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CHAPTER XXXVIII

"Let me keep it until you can read it, Leah. Carry your mind back, my dear, to the afternoon when I first saw you—to the little gloomy room where the bars of yellow sunlight fell upon the floor. Do you remember it, Leah?"

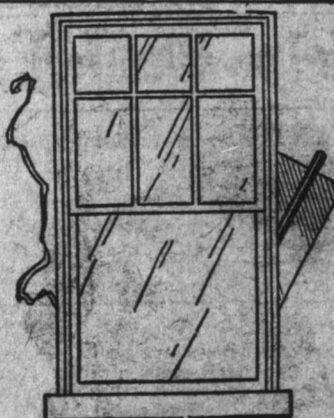
"Yes," she cried, with a shudder; "but why do you speak of it—why remind me of it?"

"You will hear, my dear. This letter is from Hettie; and she says that your father is very ill, and wishes to see you."

Leah clasped her hands in dismay. "Oh, uncle," she cried, "I had so nearly forgotten that terrible past, that dreadful life!"

"I know, my dear," he said, soothingly. "We have kept to our compact well: the name of Ray has not been mentioned between us. But this letter is the result of my words. I said:—Heaven forgive me if I spoke too harshly!—that in life I would have nothing to do with him, but that, if when he came to die, he wanted you, you should go to him. You remember?"

"Yes," she replied, shuddering, "I remember it. You said: 'If you are dying, and send for her, she shall come.'"



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"Those were my words," said the general, "and I must carry them out. Your father is dying, Leah, and he wants to see you."

"She hid her face in her hands, and he saw that she trembled.

"You shall not go unless you wish," he said.

"I must go," she replied, looking up at him in troubled despair. "Duty, conscience, honor, all tell me I must go; but I shrink from it. Oh, uncle, I hated that old life so much!"

"You need not think of it. You will never go back to it, Leah; and you shall not go to Southwood now, unless you wish it."

"I must go," she said, more to herself than to him. "He is my father—I must go. Let me see what Hettie says, uncle, I have longed to speak of her. It eases my heart even to utter her name."

Silently the general placed the letter in her hands, and watched her face as she read.

Simple and pathetic were the words addressed by Hettie to the general. She seemed to think that the presence of death levelled all distinctions. She addressed him as "Dear Uncle," and went on to say that all through the summer her father had been very ill, but that lately he had been much worse. Ten days since the doctor had thought him dying. Since then he had been in a terrible state—dying, yet could not die. "Last night" he had called her to him, and told her that he could not die until he had seen Leah once more. "I cursed her, Hettie, when she left me," he had said, "and I want to take the curse from her. I cannot die until I have seen her. Write to the general, and ask him to bring her hither."

"I must go," Leah repeated, with white lips, turning to the general. "How horrible, uncle! My poor father did curse me, but they were only words. I have never been frightened about it; have you?"

"I have never liked even to think of it, my dear," he replied. "If any one was to blame in that terrible business, it was myself. I was too harsh, but I thought I was carrying out my dear sister's wish—that was all. Everything looks different in the presence of death; and yet I do not see how I could have acted otherwise. Will you go at once, Leah?"

"Do you really believe that he is dying?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the general; "I see no reason for doubting what Hettie says. I do not think he would ask to see you, Leah, if he had any chance of life."

"Then we must go at once," she said. "But was there ever anything so strange, uncle? It looks to me more than a coincidence that they should have lived at Southwood and we at Dene Abbey, so near them, yet never once have met, is it fate or Providence?"

"Providence," replied the brave old soldier. "I do not believe in fate. I remember, when we were at Dene, hearing the duke speak of some worn-out old politician who lived at Southwood. I need hardly say that I never for one moment dreamed that it was Martin Ray."

Leah shrank back with a shudder at the sound of the name.

"Do not think me unfeeling, uncle," she said, "but I suffered so terribly in my early life that I cannot bear even to recall it. And to think that I have been so near Hettie and never knew it!"

Sir Arthur took out his watch and looked at it.

"We can catch the midday express," he said. "If we lose no time."

But Leah seemed hardly conscious of his words.

"Uncle," she said, "there was a time when Hettie and I had but one heart and one life between us. How strange that we were so near, with only the great green hill dividing us! I wonder what Hettie is like."

"She was a very sweet girl," said the general. "I wish she had chosen to come with us; but I admitted them, as I do now, the faithful, tender heart. We must not lose time, Leah," he added.

But there was something in his niece's face that made him stop and draw her closer to him, that made him kiss her again and again, while he said:

"You are the child of my heart, Leah; and you, who came with me, are the one I shall always love best in this world. Go now to your room to dress, and I will get ready at once. Stay—we must think of Basil. Write a note to him—one of the grooms shall take it over—and tell him that we

have been sent for quite suddenly to the sick-bed of a relative, but that we expect to return in a day or two. Do not say where we are going. I will tell him the whole story on my return. I intended to tell him in the course of a few days; it is time he knew. How surprised he will be!"

"So they parted; but, for the first time since he had adopted Leah, there was in the general's mind a slight sense of disappointment—he could hardly tell why or wherefor. He would have felt happier had she shown more pity, more affection for Martin Ray, more anxiety to be with him; and yet it was by his wish that she had left him. And in Leah's heart there was something like a feeling of resentment or jealousy. It seemed to her that he admired Hettie for staying with her father quite as much as he had admired her for coming away.

"Perhaps," said Leah to herself, "he thinks Hettie the most noble of the two. He does not know. There are many ways of showing true nobility. I may find one some day."

They reached the station just in time to catch the midday express that would enable them to arrive at Southwood long before night.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The sullen, gray light of a dull November sky fell over land and sea. The great hill that lay between the wide woodlands and Southwood looked brown and arid. The tide was high, and the huge waves boomed at the foot of the rocks. It was a cold, uncomfortable evening, with a chill wind blowing, the clouds falling lower and lower and threatening rain, a mist spreading from sea to land, clinging to the trees and hedges, and lying like soft clouds on the grass. There was no sound of a bird's song, no glimpse of a flower. Even the pretty little town of Southwood looked dull and gloomy. All around it was still and silent, except for the sullen roar of the waves and the wailing of the wind. All the sweet summer sounds and scents were dead; autumn reigned supreme.

Inside Martin Ray's cottage the scene was even more dreary than without. There is no room so sad as that in which a man has lain day after day, week after week, dying. When there is any hope in the nursing, it is not so dreary. There is the prospect of a pleasant termination; there is the looking forward to a time when all the paraphernalia of medicine will be done away with. But in this case there was no such hope. The long illness must end in death, and death was long in coming. It seemed at times as though nothing but the fierceness of hate kept life in Martin Ray; all that he had disliked, scorned, denounced in his youth and his strength, was more odious than ever to him now. More than once his doctor, looking at the stern, vindictive face, said to himself:

"It is strong feeling that keeps him alive."

That Hettie was a model nurse, as she had always been a model daughter, surprised no one. She never seemed to think of herself; she scarcely slept or rested, for the dying man was afraid to be left alone.

"You must never leave me, Hettie," he said to her one day. "While you are in the room some of my old thoughts of the angels come to me; the moment you go I have a horrible fancy."

"What is it?" she asked, touching the gray hair with her white fingers.

"When you leave the room, it fills with huge black dogs, their flaming eyes all fixed on me. I know it is fancy, because they only bark. They never touch me."

(To be continued.)

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