Out of the Darkness

"No, Arty, my boy, I would not call it the 'Old Ladies' Feast,' because there are no old ladies here. When you have lived a little longer, Arty, you will know that ladies never grow old. If I were to christen my tea-party, I should give it a better name than that—I should call it 'The Vicar's Atonement.'"

Great excitement in the jury-box—Miss Brookes drops her shawl for the ninth time, and looks across at Robert, who is frowning at his plate; Belle is playing with the trinkets of her watch-chain; Rotha leans back in her chair, so that Garton's broad shoulders may shield her from notice—she has not a vestige of color; perhaps Garton understands the movement, for he keeps his arms still on the table. As for the vicar, he has what Guy called "his grand preaching look" on his face, and is waxing very big—he had made up his mind to the work, and is quite warm now.

"Yes, I should call it 'The Vicar's Atonement.' Why, you dear people, you have no idea what a culprit I have felt for this last week. Isn't it next Sunday that I shall have to preach my sermon on charity? Sunday next, isn't it, Gar? Well, I'll not shirk it; it is not my way to shirk anything, and I hope you will all listen to me most attentively. But remember this, that I shall be preaching every word to myself, as well as to you. If I did not think that, I should just take the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians and read it all through without another word.

"Oh, Mr. Ord!" interrupted one young jurywoman bashfully—Amy Travers by name—a silly young thing of nine-and-twenty.

"Who was that who spoke? Yes, indeed, Miss Travers; and I dare say the consciences of a great many amongst us will not be quite free on that occasion. I dare say there has been plenty of silly things said in the drawing-rooms this week. About that wretched letter in the Blackscar Herald, for example; I dare say you have said a few things yourself, Miss Amy, that you would not have cared for Miss Maturin and me to have heard—eh, ladies?" (Unmistakable confusion in the jury-box; the leading counsel frowns more darkly over his plate, and Miss Brooke watches him.) The vicar has his eye on both, but he does not look once at Rotha, shrinking under cover of Garton's broad shoulder, but Garton still keeps his arm on the table.

"Bless you, we know all about it," continues the vicar, "and that makes me feel so guilty. Mary there will tell you how sore I have been. I feel it was such a shabby thing of us allowing this coolness to spring up just because poor old Aunt Charlotte chose to treat Robert so badly; but as Miss Maturin has forgiven us, I need say nothing more about that, except to express our grief for the sad mischief to which our coolness has led; that, I confess, has given me great uneasiness."

"Who wrotes the letter, vicar?" The question was in Miss Brookes' sharp voice.

"My dear Miss Brookes, I have no desire to know the writer, but Graves has to bear the odium, of course. I dare say you ladies have agreed by this time that it was a most infamous letter—and you were right. I can tell you Robert made short work of the whole business" (oh, cunning, cunning vicar!). "The fellow shook in his shoes, Garton tells me; so I hope next week there will be some sort of apology."

At the mention of Robert's name, the jurymen to a man—or rather to a woman—come over, except Miss Brookes, who still slips her shawl and looks at Robert. Robert sees her looking at him, fights a bitter battle with his pride, and half succeeds; his brows clears a little, and he looks up pale and resolute.

"Oh, Robert Ord," thinks Rotha, "there is something noble about you in spite of all;" for he looks straight at the vicar and says:

"There will certainly be an apology, Austin; I insisted on it."

Miss Brookes draws on her shawl well now, and hugs herself well up in it; she is vanquished.

The vicar nods pleasantly at his brother, and goes on:

"So you know now, dear ladies, why I call this 'The Vicar's Atonement.' I want to atone for my want of charity to this poor child; "and he lays his hands lightly on Rotha's, keeping it there in his fatherly way; "and I want you all the help me to make up to her for all the pain and annoyance to which she has been subjected during her brief sojourn amongst us, and to promise her that she shall be better treated for the future." And then he releases Rotha's hand and sits down.

In truth he has done his work well.

During the lull that follows the vicar's words you might hear a pin drop. Garton has moved his arm at last, and is rubbing it gently as though it is cramped. Rotha has raised her eyes to the vicar with a look that only he can understand, for it speaks of undying gratitude. There is a brief silence, but when they all rise from the table, Mrs. Blake—the gentlest of women—comes round to Rotha and kisses her; and after that it is only a repetition of the vicar's queer illustration of sheep jumping through a gap in the hedge.

Yes, the verdict was "Not guilty, my lord." Rotha might have worn her white dress after all, but nobody could think the black one unbecoming now the sweet pale face is suffused with blushes of happiness. Even Belle roused a little out of her apathy to wonder if it were possible that Robert—her Robert—could be wrong.

To Rotha the rest of the evening was simply a triumph, swelled by Meg's glorious singing. When it was over she walked home with Garton in the starlight, saying little snatches of the "Te Deum" to herself.

"What did you mean by the story of 'Haman,' Rotha?" asked Meg, in her slow, ponderous way, as they were about to retire for the night. She had been puzzling over it several times that evening.

Rotha had the grace to look a little ashamed of herself, and then she burst out laughing.

"Oh, Meg! the idea of remembering my silly speech."

"But you looked as though you meant it, Rotha."

Rotha grew rather grave.

"Well, perhaps I did; but all the same, I don't want to explain myself, it seems so ungrateful after all this happiness; it is the one thorn in the handful of roses—the death's-head at the Egyptian feast; and, after all, Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, was a terrible heathen to say such a thing."

"What thing?"

But Rotha would not tell her.

CHAPTER XX.

And so a little sunshine had come into Rotha's life.

And the stigma and stain of a grievous suspicion was removed.

"Not guilty, my lord."

"Not proven," still echoed one dissentient voice; for, alas! the baseless fancy which envy had engendered in Robert Ord's brain still lurked there in dusky corners, and came to light in slow brooding moments of pain; only with this difference—that he dare no longer avow his suspicion openly.

And why?

He had grown to be ashamed of it.

Nay, more; since the night of the vicar's declaration a little doubt had crept in; he still maintained to himself that he was right, but he had begun to argue on the matter. Argument presupposes doubt, assurance needs no reasoning. Robert began to assert his right to this ill-founded dislike, but his pride ceased to uphold him; it was the first evidence of weakness.

The conflict had begun in earnest now; henceforth there would be no peace for Robert Ord. The better part of his nature was at fault, his inner integrity was disturbed; the man was bred for nobler uses than to expend all this waste of passionate resentment against one poor woman, whose only fault was in being the unwilling instrument of a most unworthy revenge.

Sometimes in the dead of the night he would start up and ask himself, could he be wrong; was it all a mistake—a morbid fancy? He had heard that dwelling on a single thought creates monomania; had his brain become diseased with brooding over his wrongs? Latterly he had had stings of conscience, little quivering goads of remorse, which had moved him to generous impulses; but he always grew harder afterward. Ever since his championship in the case of Ebenezer Graves his antagonism had become even more intense; all the more that in their outward relations he could find no fault with her. Rotha's instinct detected all this; in her quaint way she had spoken of it as "the one thorn in the handful of roses;" but she never would allow even to herself how much power it had to wound. She could afford to wait now, she said, and it was in her nature to be patient; and certainly she showed wonderful tact and discrimination.

Since the night of her triumph, as Meg called it, she had been a daily visitor to the vicarage—the vicar and his wife wished it—and already a very strong friendship had sprung up between her and Mrs. Ord. Mary, who had no friend but her husband, felt a great comfort in this little interchange of womanly feeling; Belle had long ceased to be her confidante, and there were many things with which she preferred not to trouble Austin; and Rotha was a useful and sympathizing listener, and had such old-fashioned simple ways.

So Rotha came every morning to the "mother's room." But for helping Mary she would have been very idle just now. Poor Annie's suffering life was ended, and Rotha had many spare hours in consequence. The vicar, when she had applied to him for work, had flatly refused to employ her. "You have worked enough for two women already," he said, very wisely; "you must learn to play a little now. Your visits to old Sally and the Convalescent Hospital will employ you quite sufficiently;" and Rotha, though she chose to argue the matter, felt he was right. And, after all, there was no fear of her being idle; the vicar always found her with her thimble on in Mary's room. "I wish Nettie Underwood could see you," he would say sometimes, when he came in of a morning and found. Rotha stitching away with a heap of white drapery in her lap. Rotha would look up and smile; these visits of the vicar were the most sunshiny parts of the day. He had begun to treat her to the same gentle raillery with which he treated Mary and Belle. How the girl's cheeks used to flush over those innocent jokes—what a tender earnest vein of feeling ran under all the raillery—what a great loving heart, she thought. Her eyes would glisten for hours after one of these sallies. "I am so happy that I am almost afraid of my own happiness," she would say to Mary sometimes. Mrs. Ord would be touched by the simple expression of feeling; the childlike element of Rotha's nature came very plainly to the surface just now. I think Mary, being a very simple woman herself, liked her all the better for it.

Rotha was devoted to Mary, but it would not be too much to say that she half-worshiped the vicar. She told Mary once that she thought he was faultless, and Mary quite agreed with her—they both thoroughly believed the little fiction. They would sit and plot for hours against his peace, as the vicar quickly discovered; Mary, who had never had a secret from her husbank, quaked daily over some scheme of Rotha's devising; they would sit smiling in his face all the time they were stitching the beautiful linen shirts and cambric handkerchiefs, whereof the stuff had been surreptitiously conveyed into the house. Unfortunately for them, the vicar knew fine linen and cambric when he saw them, though he chose at times to disguise his knowledge. He chose to shut his eyes now.

"You women are always working," he would say sometimes, "I hope you are not running up too long a bill at Alison's, Mary." And then he would take up the linen softly, as though its touch were pleasant to him. He was a man to whom no purple and fine linen would have come amiss. Mary would quake more than ever when she saw him do this.

But if the vicar's eyes were opened, he had no mind to protest just now, and so for a little while Rotha had her way.

Shirt-making is very pleasant work to those who like it. Rotha soon came every morning, and stayed for hours in Mary's room, but Belle seldom joined them; as a rule, she preferred taking her portion of work upstairs; she always complained there was no light in "mother's room," but somehow Belle did very little of any work just now. Rotha was not the only one who noticed her flagging strength.

Sometimes Garton or one of the lads would drop in. Rotha was a great favorite with all the "five boys," as Mary called them; but for that she would have had small opportunity for seeing them, for it began to be an understood thing that she never came of an evening without a special invitation from the vicar, and out of consideration for Robert these invitations were very rare.

But sometimes he would ask her, and then Rotha would come at once. It was not a part of her plan to avoid Robert Ord; Robert was always very civil when they met; if visitors were present, outsiders to the vicarage, he would make a point of accosting her with studied politeness, but otherwise he would keep much to himself.

(To Be Continued.)

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Our 39c White Cotton Vests For 25c Saturday

Saturday and Saturday evening you can buy our 39c White Cotton Vests for 25c. This price is for Saturday—not good for Monday, remember. They are perfectly cut—fashioned to fit your figure accurately. Ladies! don't miss this great chance.....25c

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Good quality black cashmere. Just a few dozen to sell at the price. Sizes 8½ to 10. They will only remain with us a couple of hours or so at this price. Saturday, per pair.....25c

Our 50c Tweeds for 38c

A great many who delayed purchasing our 50c Tweeds at 38c last Saturday have asked for another chance. We will give it to you tomorrow, but remember 38c a yard is the price for Saturday only.

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It's certainly worth $18. Yes, indeed, $18 is a low price for such a swagger suit. It is a white and black check. Popular Eton coat is stylishly ornamented with black braid. Skirt is pleated and trimmed with braid to match coat. Come and see this suit tomorrow.....$18

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