

DESPAIR.

A maiden with a comely face
And all celestial Cynthia's grace,
With eyes of liquid dusk and light
And form embodying all in art
And tresses spun by hand of night,
Yet under all a demon's heart!

O heart! I would thou wert a lute,
That thou might'st pour thine agony
Forth from thy quivering strings and be
Less suffering since less mute.

I would that lips had never said
Such tender words as fell from hers,
And that this love which in me stirs
Had ever been as dead.

"Love," sang I! 'Tis love as grand
As if her vows were never broken;
But hatred too is now a token,
And Love and Hate go hand in hand.

Montreal.

H. D.

JOAN:

A TALE,

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF

"Cometh up as a Flower," "Red as a Rose is she," etc.

PART II.

CHAPTER VII.

The heavy, windless afternoon is wearing itself away; surely, surely, the end must be drawing nigh. It seems to Joan as if she had been walking for many hours, walking along with the same sense of unending ache, of bruised bewilderment, of recognition and non recognition, as had marked her progress through the house. Is her memory indeed so weak that she feels as if she scarcely knew which way to turn in these familiar, unfamiliar grounds, about which she could have confidently made her way, though blindfolded, three years ago? Or is it that the old landmarks have been so wholly and carefully removed and obliterated that she has a sort of blank half-feeling of never having been here before? Haltingly, and with wandering, puzzled eyes, and short, hard breaths, she has asked, one after one, for her old friends—the great double box hedges, old, past the memory of man, and which so stoutly kept off the winter winds from the quiet path which led between them, that, in the keenest January blast, one might pace there in ease and warmth. They are gone—stubbed up—as being a harbor for slugs.

"This at least is unchanged!" says Joan, in a slow, soft voice, and drawing a long, sighing breath; "this is as we left it."

"For the present," cries Mr. Smith, briskly; "quite for the present. You know that, as they say, Rome was not built in a day. We are coming to it by-and-by—by-and-by."

"What! is not even this to be spared?" cries the girl brokenly, turning her tragic eyes woefully round, on the lovely mellow walls, on the scented glory of the old-world flowers—survivors from an elder day.

"Do you wish it to remain unchanged?" asks Mr. Smith, with surprised *empressment*. "I had no idea—of course, if you express the slightest desire—but" (in a rather mortified tone) "I had imagined that the improvements had met with your approbation. You—you—gave me that impression."

"Do not you think," she answers, turning toward him with a smile, gentle and civil, if steeped in melancholy, "that this one shabby corner will make a good foil for the rest of the new magnificence? But, after all"—(slightly shaking her head)—"it is your taste that is to be consulted—not mine!—after to-day" (shivering a little)—"I shall probably never see the place again."

She has sat down on a broken old stone bench, between whose rifts and clefts little stray seedling flowers and baby-trees are merrily growing. Her hands fall idly on her lap; and, upwadded on the wings of the cabbage-rose scents, her spirit sails away into the past, of which this old garden-plot is verily and indeed a piece. She is brought back to the present by the voice of Mr. Smith. She looks round.

Anthony and the children have disappeared. A momentary bitterness nips her heart. Is this his idea of effacing himself judiciously at the right moment? Has he, too, become a party to this dismal jest? She glances apprehensively at her companion. He has seated himself on the bench beside her—his own bench, after all. His little freckled face is for the moment as white as his eyelashes; and there is a purpose—hesitant, indeed, and uncertain, but still that frightens her, in his usually purposeless eyes.

"It seems a pity," he is saying, tremulously, snatching a thief-like glance at her every now and then, to see how she is taking his remarks—"you—you—were always so much attached to the Castle, I understand! It—it—seems a pity that you—you should not resume your residence here." As he comes to this last clause he turns his back completely upon her, and so sits in an agony of nervousness, gnawing the top of his stick.

"And turn, you out?" she answers, with a fine, cold smile, and a little rallying air that would have baffled a bolder wooer than this; "that would be too ungrateful, after your having so hospitably entertained me; would not it?"

There is a hot, uncomfortable silence.

Joan's eyes are roving uneasily round, trying to discover to what point of the compass Anthony and his tormentors have disappeared—waiting only to be sure, in order to make a desperate rush in that direction. Before, however, she has ascertained this, her companion speaks again.

"It—is—is very large," he says, in a low and quivering voice, still turning to her only the back of his head; "if you remember, I have always said that it was too large for one person!—perhaps if—it—it—might not be too large for two."

"Do you think not?" she says, hastily, and rising. "Ah!"—(with a sigh of relief)—"there is Colonel Wolferstan! he is so good-natured; but we must not allow the children quite to monopolize him, must we?"

So saying, she begins to walk hurriedly along the garden-path, in the direction where she sees Colonel Wolferstan at length emerging from among some distant bushes of late red currants; which the children, with the unerring instinct of their kind for food—unerring, even after such a luncheon as Faustine's—have sniffed out. It is the first time since their coming together again under one roof that she has ever gone willingly to meet him. By the time she reaches him vexation has steeped her face in as lovely a dye as if all the carnations in the garden had given each other rendezvous in her cheeks. She lifts her eyes, full of annoyance and reproach, to his.

"Where have you been?" she cries, irritably. "Why did you go away?—it is not fair to break up a party!"

Anthony is silent; but the look that answers hers makes her at once turn away her upbraiding glance, as she feels with a miserable, uneasy excitement, that after all it is only out of the frying-pan into the fire; out of a very small frying pan into a very large fire; and that there is no rest for her anywhere. She begins to talk again quickly, and a little at random.

"Why should not we go back through the wilderness?" she asks; "there used to be a wilderness beyond this garden; it is there still; I see the tree-tops waving. We used to get to it through that door"—(pointing to a small arched one in the wall). "Ah!" (going up to it), "It is locked."

"If you like—if you wish," says Mr. Smith, in a crestfallen voice, having, in the meanwhile, come up with them, "I will go and inquire for the key; no doubt some of the gardeners have one."

No one tries to dissuade him, and he sets off at once on this self-imposed errand. No sooner is he out of sight than, "Why, here is the key!" cries Faustine, who has been occupying herself in applying an enquiring eye to the key-hole; in pulling out loose bricks, dislodging old-established wood-lice, and tweaking little cranesbills by their long noses; and now, in her prying, has suddenly discovered the missing article, snugly lying crusted with iron-mould in a convenient cranny.

"I will run and call Mr. Smith back," says Rupert, officiously, beginning to suit the action to the word.

"You will do nothing of the kind!" cries Wolferstan, sharply, making a detaining clutch at the child's shoulders; then, becoming aware by Rupert's face of the angry peremptoriness of his own tone, he adds, in a gentler key: "I mean, my boy, that it is not worth while; he will soon find out his mistake and overtake us!"

So saying, he fits the rusty key into the lock; it turns unwillingly, with a grinding sound; the disused hinges give way sulkily, and they all step out together into the green tangle beyond. Once there has evidently been a path through it—a path where two might walk abreast; but Nature, who, leave her to herself but a very little while, quietly takes back man's thefts, repairs the rents he has made in her cloak, has been taking back—mending here, too. As they pass along, the grasses coolly trammel their feet. The brambles hold out to them the tart plenty of their crude berries; and the dis-flowered brier-rose catches at them with long fingers, crying, "Stay!" Around them the honeysuckle ambitiously climbs the trees, blowing its late trumpets, safe and high, aloft; and the briony ties haw to haw in loving green bonds. Above them the trees have laid together the friendly variety of their leaves, the sycamore its broad platter, and the horse-chestnut its fan, in league to keep out the sun. But at present there is no sun to keep out. Surely he was here—but now! How long is it since the clouds, sweeping up from their unseen chambers, have clean abolished his smile!

On the woodland path there is now no play of gamesome lights, no frolic of little shadows. Instead, everywhere, one same verdurous gloom. A tempered light, as when day dies; a silence, as of popped sleep. Of all God's strong winds there is not one awake. No lightest gust either sighs or laughs, either rings the bluebell's silent chime, or puffs away the little hawk-weed clocks. The birds, too, are dumb. By August, their talk is mostly untalked, their madrigals out-sung; but to-day, not even a garrulous finch twitters, or sparrow cheeps. A hot and drowsy stillness weighs, lead-heavy, upon all. Hardly less still than the winds—hardly less silent than the song-birds—the young man and the young woman step along together, side by side.

Joan has taken off her hat, and loosened her little kerchief from about her milk-white throat. Whether it be from the thunderous weight of the air, or the oppression of the long day's ignoble suffering, she feels as if an iron band were tightly clasped around her brow. All day her spirit has been stretched upon the rack; broken on the wheel. All day she has been, with stiff, tight smiles and combated tears, helping at the desecration of her own altars. All day long she has been clapping hands and applauding at her own execution. Now, at least, she may be silent. She need no longer commend the ingenuity of the thumb-screw that dislocates her fingers, or of the boot that crushes her foot; now she may rest. This rest, indeed—fevered, hard-pulsed, thundering-hearted—is as much like real rest as the repose that narcotics give a sickly man is like the royal slumber that God gives a healthy child. But, after all, an opiate sleep is better than none. Why should they talk?—they, to whom all speech worthy of the name, is forbidden! If, indeed, their intercourse were likely to be prolonged and stretch over any considerable space of future time, it would be fit to practise themselves in the necessary falsity of civil, light talk and empty phrase. But is it not the last day—the last day of all?—is not this the very last walk, during which they are ever likely to pace together the green-kirtled summer-land? they who once thought that they should walk—tender hand in tender hand—to the distant undreaded grave! It is through no fault of their own that they are now in each other's company.

Joan's conscience is at ease on that score. It is fate and chance that have thus brought them helpless and unconsenting into transient contact. Nor is there anything of *genant* or embarrassing in this *fin-de-siècle*, which is broken every two or three minutes by one or other of the children, returning from snatching excursions into the brake: Faustine to exhibit a bramble-scratch; Rupert to brag of the pheasants he has started; both to ask loudly for arbitration on some wrangled point. Joan does not know how long they have thus together dumbly trod the wood's lush intricacies—how long this quiet trance—not itself exactly of pain, but with pain for background, pain for foreground, pain for horizon—has lasted, when it is broken in upon by a sudden, kingly noise, not made or makable by man, or any of his engines; the sound of a loud and angry thunder clap. It has been growling and sulkily muttering in the distance all the afternoon, but nobody has heeded it. The children come running back in scared haste pushing through cornel and brier.

"O Miss Dering," cries Faustine, her small, bold face already pale with fear, "did you hear the thunder? I am so frightened!—let us go home!"

"Mitchell says that there was a man struck by lightning the other day," says Rupert, encouragingly; "he was as black as a coal all down one side!"

"We had better get out of this as quickly as we can," says Anthony, rousing himself, and looking round at the close-growing tree-trunks—the interlaced branches—the thick leaf roof—"we could not well be in a worse place!"

"We must be nearly through the wood," says Joan, waking up again to present realities; "five minutes will bring us into one of the park-drives."

They all begin to walk quickly in the direction indicated; the children, indeed, take to their heels and run. No one speaks; nor is there in all the wood one lightest sound. It seems as if every bird, and beast, and insect, were listening with held breath for the sky's next loud speech. Joan's memory has misled her as to distance. It is twenty minutes, instead of five, before they emerge into the open. Just as they do so, there comes a mighty rolling crash overhead, as if God were driving his chariot along the clouds, and before you can count one, a lovely sudden arrow of deathful light has leaped into their eyes.

It is come and gone, and they are in the dark again. For by this time it has grown very dark—darker than at the midst of many a clear-faced summer night. The clouds—but now piled on the horizon—quiet, sun-kissed Alps—have rushed into one pitchy mass—a canopy of ink; out of which, momentarily, the lightning springs in blinding glory. Faustine has covered her face with both hands, and so stumbles on; Rupert, with his brag and his high courage extinct, is beginning to blubber, and to clutch at the out-held hands of Joan and Anthony, as they hastily drag him along.

"Thank God we are out of the wood!" says Joan, cheerfully.—"Hold up, Rupert!—we shall soon be home now!"

But, though she speaks confidently, her heart sinks a little as she sees how much farther off than she had imagined rise the sheltering towers of Dering, a good half-mile away at the least. They have reached the park-drive, and are posting breathlessly along it, through the alternate dread noise and dreader silence, when, in one of these latter intervals of ominous quiet, they become aware of the sound of rolling wheels and trotting hoofs coming up behind them. They turn to see an empty coal-cart advancing at its heavy horse's best speed on their tracks. As it draws near, Anthony steps into the middle of the road and hails it.

"Are you going to the castle?—because, if so, will you give these children a lift?"

No sooner said than done. On ordinary occasions Faustine would have looked upon it as very much below the dignity of Miss Smith Deloraine to be wedged between two grimy men on the tilt of a coal-cart, behind a shaggy-heeled cart-horse; but fear has taken all the glory out of her, as it has taken all the brag out of her brother. She would be thankful for

even the apothecary and dung-cart prophesied her.

"That was a good move," says Joan, with a sigh of relief and ended responsibility; "they will be in before the rain comes!"

As she speaks—in the twinkle of an eye—the whole world is lit up by one sudden green glare, intolerably lovely, against which the castle's four towers are cut out clean and fine as cameos; and at the same instant, a giant rain-drop splashes on the girl's cheek. Its successors are not slow in following it. Down they come, straight and numberless, with such a spiteful force and fierceness as if they were being shot from skyey guns; and mixed with them bullets of hail that bruise and bite.

They have taken to the grass again, so as to make a short cut to the house. Joan has given her sole protection against the weather—her flimsy sunshade—to Faustine. The mighty rain patters and smites on an absolutely undefended head.

"This is bad for you," says Anthony, as with stooped head and blinking eyes he butts against the storm; the hail-stones pelting his eyelids, and driving into his mouth the moment that he opens it.

"Do you think so?" she says, cheerily, though blinking too, and gasping a little; "I do not mind it!—it is—it is much better than the improvements!" (with a breathless laugh.)

CHAPTER VIII.

The days pleasure is ended. Faustine's profuse tears for her ruined flounces—only partially dried by the assurance that the wash-tub and the mangle will restore them to their original stiff elegance—have had their current stemmed by slumber. Montacute, physicked into convalescence, has fallen asleep despite all his nurse's remonstrances, with Leviticus for a pillow.

Most even of the grown-up members of the expedition have gone to bed early, fagged and cross. Joan's duties are ended. Till eight o'clock to-morrow morning her time is her own. She is in her bedroom, standing before her glass staring steadfastly, as if it were a new sight, at the face which that glass gives back; at the privet-white cheeks, at the horrified blue eyes looking out at her in frosty dismay, at the pinched set mouth.

"Wither am I going?" she says out loud, stonily watching her reflected lips as they stiffly move. "Wither am I dragging him?" Then clasping her lifted hands above her head, she stumbles forward, and, with an utter collapse of all restraint and self-government, sinks upon the floor, and so, through the watches of the night, lies all along in deepest abasement before God.

Through the wide window there steals now and then a little wakeful gust, that, sighing softly awhile about the dusky room, sinks all else to sleep again.

"Oh love!" she says aloud, burying her burning face on her out-flung arms, while great tearless sobs make all her prostrate body shake and quiver—"oh, poor unstable love! with all my high talk and large professions, what have I ever been, but a curse and a cruelty to you?"

Her voice dies away in utter brokenness, and for a while there is silence. Then, by-and-by, she speaks again.

"There is only one poor kindness now left me to do for you!" she says, more collectively, "to take myself at once wholly and forever out of your life; it is the last, meagre gift I shall ever give you; let me at least give it promptly."

Then she is once dumb; only now and again a catching of the breath, a dry, hard sob, tell that to her through all sleepy hours sleep's solace never comes. Once before has she kept a vigil in love's name; on that austere winter night at Helmsley when she had first heard of fickle love's early faithlessness. Even so then had she fought and wrestled all night; pushing with useless, tender hands against Fate's iron doors, and with the cold dawn victory came. Thus it is now. She has raised herself from her attitude of despair and abasement. She is leaning against the casement, no longer sobbing or moaning; tranquilly watching the coming of the young new morn. There is as yet no earliest sun-peep, and, nevertheless, all over the face of Nature there is a look of expectant surety. When he is climbing in red glory over the elms-tops it will be not more certain that he is coming than now when no faintest tinge of his smile paints the high orient gates. Never since the world swung round has he failed to come. He will come to-day. As she so thinks, a feeling of solemn, awful comfort steals over her heart, at the sense of the utter certainty of the Hand—whosoever it may be, wrangle as we may over that—that guides the world; the Hand that never makes an uncertain stroke or a blurred outline.

"It will be right!" she says, looking towards the east; her lovely sunk eyes serene with faith and reverence. "By-and-by it will be right!"

CHAPTER IX.

It is now five days since the Dering pleasure party. Even as a theme of school-room talk it is worn prematurely threadbare. In the natural course of things it might have outlasted a week, but, as it is, a new topic has elbowed it away. Of the fifth day there is now but little to run. In half an hour the sun will be gone. His fire-horses are stretching in their last gallop. These are almost the latest arrows in his quiver, that

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