A SIMPLETON;

A Story of the Day.

BY CHARLES READE.

CHAPTER XIV—CONTINUED.

This was done; and then she complained that nobody cares near her. She hasted to coming down stairs; it was so dull.

Dr. Philip consented, if she would be content to receive no visits for a week.

She assented to that; and now passed some hours every day in the drawing-room, her morning wrappers, so fresh and crisp, she looked lovely; and increased in health and strength every day.

Dr. Philip used to look at her, and his very flesh to creep at the thought that, so long, he must hurt this fair creature into the chasm of affliction; must, with a word, take her rainbow away, that she rose from her cheeks, the sparkle from her glorious eyes—eyes that beamed on him with sweet affection, and a mouth that never opened, but to show some simplicity of the mind, or some pretty burst of the sensitive heart.

He put off, and put off, and at last convoked the family, and said, "Why hell be the whole truth at all? Why not take her through stages of doubt, alarm, and, at all, leave a great gleam of hope till her child gets so rooted in her heart that—" But conscience and good sense interposed this cowardly thought, and made him see to what a horrible life of suspense he should condemn a human creature, and live a perpetual lie, and be always at the edge of some pitfall, or other.

One day, while he sat looking at her, with all these thoughts, and many more, coursing through his mind, she looked up at him, and surprised him. "Ah!" said she gravely.

"What is the matter, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing," said she, cunningly.

"Uncle dear," said she, presently, "when do we go to Herne Bay?"

Now, Dr. Philip had given that up. He had got the servants and Kate Willis to a cottage, and left after here than in any strange place; so he said, "I don't know. That all depends."

"No, uncle," said Rosa; gravely, "I don't wish to have this house. I can hardly breathe in it."

"What! your native air?"

"Mystery is not my native air; and this house is full of mystery. Voices whisper at my door, and the people don't come in. They nods cast strange looks at me, and hurry away. I notice that very pale, Mrs. Jones, she answered me as meek as Moses. I catch you looking at me, with love, and something else. What is that something?—Is it pity? that is what it is. Do you think, because I am called a simpleton, that I have no eyes nor ears, nor sense? What is this secret which you are all hiding from one person, and that is me? Ah! Christopher has not written this five weeks. Tell me the truth, I'm I will live it," and she started up in wild excitement.

Then Dr. Philip saw the hour was come.

He said, "My poor girl, you have more rights than I am anxious about Christopher, and all the servants know it."

"Anxious, and not tell me; his wife; the woman whose life is bound up in his."

"Was it for us to spoil your coronation, and set you fretting, and perhaps destroy your child? Rosa, my darling, think what a treasure Heaven has sent you, to love and care for."

"Yes," said she, trembling. "Heaven, he has been good to me; I hope Heaven will always be as good to me. I don't deserve him, but there I hid God. I am very grateful, and very penitent. I never forgot that, if I hide a good wife, very husband, five weeks is a long time. Why do you tremble so? Why are you so pale—so strong man as I am? Calamity! calamity!"

Dr. Philip hung his head.

She looked at him, started wildly up, then sank back into her chair. So the stricken deer leaps, then falls. Yet, even now, she put on a deceitful calm, and said, "Tell me the truth. I have a right to know."

He stammered out, "There is a report of an accident at sea."

She kept silence.

"A passenger drowned—out of that ship.—This, coupled with his silence, fills our hearts with fear."

"It is worse—you are breaking it to me—you have gone too far to stop. One word, is he alive? Oh, say he is alive!"

Philip rang the bell hard, and said in a troubled voice, "Rosa, think of your child."

"Not when my husband—is he alive, or dead."

"It is hard to say, with such a terrible report about, and no letters," faltered the old man, his courage failing him.

"What are you afraid of? Do you think I can't die, and go to him? Alive, or dead, and she stood before him, raging and quivering every limb.

The nurse came in.

"Fetch her child," he cried; "God have mercy on her."

"Ah, then he is dead," said she, with stony calmness. "I drove him to sea, and he is dead."

The nurse rushed in, and held the child to her.

She would not look at it.

"Dead!"

"Yes, our poor Christie is gone—but his child is here—the image of him. Do not forget the mother. Have pity on his child and yours."

"Take it out of my sight" she screamed. "Away with it, or I shall murder it. I have murdered its father. My dear Christie, before all that live [illegible] have killed him. I shall die for him. I shall go to him. She raved and tore her hair. Servants rushed in. Rosa was carried to her bed, screaming and raving, and her black hair all down on both sides, a piteous sight.

Swoon followed swoon, and that very night brain fever set in with all its sad accompaniments: a poor bereaved creature, tossing and moaning; pale, anxious, but resolute faces of the nurse and the kitchen-maid watching; on one table a pail of ice, and on another, also at the bedside, a pitcher of water, and a tumbler, which some hair or another, placed very quickly.

And the glass dispersed, and the cold water flung up to heaven with their giant arms, and then down again to hell, with a crash, and a cry of hope, what several hundred guns from him.

Only for a moment at a time could his eyeballs, straining with anguish, catch this will-of-the-wisp, the boat's flight. It groped the sea up and down, but came not near us.

When what seemed days of agony had passed, suddenly a rocket rose in the horizon—so it seemed to him.

The last man gave a shriek of joy; so prone are we to interpret things hopefully.

Misery! The next time he looked that little light, that seemed a spark of hope, it was not quite so near as before. A mortal sickness fell on his heart. The ship had recalled the boats by rocket.

He shrieked, he cried, he screamed, he raved. "Oh, Rosa! Rosa! for her sake, men, men, do not leave me. I am here! Here!"

In vain. The miserable man saw the boat's little light retire, retire, and melt into the night's larger light, and that light glided away.

Then a cold, deadly stupor fell on him. Then Death's icy claw seized his heart, and seemed to run from it to every part of him. He was a dead man. Only a question of time. Nothing to gain by floating.

But his determined spirit could not quit the world in peace, and vent here in the cold, cruel sea, the quivering body clung to the frequented life, and resisted death's touch, though more merciful.

He despised this weakness, he raged at it: he could not overcome it.

Unable to live or to die, condemned to float slowly, hour by hour, down into death's jaws.

To a lazy, darksome stupor succeeded phrensy. Fury seized this great and long-suffering mind. It rose against the cruelty and injustice of his fate. He cursed the world, whose stupidity had driven him to the brink of death, in his present nature, and at last he railed on the God that made him, and made the cruel water, that was waiting for his body. "God's justice," said he, "God's power! they are all lies," he shouted, "dreams, chimeras, like Him, the all-powerful and good, men babble of by the fire. If there was a God more powerful than the sea, and only half as good as men are, he would pity my poor Rosa and me, and send a hurricane to drive those caitiffs back to the wreck they have abandoned. Nature alone is mighty. Oh, if I could have her on my side, and only God against me! But she is as deaf to prayer as he is: as mechanical and remorseless. I am a bubble melting into the sea. And I have none, my body will soon be nothing, nothing. So ends an insignificant life. I always tried to love my fellow-creatures. Curse them! curse them! Curse the earth! Curse the sea! Curse all nature! Man's there is no other God for me to curse."

The moon came out.

He raised his head and staring eyeballs, and cursed her.

The wind began to whistle, and flung spray in his face.

He raised his fallen head and staring eyeballs, and cursed the wind.

While he was thus raving, he became sensible of a black object so windward, and so low in the water, that he could not see it, and yet it came nearer and nearer, with a rush, as he felt safer here than in any strange place: so he said, "I don't know. That all depends. There is plenty of time."

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