

this story seemed to affect the two young women strangely after the man had gone. They pitied the child, but that was not all. The woman's strange words on the sunny summer days came back. Miss Fifield would raise her right hand at times, and look at it nervously, as if not sure that it was not her middle finger that had gone. The prophetic words that the lone woman had uttered were vividly recalled, and Miss Needham almost unconsciously repeated them. Neither of the ladies was superstitious, but each seemed to live in an apprehensive atmosphere.

"I wish I had that child here," said Miss Fifield, "and that we were not under any obligation to call there tomorrow. I would gladly help the child for its own and its mother's sake, and would take it into our school, but I have no wish to meet the new wife."

"But we must," said Miss Needham, "and we must not shirk our duty. I dare to be plain-spoken under necessity, and if there be any one that would make me resolute to face with the truth it would be a stepmother who would abuse a defenceless child. Whatever happens I shall do as the mother requested. Sometime I seem to feel her will upon me. Did you ever think of that?"

"Yes, but it must be only fancy," said Miss Fifield. "It may be. But I seem to live as under an impression. There is a cloud before me. I wish to be free from the influence. I feel as though something dark were going to happen."

"So do I," said Miss Needham. "And what causes this shadow—this eclipse of life? You cannot think that it is the dead wife of Ben Bow!"

The two women left Brook Farm in the late morning and rode over to the Dedham woods, and arrived at the house of Ben Bow early in the afternoon. They were coolly and inquiringly received by the new wife, Margaret Cone Bow.

"What may your names be?" said the woman cautiously.

"Hester Fifield and Mary Needham," answered Miss Needham firmly.

"And where do you live?"

"At Brook Farm."

"Oh, you do! Do you belong there?"

"We spend much time there. We have relatives there who are members of the Community."

"Dr. Fifield one of them?"

"Yes," said Miss Fifield, "and that is why I am here. I am his sister."

"And what brings you here this cold day?"

"We knew Mrs. Bow, and she asked us to take an interest in the welfare of her child."

"Ye didn't know that I was here, did ye?"

"We read in the papers that Mr. Bow had married again."

"Well, one mother is enough for one child. When the dead Mrs. Bow wants to see ye she'll send for ye. I'm sure I have no wish to ever meet ye again in this world or any other. Do you mean to tell me by coming over here on a cold day like this that I am not competent to take care of that child, though he is the worst youngster I ever knew?"

"I am breaking his will. It is my duty to see that the child's will is broken, and there was never another such a stubborn boy as that. But I have about succeeded in breaking his will. I have made him stop crying for his mother. She was an airy-minded, no-account woman, anyway. Benny, come here."

A child somewhat more than two years old came into the room from the kitchen. He had a thin face, high forehead, and a bashful, pitiable face.

"Here, boy, these women folks have called to see ye. Speak up good and tell them who your mother is."

The boy hesitated.

"Speak up and tell 'em, or you know what you'll get when they are gone!"

"Sarah!" The boy burst into tears.

"Sarah Bow!"

"Did you ever see the like of that for wilfulness? Don't you see what a time I have? Boy, that ain't your mother's name. That was your dead mother's name—she that lies out on the hills in the cold, without a gravestone, and will never have one if I can help it. That woman was never no good to Ben Bow. Stop that whimpering now, and tell

these young women who your mother is. Not Sarah, now, mind. Say, what was that?"

There came a heavy rap on the front door.

"There have been strange noises about the house ever since Sarah died," said the woman. "Let me go and look out of the window and see who is there. That door hasn't been opened since Ben banked up the house."

Margaret Bow went to the window and threw up the curtain, and stood silent. She presently said:

"There don't seem to be anybody there."

She sat down in an old rocking-chair and began to rock violently. She looked disturbed, and she presently said:

"Now, I am going to tell ye how bad that child is."

There fell a succession of loud, echoing raps on the door. Margaret Bow looked around wildly. A gust swept by the corner of the house. The two ladies turned apprehensively toward each other. The boy shared the fear, and came hesitatingly to his stepmother, and buried his face in her lap.

"What do you come to me for? You told these folks that Sarah was your mother. If Sarah is your mother let her look out for ye and protect ye."

Raps fell upon the door, almost causing the house to shake. Another gust of wind whirling the lone leaves swept around the corner of the house.

"Here, take the brat," were the words of Margaret Bow, as she pushed the child from her. "Let me go and open the door."

The visitors heard Margaret Bow unlock the door and slowly open it. They felt a sharp gust of wind sweep into the rooms. They heard a door in the entry fly open. There followed an awful shriek, a heavy fall. They opened the door of the room. Margaret Bow lay on the floor, moaning. They tried to lift her, but she was convulsed. They asked her what had happened. She at last gasped:

"Sarah's hand!"

"What—tell us?"

"It met me at the door and struck me on the forehead here. It was her hand—I knew it—I can't tell ye how. Send for Ben."

She curled up in a heap on the floor and lay motionless.

"Where is your husband?" asked the ladies over and over, but they received no answer. They asked the boy, but he could only answer:

"He's chopping wood," but where he could not tell.

"The woman is dying," said Mary

Needham. "She must not be left alone. You go over to Brook Farm and call the Doctor, and I will remain here with the child."

At sunset Ben Bow came home, and Dr. Fifield and his sister met him on the road and told him all that had happened. They entered the dreary house, and found Margaret Bow lying unconscious where she had fallen. The Doctor examined the prostrate form.

"She is dead," he said.

"What was it?" asked Mary Needham.

"Paralysis," said Dr. Fifield.

"No it were not," said Ben Bow.

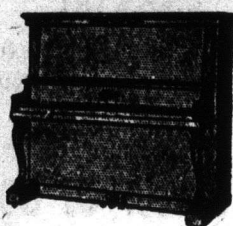
"That warn't no paralysis."

"What then?" asked Miss Needham.

"It were a conscience stroke. I know that woman's soul. I know things that I wouldn't want ter tell. You may call it what you will—it were a conscience stroke. She's been a-hearin' noises. People who have wrong in their souls have haunted minds. Poor critter, may the Lord forgive her; she was constituted so."

"She said that Sarah's hand came and struck her on the forehead," said Mary Needham. "Her forehead does look strange."

They took up the form and laid it on a bed. Her hair fell over her high forehead and white face.



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