest of all sad hours, that in which a day passes into eternity with the sun, his desolation was complete. It was something, when the cow he had petted into loving tameness would come to the garden wall, and look at him with her soft intelligent eyes, as if she knew of his sorrow and longed to share it with him. Sometimes he would go out and talk to her as if she possessed human sensibility—gather grass and wild flowers, and caress the animal's neck as she licked them from his hands.

He was sitting thus lonely at the window between twilight and dark, when the figure of a woman came walking down the lane, that made the almost dead pulses of his heart stir rapidly. It was so like Judith, the free movement, the very poise of her head. The resemblance almost made him cry out. But, no, he had been mistaken before. The dusk was gathering. It must be some neighboring woman come to chat a moment with him. Some of the old friends were kind enough for that now and then when Judith was at home.

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No, no—it was Judith. He could see her face now. She was smiling, and waved one hand; in the other she carried a bundle which did not trouble her with its weight, she was so young and strong—Judith, his daughter, come back again.

The old man got up from the window and went into the porch, holding out his arms.

"Judith! Judith! Oh, my child! my child!" She came up with breathless speed, flung her bundle down on the porch, and clasped the old man in her arms.

"So you have missed me, father? Take that and that for loving me so."

She kissed his face, and shook both his hands with emphasis; then turned about, crossed the yard and patted the cow on its forehead.

"There, now, that I have got all the welcome there is for me, let's go in and strike a light. How dark you are!"

Directly the girl had a match flaring and a candle lighted.

"There," she said, "I will bring another bowl and we will have supper; there is porridge enough for two."

There was enough for two, though one had the greatest portion, for joy took away the old man's appetite. It was enough for him that he could sit there with a spoon in his hand, gazing at her. There was not much conversation during this meal. The timid old man asked few questions, and Judith only said that she had been in a servant's place away up the railroad, and had brought home her wages, or most of them.

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The girl had every penny that she had earned in her bosom, and gave it to the old man that night. She had walked all the way from "Norston's Rest," that the little sum might be worth giving. So the old man was happy that night, and after Judith had carried her bundle, in which was the red garment Storms had given her, up-stairs, he was on his knees by the unmade bed, in his little room, with a prayer of humble thanksgiving on his lips, and tears streaming down his face like rain.

The next day Judith took up her household work with unusual energy. It was her only resource from the excitement of hopes and fears that possessed her. The love that had tempted her from home was absorbing as ever; but doubts and fears strong as the love tormented her continually. Even at the last moment she had hesitated to leave the neighborhood of "Norston's Rest." There had been something in Storms' manner that made her distrust him.

But she would wait patiently. That was her promise. In three days he had pledged himself to see her. If he failed, if he was mocking her, why, then—

Judith turned away from the subject here. That which might follow was more than she dared think of.

I have said that the girl was not all evil—indeed what human being is? She loved this man Storms, with all the passion of an ardent, ill-regulated nature. Heedless, selfish, nay, to a certain extent, wicked, she might be; but deliberate cruelty of action was repulsive to her—that of speech had its origin in the jealousy which tormented her more than any one else.

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Judith understood well enough that the paper she had given to Storms might cause great trouble to Sir Noel Hurst, but her ideas of the rights of property were very crude, and she could see no reason why that should not be used to win a portion of the baronet's great wealth, for the benefit of her lover. "Why should one man be so enormously rich without labor," she reasoned, "and another win the bare necessities of life by incessant toil?" Judith had gathered these ideas from her lover, and dwelt upon them in extenuation of her fault, when she joined him in a conspiracy to wring wealth from the proud old man at "Norston's Rest."

After her return home, the destitution of her father gave a new impulse to this levelling idea. She began to look on him as a victim to the injustice of society, and persuaded herself that in the advancement of her lover's projects she would lift him out of this miserable existence.

It was with difficulty that Judith kept silent, on this subject. She longed to cheer and astonish the old man by the brilliancy of her projects, but Storms had forbidden this, and she dared not disobey him.

On the third day, this hoping and longing became greatly intensified. It seemed to her as if each hour had lengthened into a year. She was constantly examining the face of that old brass clock, and reviling it in her heart because the hands went round so slowly.

When her father came in, his presence was more than she could bear. Forced to energetic action by her own unrest, she had prepared his supper early and after that sent him down to the village,

that he might not detect the fever of her impatience.

Twice she went down to the orchard wall and came back, disappointed that no one was in sight; though she knew that Storms would not be there until his approach could be covered by the evening shadows.

At last she sat down by a window that looked toward the orchard, resolved to wait. Thus she watched the sunset, while its crimson melted into purple, through which the stars began to shine. A strange, keen light was in her face, and her eyes had the glitter of diamonds when the first star came out. Then, and not till then, she lighted a lamp.

All was still in the house. Far back in the room the lamp was turned down, shedding a faint light, such as a clouded moon might throw, around the table on which it stood, but leaving those pleasant shadows we love in a summer's night everywhere else. Storms would not enter the orchard until he had seen that light. It was the old signal that they both understood.

Scarcely had this faint illumination brightened the room, when Judith saw something flutter above the wall, as if a great bird had settled there and was ready to fly again. She leaped to her feet, snatched up a shawl that had been laid across a chair in readiness, and hurried through the back door, folding the drapery around her as she went.

## CHAPTER LXV.

### ON THE PRECIPICE.

**R**ICHARD STORMS was there, leaning against the wall. He reached out his hand to help her over—an attention that made the heart leap in her bosom.

"Oh, Richard, I am so glad that you have come," she exclaimed, clinging fondly to his arm.

"Hush," he said, "wait till we get farther from the house. The old man will hear us."

"No, no. He is down in the village. I sent him away."

This was what Storms wished to learn, but in his subtle craft he would not ask the question directly.

"He knows nothing—you have not told him that I might be here?" he questioned.

"Not a word."

"That is wise. He might be talking to the neighbors and set them clamoring at you again. I shouldn't like that, just as everything is coming right with us."

"There's no danger of that; he speaks to no one—poor old man. The neighbors know nothing about my leaving home; he felt it too much for talking."

"Of course, and you got back safely?"

"Oh, yes. How good of you to ask! But you have something to tell me."

"Let us walk farther on," said Storms, passing his arm around the girl's waist.

Thus persuasive in his speech and unusually affectionate in manner, Storms led the girl down the orchard path. Once under the old apple tree where their last stormy interview had taken place, he paused and leaned against the trunk, while she stood before him, waiting for the information he had brought with some impatience; for, with all his strange gentleness, few words had been spoken on the way.

"Well," she said, "have you brought no news—good or bad? Have you seen Sir Noel?"

"No."

"No! Why not? Afraid to go on, were you?"

"Afraid? You, Judith, ought to know me better than that. I found an easier way of getting what I want. Women, after all, are safest to deal with. Instead of a farm I shall have land in my own right."

"You will! You are sure; and I gave it to you!"

Storms made no reply to this exultant outburst, but went on counting over the benefits he had secured with tantalizing particularity.

"In one week from now, I shall be a rich landholder, with plenty of money in my pocket, and a house that any gentleman in England might be proud to take his lady into."

Judith's eyes flashed triumphantly.

"It was I who helped you to all this land, money, the grand house we shall live in. Oh, who ever thought that a bit of crumpled paper would do so much?"

Storms shrugged his shoulders, and prepared to walk onward.

Judith saw this, and her temper, always ready to take fire, kindled up.

"You lift your shoulders—you keep silent when I speak of the paper which brought all these grand

things, as if you did not mean to give me credit for giving it to you."

"What would the paper have been without a shrewd man to use it? Besides, you found it in the bushes where any other person might have picked it up."

Judith felt a strange choking in her throat.

"What does this mean, Richard Storms?"

"Mean? why, nothing. Only it is getting stormy here. When you lift your voice in that way, it might be heard from the house. Walk on; you have nothing to flare up about."

There was something in the man's voice that would have warned Judith, but for her own rising temper. As it was, she walked toward the precipice, sometimes keeping ahead, and looking back at him over her shoulder. He certainly looked pale in the moonlight.

"Now, Richard, what is the meaning of this offish talk? Is it that you want to get rid of your promise, with all these twistings and turnings?"

When Judith put this question, she had halted close by the brink of the precipice and turned around, facing the young man, who came up more slowly.

Storms attempted to laugh, but he was too hoarse for that.

"I haven't said a word about being off; but, if I had, all this temper wouldn't hold me back. What should hinder me doing as I please? The paper was as much mine as yours."

"What should hinder you, Dick Storms? Don't ask me that. I do not want to talk about the things I saw, that night."

Judith stood close to the precipice as she said this, between the very edge and Storms, who strode forward till his white sinister face was close to hers.

"You saw what? No more hints, I am tired of them. You saw what?"

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"I will not talk about it here. When I do speak, it will be to Sir Noel Hurst," answered the girl, bravely.

"Sir Noel Hurst will be very likely to believe you against my oath, and the paper signed by Jessup himself."

"The paper that I gave you, fool that I was!"

"Exactly, if you could not trust me."

"I did trust you—I did shield you. I gave you the paper. I kept still as the grave about what I saw that night."

"Still as the grave—there is no stillness like that," said the man, in a voice so hoarse and strange that Judith instinctively attempted to draw sideway from her perilous position.

But Storms changed as she did, still with his face to hers, pressing her toward the edge.

"If I kept back another paper, it was because I meant to give it you on our wedding day, and prove how much a poor girl could do toward saving the man she loved from—"

"From what?" questioned Storms, throwing his arm around the girl and drawing her back from the precipice, as if he had for the first time seen her danger. "Of what are you speaking, Judith?"

"Of a paper I found in the dress that was taken off William Jessup after he died, which makes the one I gave you of no worth at all."

"You have such a paper, and kept it back?" The man absolutely threw a tone of tender reproach into a voice that had been cold as ice and bitter as gall a minute before. "Let me read it; the moonlight is strong enough."

"It is not with me. I have put it by in safe hiding, meaning to burn it before your face and pay you for the marriage lines with your life."

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Storms drew the girl farther away from the precipice, for he feared to trust the instinct of destruction that had brought him there, and would not all at once be subdued. He felt that his own life was, for the time, bound up in hers, and absolutely shuddered as he thought of the fate from which a word had saved him and her.

For a time they walked back to the orchard in silent disturbance: she unconscious of the awful danger she had run; he pondering new schemes in his mind.

"Why will you always doubt me?" he said, at last.

"Because you force me to doubt," she answered, almost patiently, for the ebb-tide of her anger had set in.

"No; it is your own bad temper, which always drives me into teasing you. I have the license in my pocket, and came to settle everything."

"The license!"

At this word Judith turned her face to the moonlight, and Storms saw that his falsehood had done its work.

"While you have been doubting me," he said, with a look and tone of deep injury, "I have been upon my knees almost, persuading the old people to give up this Jessup girl, and take you in her place."

"And they have? Oh, Richard!"

"I came to set the day when you would come to the farm and stop a bit with the old mother."

"Ah!" said Judith, with tears in her eyes, "I cannot remember when I had a mother."

Storms lifted his hand impatiently. Even he shrunk from using the name of his kind old mother as

a snare for the girl.

"You will say nothing of this to your father, or of my coming here at all. When we are wedded and ready to start for the new home, it will be a grand surprise for him."

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"Shall we—oh, Richard, shall we take him with us?" cried Judith.

"That may be as you wish. I will not object."

"Oh, Richard, I would give up that horrible paper now if I had it with me!"

"No, let it rest until I can exchange it for the marriage lines; then it will be as much for your interest as mine that it should be made ashes of. But be sure and have it about you then."

"I will, I will. Only it is like putting a snake in my bosom when I hide it there."

"And that pretty dress. Leave nothing behind you. On the second day from this I will be at the nearest station. Meet me there, but mind that no one sees us speaking to each other."

"I will be careful."

"Good-night, then."

The girl looked at him wistfully, as if she expected something more; but Storms only reached out his hand. He was not quite a Judas, and did not kiss her.

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## CHAPTER LXVI.

### SIR NOEL AND RUTH.

**S**IR NOEL HURST had been left standing in his library, white and stately, like a man turned into marble. That one hideous word had struck him with the force of a blow. In the suppressed rage of the moment he had sent Storms from his presence, scarcely comprehending the charge he had made or the price for secrecy that he demanded. Still, audacious and unbelievable as the man's charge was, it aroused reflections in the father's mind that had hardly taken form before. For months and months he had been vaguely uneasy about his son. With the keen perceptions of a man of the world, he had, without spying upon Walton, observed him anxiously. He knew that more of his time was spent about the gardener's cottage than seemed consistent with any interest he could have felt in William Jessup. He saw that the young daughter, whom he could with difficulty look upon as more than a child, was, in fact, a wonderfully beautiful girl. Beyond all this he perceived that, day by day, the young man drifted from his home, that the society of Lady Rose was almost abandoned, and that this fair young patrician drooped under the change.

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On the night when the young man was found lying so deathly and still across the forest-path, these observations had deepened into grave anxiety. He became certain that some more dangerous feeling than he had been willing to believe must have drawn his son into the peril of his life. The anguish in Ruth's face; the piteous humility with which she shrunk from observation, alarmed him; for the girl had been, from her very infancy, a pet at the great house, and underneath all other anxiety was a feeling of paternal interest in her.

That some dispute had arisen, of which Ruth was the object, he had never doubted, and that both men had been injured in a rash contest seemed natural. All this was hard enough for a proud, sensitive man to bear in patience; but these apprehensions had been held in abeyance during his son's illness by deeper anxiety for his life, and now from sorrow over the death of a faithful old servant, to whom every member of the family was attached.

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All these perplexities and suspicions had been fearfully aroused by the charge and proposal of young Storms. Not that the baronet gave anything but a scornful dismissal of either from his mind, but his old anxieties were kindled anew, and he resolved to break at once the tie that had drawn his son so often to the cottage, or, at least, make himself master of its nature. Had young Hurst been out of danger from excitement, perhaps Sir Noel would have broken the subject to him; but he had carefully avoided it, fearing some evil effect during his illness, and now was cautious to give no sign of the uneasiness that possessed him. So, with the sting of a rude insult urging him on, he went to Jessup's cottage.

Ruth was lying in the little parlor, weak and helpless as a crushed flower, all her rich color gone, all the velvety softness of her eyes clouded. A man's step on the porch made her start, and listen. She had cause to dread such steps, and they terrified her. A knock, measured and gentle—what if it was her husband's? What if Storms was on the watch? He must not come in. That was to endanger more than his life. It was her hard task to say this. Ruth started up, crept to the door, and opened it, with trembling hands.

"Sir Noel!"

The name scarcely formed itself on her lips, when she shrunk back from the baronet's stern countenance, wondering what new sorrow was coming upon her.

Sir Noel had always liked the girl, and her sad bereavement awoke his compassion. Almost

before she had spoken he felt the cruelty of his errand. It was impossible to look into those eyes, and think ill of a creature so helpless and so beautiful. But the very loveliness that disarmed him had brought death to her own father, and threatened disgrace to his son. The plans he had formed for that son—the future advancement of his house—all were in peril, unless she could be removed from the young man's path. This must be done. Still he would deal gently with her.

Sir Noel had sought the cottage with a quickly-formed resolution to urge on the marriage of its inmate with the man who had exhibited some right to claim her; but as he stood on the threshold, with that young girl trembling before him, this thought took a form so hideous, that he almost hated himself for having formed it.

Ruth went into the little parlor, trembling with apprehension. Sir Noel followed her. Here his heart nearly failed him. He felt the cruelty of harassing her with new troubles, when sorrow lay so heavily upon her; but anxiety urged him on against his better nature.

"Poor child!" he said, gently. "I see that you have suffered; so young, too. It is hard!"

Ruth lifted her eyes to his face, as if wondering that any one—he, most of all—could pity her. Then she said, with touching sadness, "It is hard, and I am so tired."

"I too have had trouble," said the baronet. "For many days we feared that Walton—"

"I know! I know! He came near dying, like my father—the best father that ever lived."

Ruth spoke low and nervously. The presence of Walton's father filled her with apprehension. Yet she longed to fall at his feet, and implore him to forgive her.

"Ruth," said Sir Noel, seating the poor girl on the sofa, and taking both her hands in his, "Ruth, try and think that it is your father who asks you: and answer me from your soul. Does my son love you?"

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A flash of hot scarlet swept that desolate face. The eyelids drooped over those startled eyes. Ruth tried to draw her hands away.

"Answer me, child."

He spoke very gently, so gently that she could not help answering.

"Yes," she said, in a soft whisper. "He loves me."

"And you?"

Ruth lifted her pleading eyes to his—those great, innocent eyes, and answered, humbly, "How could I help it?"

"How long is this since, Ruth?"

"I don't know. It seems to me always; but he knows best."

"But, my poor child, how do you expect this to end?"

"It is ended! oh, it is ended! I wish you would tell him so, Sir Noel. I must never, never see him again."

Ruth threw both arms over the end of the sofa, and, burying her face upon them, broke into a wild passion of sobs.

Sir Noel was touched by this helpless acquiescence. He bent over her sadly enough.

"No, Ruth, you never must see him again."

"I know it—I know it!"

"There is another who loves you," he said, shrinking from the idea of giving that girl to the crafty ruffian who had dared to threaten him. It seemed like an insult to his son thus to dispose of the creature that son had loved, and evidently respected; but he was not prepared for the wild outburst of anguish that followed his words. Ruth sprang to her feet, her eyes widening, her wet face contracted.

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"You will not—you must not ask that of me. I will die first."

"Be it so. I will not urge you," answered the baronet, soothingly. "Only promise me never to see Walton again!"

"I must! I do! Oh, believe me! I never, never must see him again!"

"You must go away!"

"Oh, if I could—if I only could!"

"It must be, my poor child. Some place of refuge shall be found."

Ruth lifted her face with sudden interest.

"I will see that you are cared for. Only this my son must never know."

"He must never know," repeated the poor girl. "Only, if I should be dying, would there be danger then? Only when I am dying?"

"We will not think of that, Ruth."

"No. I dare not. It tempts one so; but the good God will not be so cruel as to let me live."

Sir Noel was surprised at this broken-hearted submission. He had come to the cottage prepared for resistance, perhaps rebellion, but not for this. No doubt of the girl's innocence, or of his son's honor, disturbed him now. But this only made his task the more difficult. She must be removed from the neighborhood. The honor of his house—the future of his son demanded it.

"I will go now, Ruth," he said, with great kindness; "but, remember, you will never want a comfort or a friend while I live. In a few days I will settle on some safe and pleasant home for you."

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Ruth did not seem to hear him, though she was looking steadily in his face; but when he dropped her hand, she said, piteously, "You will tell him—you will let him know that it was for his sake?"

"After you are gone, he shall know everything, except where to find you."

Ruth sunk back on her seat, bowed her face drearily, and thus Sir Noel left her.

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## CHAPTER LXVII.

### SHOWING THE WAY.

**W**HERE could Ruth go? She had never been from home more than once or twice in her life. Her world was there lying about "The Rest"—her home in that cottage, where she was born, and her mother had died. She must leave it; of course, she must leave it, but how? To what place would Sir Noel Hurst send her? With that awful secret lying between her and Richard Storms, would she dare to go? He would avenge her absence on Hurst. She, no doubt, stood between him and the thing she shuddered to think of. What could she do?

All night long the poor child lay asking herself these questions. She had locked herself in with the darkness as the dusk came on, fearing that her husband might come—dreading to hear another step that filled her, soul and body, with loathing. She did hear a light tread on the turf, a gentle knock on the door, and fell to weeping on her pillow, with sobs that filled the whole desolate house. After these exhausting tears she slept a little, and when the daylight stole through the crevices of the shutters she turned from it, and lay with her face to the wall, wondering if she would live the day out.

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There was no fire in the cottage that day—no food cooked or eaten. Ruth crept out from her room and lay down on the little sofa, faint and miserably helpless. The apathy of great suffering was upon her. She was hemmed in by darkness, and saw no way out.

Some time in the morning she heard a voice at the casement. A white hand was thrust through the ivy, and beat lightly on the glass.

"Let me in, Ruth! Oh, let me in. I must speak to you!"

It was Lady Rose, who had known little rest since her interview with Storms in the Wilderness. A ring of excitement was in her voice. The face which looked in through the ivy was wildly white.

Ruth arose and unlocked the door. She would rather have been alone in her misery; but what did it matter? If she had any hope, it was that Lady Rose would not speak of him. She could bear anything but that.

"Poor Ruth! How ill—how miserably ill you look," said the lady, taking the hot hands that seemed to avoid her with a sudden clasp. "Death, even a father's death, cannot have done all this."

Ruth shook her head sorrowfully.

"My father—I have almost forgotten him."

Lady Rose scarcely heeded this mournful confession; but drew the girl down upon the sofa, unconsciously grasping her hands till they would have made her cry out with pain at another time.

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"Ruth, I have seen Storms, a man you know of. I met him in the wilderness. He told me—"

"He told you *that!*" exclaimed Ruth, aroused to new pangs of distress. "And you believed him?"

"Oh, Ruth, he has your father's letter. We could laugh his proof to scorn, but for that."

"Still, I do not believe it," said Ruth, kindling into vitality again. "It was my father's letter. I carried it, not knowing what was written. My poor father believed it, no doubt; but I do not."

"Nor do I," said Lady Rose. "Nothing can make me believe it!"

Ruth threw herself at the young lady's feet, and clung to her in passionate gratitude.

"Get up, Ruth!" said Lady Rose. "Be strong, be magnanimous, for you alone can save Walton Hurst's life."

The girl got up obediently, but seemed turning to marble as she did so; for she guessed at the impossibility that would be demanded of her.

"I? How?" she questioned, in a hoarse whisper. "How?"

"You and I. It rests with us."

Ruth breathed heavily.

"You and I!"

"This wretch—forgive me—this man, Storms, wants two things—land and gold. These I can give him, and will."

"Yes, yes."

"But he wants something else which I cannot give, and on that all the rest depends."

Ruth did not speak. She grew cold again.

"He wants you, Ruth."

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No word, not even a movement of the lip answered this.

"He says," continued Lady Rose, "that you love him; that you are, of your own free will, pledged to him."

"It is false!"

The words startled Lady Rose.

"Oh, Ruth, do not say that. We have no other hope."

"But he, Walton Hurst I mean, is innocent. You know it—I know it."

"But this man holds the proof that would cost his life, false or true. It is in his hands, and we cannot wrest it from them."

"Is this true, Lady Rose?"

"Fatally, fearfully true; God help us! Oh, Ruth, why do you hesitate to save him?"

"I do not hesitate!"

"You will rescue him from this terrible accusation? You will complete the engagement, and get that awful letter? To think that he is in this great danger, and does not know it! To think that his salvation lies in our hands. What I can do is nothing. It will be you that saves him."

"I cannot! I cannot!"

"Ruth Jessup! You refuse? You have the power to save him, and will not?"

"God help me! God help me, I cannot do it."

Lady Rose turned away from the girl haughtily, angrily.

"And I could think that she loved Walton Hurst," she said, in bitterness of heart.

"Oh, do not, do not condemn me. If you only knew—if you only knew," cried Ruth, wringing her hands in wild desperation.

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"I know that you could save him from death, and his whole family from dishonor, and will not. That is enough. I will importune you no longer. Had it been me, I, the daughter of an earl, would have wedded that man, yes—though he were twice the fiend he is—rather than let this thunderbolt fall on a noble house, on as brave and true a man as ever lived."

"He is brave, he is true, and you are his peer. You are worthy of him, heart and soul, and I am not. But you might pity me a little, because I cannot do what would save him."

"Because you are incapable of a great sacrifice. Well, I do pity you. As for me, I would die rather than he should even know of the peril that threatens him."

"Die? Die?"

A sudden illumination swept the white face of Ruth Jessup. Her eyes took fire, her breath rose in quick gasps, out of which came those two words. Then another question—would a death save him?

"If my death could do it, I need not have come to you," answered Lady Rose, proudly.

"True, true, I can see that. Do not think so hardly of me. I am not born to bravery, as you are. My father was only a poor gardener. When great sacrifices are asked of me, I may want a little time. You should not be angry with me for that."

Lady Rose turned eagerly.

"You relent. You have a heart, then?"

"Yes, yes, I will save him. In another week his path and yours shall be clear and bright.

"Mine? Mine? No, no! Can you think I do not understand all that you meditate, all that you may suffer in a marriage with this man? I spoke of dying. The self-abnegation you promise is a thousand times worse than death. Ruth Jessup, I envy you the power of so grand a sacrifice: I could make it as you will; and you could give up everything, taking no share in the future as I will. When this cloud is swept from 'Norston's Rest,' I leave it forever."

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Excitement had kept Lady Rose proud and strong till now; but in place of this a great swell of pity, and self-pity, filled her heart. Reaching out her arms, she drew Ruth into them, and wept passionately on her shoulder, murmuring thanks, endearments, and tender compassion in wild and broken snatches.

As for Ruth, she had become the strongest of the two, and, in her gentle way, strove to comfort the lady, who stood upright after a while, and, pushing the young orphan from her, searched her face, as if to make sure of her firmness.

"How calm, how still you look, girl! Tell me again that you will not fail."

"I will not fail."

"But you will let me do something. We shall both go away from here, you to a new home, far from this; a pretty home, Ruth, and I to an estate very near, where we will be such friends as the world never saw. This hour has made us so. That which you are doing for him I will help you to endure."

Ruth smiled very sadly. Lady Rose kissed her, preparing to go.

"How cold your lips are! how I have made you suffer!" she said, drawing back, chilled.

"It will not last," answered Ruth, quietly. "Take no further trouble about me. I have not felt so much at rest since my father died."

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"If I only knew how to thank you."



"I should thank you for pointing out the way; but for that I might never have known," answered Ruth, gently.

"You will have saved him, and he will never know. That seems hard; still, there may come a time—But, you are growing pale again; I only pain you. Good-by, for a while."

"Good-by," said Ruth, faintly.

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## CHAPTER LXVIII.

### FORSAKING HER HOME.

**R**UTH stood perfectly motionless, until the light tread of Lady Rose died out on the turf. Then she sat down and fell into thought, so deep and dreary, that it seemed like waking from a trance, when she looked up, and saw that the west was all aflame with scarlet, and drenched in great seas of gold. Then she arose, and went into her little chamber. Up to this time her eyes had been dry; but some tender recollection seemed to strike her, as she looked around, and instantly they were flooded with tears. She busied herself about the old-fashioned bureau a while, apparently selecting such little objects as her husband had, from time to time, given her. Then she took the prayer-book from her toilet, in order to secure the marriage certificate, which had been placed between its leaves.

"They must not find this here," she thought. "Nothing shall be left to show that he ever loved me." [405]

Then she took the ring from her bosom, and, folding it up in a bit of silk paper with pathetic care, laid that, too, within the leaves of the book, and made a package of the whole.

It was dark now, and, for a little time, she lay down upon her white bed, and there, with folded hands, strove to reason with herself. "When the man who hates him so hears all, and knows that the poor girl he is hunting to death is far, far beyond the reach of love or hate, he will content himself with the lady's land and gold," she thought. "She, too, will go away, and find happiness; for he will seek her out, not too soon, I know that, but after a while, and never knowing how it came to be so, will give his heart to her.

"Then I shall be forgotten—forgotten! Ah, me, why was I born to bring such trouble on every one that loved me? He will mourn. Oh, yes, he will mourn! He never can help that, for he loved me—he loved me!"

She thought this all over and over, with mournful persistency. The spirit of self-sacrifice was strong upon her; but not the less did all the sweet tenderness of her woman's nature dwell upon the objects of love she was giving up.

The night darkened. She heard the old clock down-stairs tolling out the hours that were numbered to her now. Then she got up, struck a light, and opened her desk. There was something to be written—a painful thing to be done.

The paper was before her, the pen in her hand. What could she say? how begin a letter which was to rend the heart that loved her? How could she make that young husband comprehend the anguish with which she cast herself on the earth to save him, when he was conscious of no danger! She began to write swiftly, paused, and fell into thought; began again, and went on, sobbing piteously, and forming her words almost at random. [406]

When her letter was finished, she folded it, cast her arms across the desk, and broke the solemn silence of the room with low, faint moans, that are the most painful expression of hopeless anguish.

Again the clock struck, and every brazen time-call fell on her heart like a bullet. She got up, as if in obedience to some cruel command. Instead of her scarlet jacket, and the hat, whose cluster of red roses gleamed in the candle-light, she put on the soft gray dress worn on that fatal wedding morning. Then she placed the letter she had written on the prayer-book. After this, Ruth went slowly down-stairs, carrying the candle and package in one hand.

A gust of wind from the door, as she opened it, put out the light. Thus she left nothing but darkness in her old home.

Ruth looked around warily, for even in that fearful hour she remembered the threat of her tormentor, and dreaded some harm to the beloved being she was determined to save.

The moon was buried in clouds, storm-clouds, that made the whole landscape funereal, like the heart of that poor girl. She went through shrubberies and flower-beds, straight toward the window of Walton Hurst's room. Pulling aside the ivy, she mounted the half-concealed step, not cautiously, as she had done on another occasion, but with a concentration of feeling which left fear behind.

It was a warm, close night, and a leaf of the casement was partly open. She thrust it back, with a swiftness that gave no sound, and stepped into the room. Hurst was lying on the bed asleep. Illness had left its traces upon his features, and his hands lay clasped, loosely, on the counterpane. Something more sombre than the shadows thrown by the dim lamp lay upon his [407]

fine face. Anxiety had done its work, as well as sickness.

Ruth stood by the bed, motionless, almost calm. The supreme misery of her life had come. She had no sobs to keep back, no tears to hide—despair had locked up all the tenderness of grief with an iron hand. She was about to part with that sleeping man forever and ever. He was her bridegroom: she must give him up, that his honor, nay, his very life might be saved.

The prayer-book that she carried in her hand contained, she believed, all the proofs of a marriage that had been more unfortunate than death. No one must ever see them. They were a fatal secret, which she gave up to her husband's keeping alone. She laid the book upon the counterpane, close to his folded hands, not daring to touch them, lest the misery within her might break out in cries of anguish. Then she stood mute and still, gazing down upon him, minute after minute, while the light shone dimly on the dumb agony of her face. At last, she bent down, touched his forehead with her lips, and fled.

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## CHAPTER LXIX.

### THE SOUL'S DANGER.

**H**OW, and by what way, that poor young creature came out on the verge of the Black Lake she could not have told. When she came down those balcony steps she had left the world behind her. Filled with an insane idea of self-martyrdom, she went onward and onward as rudderless boats reel through a storm.

Now she stood among the rushes—clouds over her head, a great sea of inky waters weltering away from her feet—gloom and blackness everywhere. The old lake house flung down uncouth shadows on one hand, a gnarled oak pushed its gaunt limbs far over the waters on the other. The rushes around her swayed and moaned in the wind like living things in pain.

Was it this weird picture that brought Ruth to a sense of her own condition? Did it seem to her as if she had already accomplished her purpose, and was entering upon its punishment? Who can answer for the impulses of a soul in its passions of distress? No two events are alike in all the tumultuous actions of life. When the destinies of a human being can be turned by a chance thought, a careless word, even a sunbeam, more or less, what intellect can fathom the exact thing that sways it for good or evil? One might have thought that the gloom of this picture would intensify the dark resolve that had urged that young creature on to death. Instead of that, it came upon her with a great shock, and she stood there among the rushes appalled.

Was it by that dark way she could hope to find her father?

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As she asked this question an awful fear came upon her. She walked slowly backward, with her eyes fixed upon the water, breathing heavier and heavier, as the rushes swayed to their place between her and them. Thus she drew away from the awful danger to the threshold of the lake house. There she sat down.

What was this thing she had promised to do? A great crime which would shut her out from her father's presence forever and ever, which would make it impossible to meet her young husband through all eternity. She was willing to die for him—the agony was nothing. Had she not suffered more than that over and over again? But to give him up here and beyond those black waters was more than she could force upon her soul.

Beyond all this, the delicate organism of her being shrunk from that which might come to her body after death. She saw, as if it were a real presence, herself sinking, sinking down into the blackness of those waters, her limbs, so full of life now, limp and dead, tangled in the coarse grasses, or seized upon by some undercurrent, and dragged down into the depths of the earth. Worse still, coarse men might, with mistaken kindness, search the waters, and lift her from them in the very presence of her husband; who would see the face he had kissed swollen, the sodden lengths of her hair trailing the—the—

She could not bear these thoughts; they made existence itself unreal. She pushed the hair back from her face, as if expecting to find it dripping; she lifted both hands to her lips and laughed aloud when she found them dry. She folded both arms over her bosom and clasped herself in, sobbing out her relief that he had been saved from the anguish of seeing her dead. But not the less was she doomed. It was not the sacrifice that she shrunk from, but the crime. This moral force kept the girl back from her fate, but in no way lessened the spirit of self-abnegation that had brought her to the lake. Only how would she carry that into effect without crime? How could she take herself out of the way and be dead to every one that she loved? The fearful necessities of her case gave vigor to each thought, as it passed through her mind, and these thoughts were taking vague form, when the sounds of footsteps and of voices, speaking low and at intervals, startled her. Looking through the darkness she saw two forms coming down the brief descent along which a path led to the lake house. She had risen, and was looking for some place of refuge when a voice reached her, and darting around the old building she stole up the bank and away through the wildness.

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It was the voice of Richard Storms.

Ruth went back to the cottage and searched the darkened rooms for the desk in which her father had kept his money. She placed what was found there in her pocket, with the key which had let her through the park-gate on that other eventful day of her life, and went out into the night again. She reached the gate, turned the lock, and taking the highway, walked rapidly toward the nearest railroad station.

A train was in sight. She had scarcely time to secure a ticket when it swept up to the platform. The guard half pushed her into a second-class car, and she was borne away toward London.

There in the solitude which seems most forlorn, she fell into a trance, in which all the faculties of her mind were self-centred—all the information she had ever received from her father or any other source presented itself for her use. [411]

She would not save even her own husband by a crime. That idea she put utterly aside, knowing that to live was a choice of deeper suffering and more cruel martyrdom. But she must be dead to him—dead to the whole world. Her name, humble as it was, should not betray her. She would go, no matter where, but so far as the money in her pocket would allow. Her father had sometimes talked of places beyond the great ocean, where people of small means, or made desperate from misfortune, sought a new life. All that she had read of such places came vividly to her remembrance—how people went on shipboard, and were months and months out to sea, where they were happy enough to die sometimes. Perhaps God would be so merciful to her.

With these thoughts taking form in her mind Ruth found herself in London.

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## CHAPTER LXX.

### ON THE TRAIN.

**A**T the station, which Richard Storms had designated, Judith Hart had been waiting while three or four trains went by. She did not travel much by railroads, and this was almost like a new experience to her. She had brought no luggage, for the pretty dress of black and scarlet, that Storms had given her, was the only portion of her wardrobe worth taking away, and she had put that on with a womanly desire to please his parents with her appearance, which certainly was that of a beautiful, if not highly-bred, girl. [412]

It was getting dark when a train came up, and Storms, recognizing her on the platform, made the signal agreed upon, though his face clouded over, and he stifled an oath between his teeth when he saw how conspicuous the dress made her.

"I might have known it," he thought; "from the highest to the lowest, all female creatures are alike. Most of them would go in full dress to the gallows, if the hangman were fool enough to permit it."

Judith had not seen the first signal, but stood on the verge of the platform, looking with evident disappointment up and down the train, when her eyes fell on the department he was in. The next instant she sprang up the steps and took a seat by his side, but the smile left her face when he looked up vaguely and turned to the opposite window, as if her presence was an intrusion.

The train gave a lurch and moved on. Then she ventured to speak.

"You look sullen. You do not seem glad. What is the matter, Richard?"

Storms turned in his seat and scrutinized her dress from head to foot.

"You don't like it?" she said, in some confusion; "but I had nothing else fit to wear at your mother's house, and I thought you would like me to look like a lady, as you are to make me one so soon. Forgive me, if I have taken too much on myself."

"Forgive you for making yourself so handsome? I should be a brute of a fellow not to do that."

The girl's heart leaped. She had expected harsh language, reproach, perhaps bitterness, if the dress did not please him; but there was nothing of this; on the contrary, there was hilarity in his voice, a sort of careless abandonment, as if some pleasant surprise had been given him, which he was prepared to accept with acquiescence at least. [413]

This ready, almost hilarious, approval of her dress overwhelmed Judith with delight.

"Oh, how tired I was of waiting! How happy I am!" she sighed, leaning toward him.

Storms drew her close to him with a fierce grip of the arm, in a passion of love or hate which took away her breath; then his arm released its hold, and he made a gesture as if to push her from him.

"What is the matter?" she questioned, turning her eyes wildly upon him.

"Nothing," he said; "your curls brushed my face; that is all."

"It seemed almost as if you hated me," said the girl, rubbing her arm with one hand.

"Hated you! What should make me do that?"

"Perhaps because I come between you and that Jessup girl, with all her money."

"What is her money to me? It was the old people that wanted it, not I. Now, all she has got would be nothing compared to what I can give a wife."

"To think that all this has been brought about by a bit of paper! That chance lifted me out of myself. Loving you as I did, it was like opening the gates of heaven to me."

"Yes, the gate of heaven," repeated the young man, in a voice full of weird irony. "It would be a pity to draw you back."

"It would kill me," answered Judith. "It seems as if a world of happiness had been crowded into these days, when I am made sure of being your wife! Can it be? Am I certain of that? Ah, what changes a day may bring!"

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"Yes, many things may be done in less than a day," said Storms, in a light if not mocking tone. "It only takes a minute or two sometimes for a man to yoke himself up for life. If one could only wrench himself free as easily, now!"

"You speak as if I were not quite forgiven for keeping back that paper," she said with a look of swift apprehension.

"Do I? Well, you will soon learn how I can forgive."

"What do you mean, Richard?"

"Nothing. But this is the station nearest to 'Norston's Rest.' We get out here."

The whistle of a train coming from the east was just then sounding sharp and clear in the distance.

Storms left his train just as it began to move, and Judith followed him. When she reached the platform he turned his face upon her in the starlight, and she saw that he was smiling.

"Come," he said, drawing her toward the track.

"Step back! Step back! Here comes another train," cried Judith. "How awfully human that red light blazes in front of the engine! It frightens me! Oh, be careful."

Storms had flung one arm around the girl's waist and forced her to the very edge of the platform, as if about to help her leap across the rails, but she pressed back in terror and clung to him till the train passed by.

"Why, what makes you tremble so? What did you shriek for?"

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"I was so near the edge the hot steam swept over me."

"Over me, too. The engine lurched up so suddenly that I nearly lost my balance; but that was nothing to get frightened about. Come, now, the coast is clear, and the old people will be expecting us. You are not so tired that we cannot walk from the station?"

Judith laughed.

"Tired? Oh, no. I could walk twenty miles if they only ended at your home. You don't know how I have longed for a sight of it!"

"Come, then. We will go across the park. It is the nearest way, and you know it best."

Judith did not answer; her usual high spirits were dampened. She only folded the scarlet sacque over her bosom, and prepared to follow Storms, breathing heavily, she could not have told why.

No other passengers left the train at that station, and, without entering the building, these two passed into the village in mutual stillness. Once beyond that, Storms kept the highway until they reached the side-gate in the park wall.

"This is our nearest way to the old house. It saves a good bit of road," he said, opening the gate with his key.

Judith followed him. She knew the path well and took it willingly. This really was the nearest way to the farm-house.

They were in the wilderness now, threading it by a path that made a sudden descent to the Black Lake.

"Richard! Richard!" Judith cried out, in nervous haste. "How fast you walk! It quite takes away my breath."

Storms slackened the rapid pace with which he was walking and threw his arms around her; then kissed her fiercely upon the lips, so fiercely that she was not aware that his hand pressed the paper hidden in her bosom, and she struggled away from him, for the kiss brought shuddering with it, as if an asp had stung her.

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"Why, girl, I thought you loved me."

"I do—I do! Oh, how dearly!"

"But you do not know yet how I can love."

They were descending the path that led to the lake. Now the young man girded her waist with one arm and hurried her forward almost beyond her power of walking. When they reached the lake she was panting for breath.

"One minute—let me rest a minute," she pleaded, holding back from the bank, which they were walking dangerously near.

"A minute? Oh, yes. I will give you that," he said. "Indeed, I feel tired myself. Come in here. It will seem like old times."

## CHAPTER LXXI.

### THE SPIDER'S WEB.

**S**TORMS turned at once and led the way to the dilapidated old summer-house where so many of his interviews with the girl had taken place.

There was something secretly sinister in the man's voice that might have warned Judith of danger; but for his previous expressions of tenderness, she would have been on her guard. As it was, she hurried past him, and went into the little building first; then flinging off her scarlet jacket, she tossed her pretty hat, with its cluster of red poppies, upon the bench, and pushed the black masses of hair away from her temples, with the dash of a prize-fighter going into action. [417]

"It is so warm," she said, "and we have walked so fast. Ah! how natural the old place looks!"

Storms paused at the door, and looked back along the path he had trod, and around the lake cautiously.

"You needn't trouble yourself. If a gamekeeper should see us they'll take me for that Jessup girl," she said, laughing.

"While we are here," he said, with soft insinuation, "let me read that letter you spoke of—Jessup's last. There is moonlight enough, and I haven't seen it yet."

There was something in the man's face, or in his voice, that warned Judith, who pressed both hands to her bosom in quick alarm.

"No, no, not here—the light is not strong enough. I have promised to give it up on our wedding-day, and I will."

"And not before?"

"No, I will not give it up before."

Judith Hart drew toward the dilapidated window that opened upon that balcony which overhung the deepest portion of the lake. She made a singularly wild figure, standing there, with her bloodless face, and all the thick masses of her hair thrust back, while the rays of a fitful moon streamed over her.

Storms came close to her, speaking low, and with unusual gentleness.

"Judith, I thought that you loved me."

"So I do; better than myself; better than my own soul!" [418]

"Yet you keep a paper from me that might destroy me."

"It never shall. You could not keep it safer than I will."

"What if I never marry you?"

"But you will."

"Never while you hold that paper."

"Ah, I see it was for that you brought me here. I have been a fool!"

"Exactly."

The man was looking out on the lake as he spoke, and did not see the flash of those black eyes, or the rage that curved those lips till the teeth gleamed menacingly through.

"A miserable fool," he went on, "or you would have known that a man who had the chance of a girl like Ruth Jessup would never think of you."

"Ah, it is Ruth Jessup, then?"

"Yes, it is Ruth Jessup—the only girl I ever cared a straw for. The letter you gave me gets her with the rest. That is the grandest part of my bargain. She cannot help herself."

"But I can help her and punish you. The letter you want, but shall never have—William Jessup's last letter, written when his head was clear and his memory good, taking back the lines written in his fever—a letter charging *you* with the murder I saw done with my own eyes—this letter, and all that I know, shall be in Sir Noel's hands before he goes to bed to-night."

Judith had drawn the pocket-book that held this letter from her bosom, unseen by her assailant, and made a movement as if to depart; but Storms leaped upon her like a wild beast, and when she struggled fiercely with him, hurled her against the window. [419]

A loud crash, a storm of shattered glass and splintered wood, and, through the great ragged opening, Judith Hart reeled into the balcony, hurling the pocket-book over her murderer's shoulder. He did not see the act, of which the girl herself was almost unconscious. His arm was coiled around her, and though holding backward with all her might, she was forced to the edge of the rickety structure, that began to reel under them. Here the man held her a moment, looking down into her white face with his keen, cruel eyes.

"This is how I forgive—this is how I love you—this is the way you will keep me from a fortune!"

The girl was mute with terror. She could not even cry out, but clung to him in a dumb agony of entreaty.

"You meant to force me into marrying you, poor fool! Give me that letter!"

The wretched girl had flung the letter from her and she could not tell where. It might be in the

water or among the rushes.

"I have not got it—I have not; but I loved you! Oh, I did love you!"

"Lying with your last breath. The accursed thing is in your bosom."

"No! no! no!"

She held on to him now, though he had lifted her from her feet, and covering his cruel face with desperate kisses, clung to him with a grasp that even his wiry strength could not tear away.

"You did love me. I know that. It was her money. You did love *me*—you *do*. It is only to frighten me. Let me down, let me down. Do you know I am on the very edge? It is dangerous fun—cruel fun!"

"Fun!" sneered the fiend, wrenching her arms away and drawing back to give more deadly force to the action. "Fun, is it?"

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He was pushing backward, his white face was close to hers, his hoarse curse hissed in her ear. With a terrible effort to save herself, she wound her arms around his neck, dragging him down to the rickety railing, over which he was straining all his powers to hurl her.

"Oh, Dick! Dick! Don't kill me! Do—"

Another crash. The railing gave way. He strove madly to free his neck from her clinging arms, but they clasped him like iron. The struggle was terrible. Under it the whole balcony began to quiver and break. Their two faces were close together, their eyes burning with hate and fear, met. One desperate effort the man put forth to free himself; but the grip on his neck grew closer, and choked him. With the might of despair he dragged her half-way up from the reeling timbers; but her weight baffled his strength, and brought him down with an awful thud. Down, down, they plunged, through the rotten timbers, into the black depths of the lake.

After this the stillness was appalling. Over the place where those two had gone down, linked together in that death-clasp, bits of broken wood floated, drearily, like reptiles driven from their holes; and from their midst a human head appeared, lifted itself from the water, and went down again. Twice after this the head rose, each time nearer the shore. Then two gleaming hands seized upon the strong rushes, forsook them for a rooted vine, and Judith Hart lifted herself to the bank; where she fell helpless, with the ends of her long hair streaming into the water, and mingling with the grasses that swayed to and fro on their dark disturbance.

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In this position the girl lay exhausted for some minutes, then she struggled to her feet, swept the dank hair back from her face, and, stooping forward, searched the waters with her clouded eyes.

She saw nothing. If any object, living or dead, was on that inky surface the darkness concealed it. Then her hands were flung out and her voice struggled into cries:

"Richard! Richard! Here! here! The water is shallow here. Oh, my God! Light a little light that I may see where he is!"

There was no answer—only a faint lapse of water against the bank.

"Richard! Richard!"

Again and again that sharp, wild voice rang out on the night, only answered by more awful stillness and the silence of hopeless listening.

Thus, for one dark hour, that poor creature, shivering, pallid, and wet, paced up and down the shore, dragging her sodden garments through the dense herbage, and calling out whenever she paused in her moaning, "Richard! Richard! Richard!"

At length this cry sounded for the last time, long and low, like the plaint of a wounded night-bird; but there was no reply, and if anything, living or dead, arose to the surface of those inky waters after that, God alone saw it.

Judith Hart had wandered there, it might have been a minute, or an eternity, for anything she knew of time; but the black silence drove her away at last. She went into the denser portion of the wilderness, and came out by the farm-house in which the parents of Richard Storms lay sleeping peacefully, for their son had left them for the fair held in a neighboring town that morning, and they did not expect him home before another day.

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Judith turned from her route, for she took no path, and went up to the door of this house, beating against it with her hands. After a while a bolt was drawn, and an old woman, wearing a shawl over her night dress, looked out, but half closed the door again when she saw a strange female, with a face like death, and long wet hair streaming down her back, staring at her. Twice this figure attempted to speak, but that which she tried to say choked her until the words broke out in spasms:

"You are his mother. He tried to save me. I was in the Black Lake, sinking; he plunged after me, but went down, down. I tried to drag him up. Three times, three times I went headforemost into the darkness. All night long I have been calling for him, but he would not answer. Do not think he was angry with me. No one must think that. It was to save me. Only to save me, he was trying."

The old woman held a candle in her hand. It began to shake as she said:

"Who are you speaking of? Who are you?"

"Of him—he loved me—I was to be his wife, and he was bringing me here, only we stopped at the lake and I fell in. After that, I could not find him; dive down as I would, he went deeper still. I called out till my breath failed; but he would not answer. My husband—you know."

The old woman shaded her light with one hand while she scrutinized that wild face.

"A face I have never seen," she thought; "some poor crazed thing."

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"Come in from the cold. You are shivering," she said, in great kindness, "your teeth knock

together."

"No, I'm not cold, but he is. Go seek for him. He will not answer me; but you are his mother. He is not angry with you. I will get out of the way. He will not show himself while I am there; but when you call, it will be different. What are you standing there for? Call up your men; get lanterns. He is hiding away from me; but you are his mother."

Before old Mrs. Storms could answer these words, crowded each upon the other, the girl stepped from the door-stone and was gone.

"Poor thing, poor thing, her face is strange, and she talks of a husband as if I were his mother. I was frightened in spite of that, as if it were Richard she spoke of. So like my own dear lad, to risk his life for another. It was that which set me trembling, nothing else; for I knew well enough that he was safe at the fair."

"What is it?" questioned the farmer, when his wife came back to her bed-room.

"Only a woman that has lost her mind, I think," answered the wife, blowing out her candle. "I would fain have had her come in, but she is gone."

"Then what makes ye tremble and shake so, woman? Have ye found another corpse-light in the candle?" The old man said this with a low, chuckling laugh; for he delighted in ridiculing his wife's superstitions.

"No; I had not thought of that," answered the dame. But all that night, while Judith Hart was travelling the road to her father's house, unconscious of fatigue and fleeing, as it were, from herself, this loving mother lay restlessly awake by the side of her husband; for he, in his good-natured jeering, had frightened sleep from her.

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Twenty miles away, another weary soul had been kept awake with loving anxiety. The old man whom Judith had deserted a second time lay in that humble home bemoaning his loneliness, wondering what had drawn the only creature left to him on earth from the shelter of his roof, where she had for some days seemed so cheerfully content. Would she ever return?

The old man was asking himself this question almost in hopelessness, when the first gray of morning broke into his room. Leaving his bed, weary as when he sought it, the old man dressed himself and went to the front door. There, sitting in the porch, with her limbs huddled together, and her hair all afloat, was the young creature whose absence he had bewailed—his daughter Judith.

When she saw her father, the poor girl stood up unsteadily. She was shivering all over; but on her cheeks was a flame of coming fever, and her hot hands shook as she held them toward him.

"Father, I have come back to you. Take me home. I have come back to you. Take me home."

The old man reached forth his arms, drew her within them, and with her head falling helplessly on his shoulder, led her into the house.

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## CHAPTER LXXII.

### THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.

**T**WO persons, both anxious and unhappy, sat in the breakfast-room at "Norston's Rest," Sir Noel and Lady Rose. Sir Noel was thinking with secret uneasiness of the charge, that had been made with such coarse audacity, against his son, by Richard Storms; he was thinking also, with some self-upbraiding, of the young orphan who had submitted herself so gently to the demands of his pride. With all his aristocratic habits of thought and feeling, Sir Noel was essentially a good man—rich in kindness, and incapable of doing a cruel thing, knowing it as such, and spite of his worldly reasoning, his heart was not without self-reproach when he thought of Jessup's daughter.

Lady Rose had even deeper causes of anxiety. She had performed her promise to Richard Storms; the papers, which would convey to him a really fine estate, were prepared, and she was ready to deliver them on Ruth's wedding day, when all this shameful attempt to cast disgrace on an honorable name would have been defeated by the sacrifice of two girls, herself giving the smaller part.

This thought troubled the young lady. Like Sir Noel, she felt heart-sore when thinking of the fate to which she had urged this poor girl, who had been her playmate and friend.

With all these anxieties, the guardian and ward met with their usual quiet courteousness, for habits of decorous self-control checked all expression of deep feeling.

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Still, Sir Noel might have noticed that the cheeks of his ward were pale, and her blue eyes darkened with shadows, but for his own preoccupation, for she had neither his self-control nor habit of suppression. Besides, he had observed these signs of unrest frequently of late, and it was in some degree because of this that he had dealt so positively with Ruth Jessup.

A third party looking in upon that pleasant scene would never have dreamed that disturbing

thoughts could enter there. It was a beautiful room, and a beautiful morning. The fragrance of many flowers came floating through the windows, where it met flowers again of still more exquisite odors. The breakfast service of gold and silver, the Sèvres china and crystal were delicate, almost as the flowers.

They had not expected young Hurst to breakfast with them. Since his illness he had taken this meal in his own room; but now he came in hurriedly, so hurriedly that Sir Noel absolutely started with dismay when he saw the white agony of his face. The young man went up to the table and laid a book upon it.

"Sir Noel—father," he said, in a voice that thrilled both listeners with compassion,—*"in that book is my marriage certificate. This letter is from my wife. I have deceived you, and she has dealt out my punishment, for she has chosen to abandon me, and die rather than brave your displeasure."*

Sir Noel was always pale, but his delicate features turned to marble now. Still the shock he endured gave no other expression of its intensity. He reached forth his hand, and pushed the book aside.

"It is Jessup's daughter you are speaking of," he said, pausing to ask no questions. [427]

"Yes, father, yes; Jessup's daughter. She was my wife, and for that reason has destroyed herself."

"Let me read the letter. It may not be so bad as you apprehend."

Walton gave him the letter; then falling on a seat by the table, flung out his arms and buried his face upon them.

"It may be as you fear," said Sir Noel, after reading poor Ruth's letter, "but I think there is room for a doubt."

"A doubt! Oh, father, can you see that?"

Lady Rose had arisen, and stood near the window, white as the lace that draped it, cold as the marble console on which she leaned. She came forward now, speaking almost in a whisper:

"If this thing is true—if Ruth Jessup has killed herself—it is I who am guilty of her death. It was I, miserable wretch that I am, who urged her to it, not knowingly, but out of my ignorant zeal. Poor girl! Oh, Walton! Walton! I did not know that she was your wife—I urged her to marry—I am the person most to blame in this."

"No! no!" said Walton, starting up. "By one wild, rash step, I brought this great trouble on us all. Father, father, can you ever forgive me? Is not this awful punishment enough?"

Sir Noel did not answer at once, but his face grew rigid. Lady Rose saw this, and went up to him, her eyes full of eloquent pleading, her very attitude one of entreaty.

No word was spoken; but the old baronet understood all the generous heroism of that look. Bending his head, as if to the behest of a queen, he reached out his hand to Walton, gravely, sadly, as a man forgives with his heart, while the pride of his nature is still resistant. [428]

"We must search the cottage. Ruth was young, timid. She never can have carried out this design. There must be no noise, no outcry among the servants. Living or dead, my son's wife must not be a subject for public clamor. If she is to be found, it is for us to discover her."

Walton, in his weakness and distress, supported himself by the table, which shook under his hand.

"Oh, how weak I am! How weak I have been!" he said, wiping the moisture from his pale forehead.

Sir Noel poured out a glass of wine and gave it to him.

"Take this—sit down—sit down and rest."

"No, no; I must seek for her!"

"You cannot. Trust to your father, Walton. If your wife is living, I will find her."

Walton seized his father's hand, and wrung it with all his weakened force.

"Oh, father! I have not deserved this! I cannot—I can hardly stand; but we will go—we will go."

He did, indeed, reel across the room, searching blindly for his hat.

Sir Noel led him into the little sitting-room, and placed him with gentle force on a couch.

"Rest there, my son, till I come back. Lady Rose will stay with you."

"Oh, father! father!"

The young man turned his face upon the cushions, and shook the couch with his sobs. The baronet's kindness seemed to have broken up his heart. The best comforter for such grief was a woman. Sir Noel looked around for his ward, but she had gone. [429]

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## CHAPTER LXXIII.

### SEARCHING THE LAKE HOUSE.



**LADY ROSE** had, indeed, left the house. She knew best where to search for the missing girl. In the hall she met Mrs. Hipple. Snatching a garden-hat, she held it toward the old governess, who stood gazing upon her in astonishment.

"Take this, and come with me. I want help—come!"

Never had the lady spoken so imperiously; never had Mrs. Hipple seen her so terribly agitated. Before she had tied on the hat, Lady Rose was half-way down the terrace-steps.

"To the gardener's cottage," she directed, turning her head impatiently. "We must go there first."

Startled, and utterly bewildered, the old woman followed. She was a good walker, but failed to overtake Lady Rose until she stood before the cottage. The door was closed, the shutters tightly fastened, as she had never seen them before.

"Ruth may be lying dead there." Hesitating under the horror of this thought, she held on to the gate unable to go in or move away.

"Are you afraid?" she said to Mrs. Hipple.

"Afraid? No. Why should I be?"

"Ah, you have not been told, and I have no time; come."

Lady Rose swung the gate inward, went into the porch, and tried the door. It was not fastened. She pushed it open and entered the little parlor. The light was dim, but her quick glance searched the room—the table where Ruth worked, the chintz couch, the one great easy-chair.

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"Not here! not here!" she cried. "Wait till I come."

She ran up-stairs into each chamber, calling out:

"Ruth! Ruth! Do not hide, Ruth. It is I, Lady Rose."

No answer; nothing but twilight darkness and the shadowy furniture. Down the stairs she went, through the kitchen, and out into the open air.

Mrs. Hipple followed her.

"Lady Rose! Lady Rose! what is this? you terrify me!" pleaded the old woman at last.

"How can I help it, being fearfully terrified myself? Oh, Hipple, Walton was privately married to Ruth Jessup, and she is missing!"

"Married—missing!"

"She may be dead; and oh, Hipple, my dear old friend, I drove her to it."

"You! no, no, my child; but come—where shall we search?"

Lady Rose led the way down to the Black Lake. The door of the old summer house was open. Through it she saw gleams of scarlet, outside the broken timbers.

"She is here—we are in time!" she cried out, rushing forward, but recoiled from the threshold with a faint moan. It was only a scarlet garment, with the morning sunshine pouring over it.

"It is hers. She has gone. Oh, God, forgive me, she has gone!" cried the poor lady, dragging her reluctant limbs through the opening. "Her own jacket and the pretty hat. God help me! I have killed her. I, who meant only to redeem him. Oh, Hipple, have I the curse of a great crime—the mark of Cain on me?"

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"Hush," said the old lady, with gentle authority, placing the unhappy girl on the bench. "I have more calmness; let me search. This sacque—"

"It is hers! it is hers! I have seen her wear it, oh, so often," cried Lady Rose, covering her eyes, which the flame tints of the garment seemed to burn.

"No," answered the governess, examining the garment in her hand with keen criticism; "this is not Ruth Jessup's sacque. The one she wore had a delicate vine of embroidery about the edge; this is braided."

Lady Rose dropped her hands.

"It is true; it is true; and the hat—hers was turned up at the side with red roses; these are poppies. You are right, Hipple. She may be living yet."

While they were examining the garment Sir Noel came into the lake house. He looked around, taking in the scene at a glance—the scarlet jacket, the broken window, and the jagged timbers left of the balcony, and upon the floor an old pocket-book or portemonnaie. Lady Rose watched him as he opened it. Surely there was something there which might tell them of the girl's fate. Yes, a letter, folded twice, and thus made small enough to thrust into a pocket of the book; a letter, directed to Walton Hurst, which had been opened.

Lady Rose knew the writing, came close to Sir Noel, and read the letter over his shoulder.

"Oh, thank God! Thank God, I have not murdered them both," she cried, snatching the letter between her shaking hands, and kissing it wildly. "If her life has been sacrificed, his honor is saved."

Sir Noel took the letter from her and read it a second time. It ran thus:

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MY YOUNG MASTER:—I was wrong to write you that letter; but the fever was on me, and it came out of my love and out of my dreams—wild dreams such as could not have reached me in my senses.

I am getting well now, and have thought over all that happened that night till everything is clear in my mind. This is the way I remember it; but there must no harm to any one come from what I write. I would never say a word only to take back the

foolish letter I sent to you. Richard Storms met me as I was crossing the park on my way back from London that night. He was in a rage, and said something about you and my daughter Ruth that angered me in turn. In my wrath I knocked him down, and went home, sorry that I had done it, for his father was an old friend, and we had thoughts of being closer related through the young people.

When I got home Ruth seemed shy, and complained that the lad had forced his company on her, for which you had chastised him, as he richly deserved. I got angry again, and went out in haste, meaning to call him to a sharper account for the slander he had hinted against her and you. It may be that in my heart I was blaming you. It seems as if I never could have believed ill of you as I feel now; but the young man's words rang in my ears when I went out, and I might have been rough even with you if we had met first.

Well, I hurried on by the great cedars, thinking to meet Richard on his way home. When I got into the deep shadows a man came suddenly under the branches between me and the light. I saw the face; it was only a second that the moonlight struck it, but I saw the face. It was Richard Storms. I was turning to meet him when he lifted a gun and fired. I felt a flash of fire go through me. I leaped toward him, but he pushed me aside, and reeling till my face turned the other way, I fell. Then it was that I saw you in the edges of the moonlight. The other face came and went like lightning. It was yours that rested in my mind and went with me through the fever, but it was Storms that shot the gun; it was his face I saw, his voice I heard mingling curses with blows as I lay bleeding on the ground. The man who shot me and beat you down with the butt of his gun was Richard Storms, the son of my old friend. I am sure of this now, having questioned Ruth about the gun. He brought it to the house that night, and she saw it behind the door after you thrust him from the house and left it yourself, but when I went out no such thing was there. I had no weapon in my hand that night.

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Storms must have come back and got the gun when Ruth saw him peering through the window. Do you know, I think it was not me he meant to shoot. More likely he was waiting for you, and only found out his mistake when I was down and you came in sight; for I can remember a great oath breaking over me, after I fell—and you were near us then.

I am not strong, and this writing tires me; but some how I feel that it must be done, or mischief may come from what I wrote in my fever; which I pray you to forgive.

I know you will burn this letter with the other when you have got it by heart. It must not be brought against the young man, for he was used roughly that night; and both blows and kicks are apt to turn some brave men into wild beasts.

He was to have wedded my daughter Ruth, but she could not bear to hear of it; and when my fever left all these things clear, I broke the old pledge. He loved my Ruth, and this was a blow to him. I wish no greater harm than this to the young man; and beg you to keep all that is against him a secret, for his father's sake.

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Always your faithful servant,  
WILLIAM JESSUP.

A great change came over Sir Noel's countenance as he read this letter. He did not thoroughly understand it; but Lady Rose was better informed. How Storms came in possession of the first letter, she could not tell; but that he had used it for his own interest, and the ruin of an innocent man, she saw clear enough. In a few brief sentences she explained this to Sir Noel. Then he understood the persecution that had driven Ruth to the fatal step she had taken.

There was nothing more to learn at the lake house, and with heavy hearts those three persons left it, turning their steps toward "The Rest." Mrs. Hipple, made thoughtful by experience, folded the garments they had found there, and carried them away under her shawl.

As Sir Noel was about to mount the terrace steps, a lad in uniform came up the chestnut avenue, and gave him a telegram, which he tore open with more agitation than such papers had ever produced in him before.

A young relative of ours, the daughter of William Jessup, a gardener at 'Norston's Rest,' is with us, in a state of health that requires immediate attention. I found her, by accident, in the office of the Australian line of packets. She had taken a passage, but not in her own name, and I could only persuade her to go home with me by a promise that I must break, or permit her to depart as she evidently wishes, unknown to her friends. I send this in urgent haste, and confiding in your discretion.

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The signature was that of a young artist, whose name was attached to a picture of some promise that Sir Noel had bought because he remembered that the person was a connection of Jessup's.

With his pencil Sir Noel wrote a brief reply, which the boy carried away with him.

Two events of unusual importance happened at "Norston's Rest," the next day. It was given out in the village that Sir Noel and his family had gone up to the London house that the young man might be nearer his physicians, and that Lady Rose had taken Ruth Jessup with her, thinking that change of scene might soften the melancholy into which she had fallen. This sudden movement hardly found general discussion, when something more terrible filled the public mind. The body of Richard Storms had been found floating in the Black Lake, three days after Sir Noel's departure. It had evidently risen from the depths, and become entangled in the broken timbers

still swaying from the balcony. When he failed to return from the fair, as he had promised, his mother, remembering the weird visitor who had called her up in the dead of the night, betook herself to the lake, and was at last joined by the old farmer, whose distress was even greater than her own, for he had a deeper knowledge of the young man's character, and this gave ground for fears of which she, kind woman, was made ignorant by her deep motherly love.

Thus fear-haunted, these two old people wandered about the lake day after day, until, one morning, they found a group of men upon the bank, talking solemnly together, and looking down upon the broken timbers still weltering in the water, as if some painful interest had all at once been attached to them.

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When these people saw the old man and woman coming toward them, they shrunk back and left a passage by which they could pass into the old building, but no one spoke a word.

No noise, no outcry came from those two people when they saw their only son lying upon the bench where the neighbors had laid him down; but when one of them went in, troubled by the stillness, he found the old man standing against the wall, mournful and dumb, looking upon the dead face, as if the whole world had for him been cast down there. He did not even seek to comfort the poor mother, who was kneeling by the bench, with her arms clasped about all that was left of her son, unconscious that his dripping garments were chilling her bosom through to the heart, or that the face to which she laid hers with such pathetic mournfulness had been frozen to marble in the depths of the lake.

As the kind neighbor drew near and would gladly have offered consolation, the poor old woman looked up with a piteous smile on her lips and said:

"My brave, brave lad lost his life in saving a poor creature, who would have been drowned but for him."

Then she dropped her face again, and was still as the dead she embraced; but as she spoke of her son's bravery, those scant, hot tears that agony forces on old age came to her eyes and burned there.

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## CHAPTER LXXIV.

### COMING HOME.

**U**NCLE, I have brought you a daughter."

Sir Noel looked up from the volume he was reading, and saw Lady Rose standing before him, flushed, agitated, but with a glow of exaltation in her eyes that he had never seen there before. With one arm she encircled the waist of Walton's bride, the other hand she extended in the grace of unconscious pleading; for the young creature she more than half supported was trembling like a leaf. Touched with exquisite pity, Sir Noel arose, drew Ruth gently toward him, and kissed her on the forehead.

"We shall have Walton better now," he said, leading her to a seat. "With two such nurses he can have no excuse for keeping ill."

"Is he so ill?" questioned Ruth, blushing crimson at the sound of her own voice. "I thought, I hoped—"

"We all hoped that the short journey up from 'Norston's Rest' would do him good rather than harm; but he has been more than usually restless," said Sir Noel. "If Lady Rose will excuse me, I will have the pleasure of taking you to his room myself."

Ruth stood up, blushing because of her own eager wishes; ready to cry because of the quiet gentleness with which her intrusion into that family had been received. Never, in all her short life, had she so keenly felt the great social barriers that she had overleaped. If reproaches and coldness had met her on the threshold of that house, she could have borne them better than the kindness with which Lady Rose had introduced her, and the gracious reception awarded her by Sir Noel; for she could not help feeling how much had been suppressed and forgiven by that proud man, before he could thus offer to present her with his own hand to his son.

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When Sir Noel offered his arm, she took it for the first time in her life, with such trembling that the old man patted the hand that scarcely dared to touch him, and smiled as he looked down upon her.

They went up a flight of steps and through several rooms. The house in Grosvenor Square was by no means so spacious as "Norston's Rest," but the splendor of its more modern adornment would have won her admiration at another time. Now she only thought of the husband she had fled from, to whom his own father was conducting her.

Sir Noel opened a door, paused on the threshold a moment, and then went into the room where Walton Hurst was sitting.

"My son," he said, in his usual quiet voice, "you must thank Lady Rose for the surprise I bring you. It is she who has persuaded your wife to come home to us with a less ceremonious welcome

than I was prepared to give."

Walton Hurst stood up like a healthy man, for astonishment had given him fictitious strength; he came forward at once, reaching out both hands. Sir Noel quietly withdrew his arm from the hand that had hardly dared to rest on it, and left the room.

The marriage of Walton Hurst, only son of Sir Noel Hurst, of "Norston's Rest," to Miss Ruth Jessup, daughter of the late William Jessup, was announced in the *Court Journal* that week. Some few persons noticed that the usual details were omitted; but the fact itself was enough to surprise and interest society, for young Hurst was considered the best match of the season, and no one could learn more of the bride than that Sir Noel was well pleased with the match, and the young lady herself was the most intimate friend of his lovely ward, the Lady Rose.

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The joy bells were ringing merrily at "Norston's Rest." Sir Noel and Lady Rose had been down at the old mansion more than a month, and guests chosen from the brightest and highest of the land were invited to receive the young heir and his bride on their return from a brief wedding tour on the continent. Having once accepted this fair girl as his daughter, Sir Noel was a man to stand right nobly by the position he had taken. Born a gardener's daughter, she was now a Hurst, and must receive in all things the homage due a lady of "Norston's Rest."

For this reason those joy bells were filling the valley with their sweetest music; for this the streets of the village were arched with evergreens, and school-children were busy scattering flowers along the street to be trodden down by the wheels of the carriage or the hoofs of four black horses, sent to meet the young couple at the station.

It was a holiday in the village. The tenants on the estate turned out in a body, and were to be entertained now as they had been when the young heir became of age.

The landlady of the "Two Ravens" stood at the inn door, with her arms full of yellow lilies, hollyhocks and sweetwilliams, which she lavished in gorgeous masses on the carriage as it passed. Hurst took up one of the flowers and gave it to the bride, who held it to her lips, and smiled pleasantly upon the good friends of her father as she passed through them.

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When the carriage drew up at "Norston's Rest," Sir Noel came down the steps, took Ruth upon his arm, and led her across the great terrace into the hall, where Lady Rose stood ready to welcome her. In the background all the servants of the household were assembled, headed by the steward and Mrs. Mason, both quiet and reverential in their reception of the bride, as if they had never seen her before.

Still, in the good housekeeper's face there was a proud lighting up of the countenance, that might have been traced to an inward consciousness that it was her protégée and goddaughter who was receiving all this welcoming homage; but from that day no person ever heard Mrs. Mason allude to the fact, except once, when Ruth addressed her by the old endearing title, she said, with simple gravity:

"Do not tempt a fond old woman to forget that she is only housekeeper to the mistress of 'Norston's Rest.'"

After all the festivities were over, and Ruth was established in her new position, Lady Rose, who had been the leading spirit in every social arrangement, came to Sir Noel in his library one day. There she announced her resolve to leave "The Rest," and retire to one of her own estates in another part of England—that which she had once been willing to bestow on Richard Storms in ransom of Walton Hurst's honor. The old baronet received this proposal with even less composure than he had exhibited when the announcement of his son's marriage was made to him. With grave and pathetic sadness he drew the girl toward him and kissed her on the forehead.

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"I will not ask you to stay, my child," he said, holding her hands in his until both began to tremble. "I had hoped I—oh, Rose! your own father could not have parted with you more unwillingly. It will not seem like the old place without you to any of us."

"Yes, oh, yes. They are both so happy—very happy! Don't you think so? One is not missed much. There, there, Sir Noel, this parting with you almost makes me cry!"

It did bring tears into Sir Noel's eyes—the first that Lady Rose had ever seen there in her life.

## THE END.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NORSTON'S REST \*\*\*

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