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BY CELIA'S ARBOUR.

A NOVEL.

BY WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE, AUTHORS OF "READY-MONEY MORTIBOY," "THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," &c.

Twelve o'clock struck from some church tower near at hand. I thought of the night but a few weeks ago, when Celia and I sat whispering through the twilight hours in the stern of the boat. Well, he had come, of whom we talked that night; he was with us; he had told Celia that he loved her. It was quite certain what answer she would give her elderly suitor. Celia's father, besides, had got the key of the safe, the thing by which he declared he would rid himself at once of his persecutor. I had done that with Forty-four. Oh! guilty pair. Was little Forty-four lying sleepless and remorseful on a conscious-stricken pillow? I, for my own part, felt small and rather mean thinking over what I had done—and how I had done it—but perhaps the "small" feeling was due rather to the knowledge how pitifully small we should look if we were found out. I believe the Repentance generally does mean fear of being found out when it does not mean the keener pang of intense disgust at having been actually exposed, in which case we call it Remorse. Borrowing that key for those few moments, and setting the door of the safe open, was, as Mr. John Pontifex would have said, shaking his head and forefinger, a Wrong Thing, a thing to lament, as awful an event as his own profane language over the rough goose when in the full vigour and animal passion of his youth. And yet—and yet—one chuckle over the thought of Herr Kämer's astonishment when he found the safe open and his victim free.

There was too much to think about as we sat beneath the laburnum in that quiet garden. Behind the forms of Celia and Leonard, behind the orange blossoms and flowers, rose a gaunt and weird figure, with a look of hungry longing in its eyes which were like the eyes of Wassielewski. It reached out long arms and great bony hands dripping with blood to seize me. And a mocking voice cried, "Revenge thy father," "Revenge thy father." My brain reeled as thin shadows of things, real and unreal, flitted across my closed eyes. I awoke with a start.

One o'clock.

And just then we heard in the distance the crunch of low steps over the gravel of the road.

"Moses," Leonard whispered, springing into attention.

The steps came nearer; they were a hundred yards off; they were the other side of the hedge; they stopped at the garden wall.

"Moses," whispered Leonard, again.

It was Moses. And Moses in very bad temper. He swore aloud at the garden gate because he could not at first find the handle. Then he swore aloud in general terms, then he swore at the people of the house because he would have to ring them up, and then he came in, banging the door after him, and tramped heavily upon the grass—the brute—crunching straight through the flower beds, setting his great heavy feet as if by deliberate choice on the delicate flowers. We were invisible beneath the laburnum tree.

Leonard rose noiselessly, and stepped after him. See, another step, and he will be at the door, ringing the bell, terrifying out of their wits the women sleeping within. Already as his scowling face shows in the twilight, he has formulated his requisition in his own mind, and is going to back it with threats of violence. The demands will never be made. The threats will never be uttered. Leonard's hand falls upon his shoulder, and Moses, turning with a start and a cry, finds himself face to face again with his old enemy.

"Come out of this garden," said Leonard. "Dare to say one word above your breath, and—"

Moses trembled, but obeyed. It was like Neptune's "Quos ego—"

Leonard dragged him, unresisting, into the road, and led him along the silent way, beyond earshot of the house, saying nothing.

"What shall we do to him?" he asked me.

"O! Mr. Ladislav," whispered Moses, "don't let him murder me. You're witness that I never done anything to him. Always hard on a poor innocent cove, he was, when we were all boys together."

"You came out to-night," said Leonard, "thinking that you were going to find an unprotected woman asleep in the dead of night; you were persuading yourself that you would frighten her into giving you more money, knowing that it was your last chance."

"No, sir," whined Moses abjectly. "No, Captain Copleston, sir. Not that. What I said to myself, as I came along, was this: 'Moses, I says, says I, the plant's found out. All is up. That's where it is.' So I says to myself—if you don't mind, sir, takin' your fingers from off o' my coat collar, which they have a throttlesome feel"—Leonard released him. "Thank you, sir. I says to myself then, 'I'll up and go to Miss Rutherford!—which she is a generous hearted lady, and tell her—tell her—Hall.' That's what I meant to do, Cap'n Copleston, sir. Hall I was a goin' to tell her."

"A likely story, indeed," said Leonard.

"Very likely, sir," Moses echoed. "Yes and I should have said—"

"Now—you—drunken blackguard and liar," said Leonard, "you have come here to make a final attempt. You have failed. Henceforth, you will be watched. I give you fair warning that if you are ever seen by me about this place, or in any other place, I will instantly give you into custody on a charge of obtaining money on false pretences. You understand so much. Then go—get out of my sight."

He accompanied his words with a gesture so threatening that our prisoner instantly set off running as hard as he could down the road. If fear ever lent wings to a fugitive, those wings were produced for Moses on this occasion.

"I was in such a rage," said Leonard, as the steps died away in the distance, "such a boiling rage with the creature that I think I should have killed him had I not let him go. It is too bad, because he richly deserved the best: cowardly one could give him. Odd! All the old feeling came back upon me, too. I used to hate him in the old days when we fought night and morning. And I hate him now."

"What is to be done next?" I asked. "Are we to go back to the friendly laburnum? There is no fear about Moses any more."

"No; I don't care what we do. I am restless and excited. I cannot sleep. Perhaps she gets up early. Let us go for a walk."

Half-past one in the morning was rather late for an evening walk, but I complied, and we went along the deserted road. Presently I began to feel tired, and was fain to rest in the hedge under a tree. And there I fell fast asleep. When I awoke it was broad daylight. Leonard was walking backwards and forwards along the road. What a handsome man he was as he came swiftly towards me, bathed in the early sunshine which played in his curly hair, and lay in his eyes.

"Awake already, Laddy?" he cried. "It is only four o'clock. I am less sleepy than ever. And there are two long hours to wait. She can't get up before six. Perhaps she will not be up before nine."

I confess that those two hours were long ones. Leonard's restless excitement increased. I made him walk. I made him bathe. I tried to make him talk, and yet the minutes crawled. At last, however, it was half-past six, and we retraced our steps to the cottage.

CHAPTER XL.

MISS RUTHERFORD.

Miss Rutherford was already up. At least there was in the garden a lady of about five-and-forty, small, fragile, and dainty, with delicate features and an air of perfect ladyhood; she wore a morning dress of muslin, with garden gloves and a straw hat. And she was gazing with dismay at the footprints—that brute Moses!—on her flowerbeds.

We looked at her for a few moments, and then Leonard opened the garden-gate, and we presented ourselves.

At least, I presented both of us.

"Miss Rutherford!"—she looked surprised. "I am speaking to—Miss Rutherford, am I not?"

"Yes. I am Miss Rutherford."

"We have something to tell you of importance. Will you take us into your house?"

She looked from one to the other.

"It is very early," she said. "My servants are not down yet—but come—you appear to be gentlemen."

She led the way to a little drawing-room, which was a mere bower of daintiness, the pleasant and pretty room of a refined and cultivated lady, with books and pictures, and all sorts of pretty things—fancy the hulking Moses in such an apartment!—and offered us chairs. There was nothing in the room which pointed to the presence of the sterner and heavier sex. Even the chairs seemed only calculated for ladies of her own slender dimensions. Leonard's creaked ominously when he sat down.

"Let me go back twenty-three years," I began. "But first I must tell you that my name is Ladislav Pulaski—here is my card—and that we do not come here from any idle motives. This gentleman—but you will see presently who he is."

"Three-and-twenty years ago?" Miss Rutherford began to tremble. "That was when I lost my sister—and my nephew was born. You come about him, I am sure. He has done something terrible at last, that boy, I am afraid. Gentlemen remember under what bad influences my nephew's early life was spent. If you have to accuse him of anything wrong—remember that."

"Pray do not be alarmed," I went on. "Your nephew's early influences were not so bad as you think, and you will very likely see reason to be proud of him."

She shook her head, as if that was a thing quite beyond the reach of hope.

Leonard was looking at her with curious eyes that grew softer as they rested on this gentle woman's sweet face.

"Twenty-three years ago, your sister died."

Would it pain you too much, Miss Rutherford, if you would tell us something about her?"

"The pain is in the recollection, rather than the telling," she replied. "My poor sister married an officer."

"His name was Leonard Copleston," I said. "Yes—you knew him perhaps? She was only eighteen—three years younger than myself and she knew nothing of the world—how should she, living as she had done all her short life in our quiet country vicarage? She thought the man she married was as good as he was handsome. She admired him for his bravery, for the stories he could tell, for the skill with which he rode, shot, and did everything, and for the winning way he had. My father liked him for his manly character, and because he was handsome and had read as well as travelled and fought. And I believe I liked him as much as my father did. There was never any opposition made, and my poor dear was married to him in our own church, and went away with him on her eighteenth birthday."

She paused for a moment.

"He was not a good man," she went on, "he was a very, very bad man. I hope God has forgiven him all the trouble and misery he brought upon us, but I find it very hard to forgive. My sister's letters were happy and bright at first; gradually I thought it was my own fancy—they seemed to lose the old joyous ring; and then they grew quite sad. In those days we did not travel about as we can now, and all we could do was to wait at home and hope. Six months after her marriage she came back to us. Oh! my poor dear, so changed, so altered. She who had been the happiest of girls and the blithest of creatures was wan and pale, with a scared and frightened look,"—Leonard rose, and went to the window, where he remained, half-hidden by the curtain.—"Such a look as an animal in a cage who had been ill-treated. She came unexpectedly and suddenly, without any letter of warning—on a cold and snowy December afternoon: she burst into passionate weeping when she fell upon my neck; and she would never tell me why she left her husband. Nor would she tell my father."

"He began to write to her. She grew faint and sick when the first letter came; she even refused at first to read it; but she yielded, and he kept on writing; and one day, she told me she had forgiven her husband, and was going back to him."

"She went. She went away from us with sad forebodings, I knew; she wrote one or two letters to us; and then—then we heard no more."

"Heard no more?"

"No; we heard nothing more of her from that day. My father made inquiries, and learned that Captain Copleston had left the army, sold out, and was gone away from the country—no one knew whither. His own family, we learned for the first time, had entirely given him up as irreclaimable, and could tell us no more. We heard nothing further, and could only conjecture that the ship in which they sailed had gone down with all on board. But why did she not write to tell us that she was going?"

"We waited and waited, hoping against hope. And then we resigned ourselves to the conviction that she was dead. The years passed on; my father died, full of years, and I was left alone in the world. And then one day last year a letter came to me from America. It was a letter dictated by my sister's husband on his death-bed—"

"He is dead then? Thank God." Was that the voice of Leonard, so hoarse, so thick with trouble?

"He implored my forgiveness, and that of his wife if she still lived. He confessed that he had let her go away—driven her away by his conduct, he said—when she was actually expecting to be confined, and that in order to begin life again without ties he had emigrated. The letter was unfinished, because death took him while he was still dictating it. Yet it brought me the comfort of knowing that he had repented."

"And then—?" I asked, because she stopped.

"Then I began again to think of my poor sister, and I advertised in two papers, asking if any one could give me tidings of her. For a long time I received no reply, but an answer came at last; it was from my nephew, that unhappy boy, who seems to have inherited all his father's vices and none of his graces."

"Poor Leonard! What a heritage!"

"It was from him that I learned how his mother, poor thing, poor thing, died in giving birth to him; he told me that he had been brought up in a rough way, among soldiers and sailors; that he knew nothing about any of his relations, that, as his letter would show me, he had little education, that he was a plumber and joiner by trade; and that by my help, if I would help him, he hoped to do well. In answer to his letter I made an appointment, and came down to meet him. I can hardly tell you what a disappointment it was to find my poor dear sister's son so rough and coarse. However, it was my duty to do what I could, and I moved down here in order to be near him, and help him to the best purpose."

She stopped and wiped away a tear.

"I have not been able to help him much as yet," she went on. "He is, indeed, the great trouble of my life. He has deceived me in everything; I find that he has no trade, or, at least that he will not work at it; he said he had a wife and young family, and I have found that he is unmarried; he said he was a total abstainer—and—oh! dear me, he has been frequently here in a dreadful state of intoxica-

tion; he said he was a churchgoer and a communicant. But these things cannot interest you."

She said this a little whistfully, as if she hoped they might.

"They do interest us very much," I said.

"After all, he is my nephew," as if she could say much more, but refrained from the respect-due to kinship.

"You have been deceived," I told her.

"You have been very grossly deceived."

"I have," she said. "But I must bear with it."

"You have been deceived, madam, in a much more important way than you think. Listen to a little story that I have to tell you."

"There were once four boys living together in the house he showed you, all under the charge of an excellent and charitable woman Mrs. Jeram to whom we shall take you. One of those boys, the best of them all, was your nephew."

"The best of them all?" she repeated bitterly.

"Then what were the others like?"

"One of them, to whom I can also take you, was named James Hex. He is now a boatswain in the Royal Navy, a very good boatswain, too, I believe, and a credit to the service. Another was—myself."

"You?"

"I, Miss Rutherford. I was placed there by my countrymen the Poles, with this Mrs. Jeram, and maintained by them out of their poverty. When one of these boys, your nephew, was eight or nine, and I a year or two younger, we were taken away from the good woman with whom we lived by a gentleman whom you shall very soon know, he adopted us and had us properly educated."

"Properly educated! But my nephew can hardly write."

"Your nephew writes as well as any other gentleman in England."

"Gentleman in England?"

"My dear lady, the man who calls himself Moses Copleston is not your nephew at all. He was the fourth of those boys of whom I told you. He is one among those who has turned out badly. He knew, no doubt, from Mrs. Jeram, all about your nephew's birth. What he told you, so far, was true. All the rest was pure invention. Did you ever, for instance, see any resemblance in him to your late sister?"

"To Lucy? Most certainly not."

"To his father?"

"Not in face. But he has his father's vices."

"So have, unfortunately, a good many men."

"But I cannot understand. He is not my nephew at all! Not my nephew? Can any man dare to be so wicked?"

"It really was, as we reflected afterwards, a claim of great daring, quite worthy to be admitted among those of historical pretenders. Moses was another Perkin Warbeck."

"Most certainly not your nephew. He is an impudent pretender. I do not ask you to accept my word only. I will give you proof that will satisfy any lawyer, if you please. He must have seen your advertisement, and knowing that the real nephew was gone away, devised the excellent scheme of lies and robbery, of which you have been the victim. Last night we wrung the truth from him; last night he came here, to this house, intending to make a last attempt at extortion, but we were here before him. Your house was guarded for you all night—by your real nephew."

She was trembling violently. She had forgotten the presence of Leonard, who stood in the window, silent.

"My nephew! My nephew! But where is he? And oh! Is he like that other? Is there more shame and wickedness?"

"No! No shame at all. Only pride and joy. He is here, Miss Rutherford. See! This is Leonard Copleston, your sister's son."

Leonard stepped before her.

"I am, indeed," he said. "I am your sister's son."

What was it, in his voice, in his manner, in his attitude, that carried my thoughts backward with a rush to the day when he stood amid the snow in the old churchyard, and cried aloud to the spirit of his dead mother lying in the pauper's corner?

And was she like her dead sister, this delicate and fragile lady who must once have been beautiful, and who now stood with hands tightly clasped, gazing with trembling wonder on the gallant young fellow before her?

"My nephew?" she cried. "Leonard—it was your father's name—you have his hair and his eyes, but you have your mother's voice. Leonard, shall you love me?"

He took her two hands in his, and drew her towards him like a lover.

I thought they would be best alone, and disappeared.

After meditation for a space among the flowers I went back again. They were still standing by the table, her hand in his. He held a miniature. I guessed of whom, and was looking on it with tearful eyes.

"Leonard," I said, "I shall take the dogcart into town, and leave you with your aunt to tell your own story. Bring her with you this very afternoon, and introduce her to the Captain. Miss Rutherford, you are pleased with this new nephew of yours?"

"Pleased?" she cried with a sob of happiness.

"Pleased?"

"He is an improvement upon the old one. Moses, indeed! As if you could have a nephew named Moses, with a drink-sodden face and a passion for pipes and beer."

She laughed. The situation had all the elements of tears, and I wanted to stave them off.

"And then there is Celia," I added.