

for who but you can break it to that wretched girl upstairs. Is she waiting for him now in her wedding gown? Well, her gay bridegroom is a husband this morning, with a dainty wife, with red cheeks and black eyes, the barmaid at the Royal George, a bridegroom who is raving, and vowing to kill himself or the landlord, or fight to the death with me, his old friend." He broke down with a sob. His words sounded brutal, but they were but the outcome of despair.

"What does it mean," Rachel moaned feebly.

Harry went on in the same half-scoffing, half-desperate fashion.

"What does it mean? Why, it means that those gay blades from Shelburne must needs play the devil in their cups last night. I saw that mischief was coming, and spoke a word to De La Tour, but he was their host, and could stint nothing. The wine flowed like water; the landlord drank with us; not a man was sober. When towards the small hours, the devil put it into some one's head to have a rehearsal of to-day's wedding. The poor little wretch of a barmaid was dragged in, the landlord propped up with chairs, and De La Tour made to go through the whole ceremony. Most of us slept where we fell, and this morning I was shaken awake by the trembling landlord to the pleasant tidings, that he being one of the magistrates appointed, under that cursed new Act, to solemnize marriages, the farce of the night before was a legal ceremony."

A long, wild shriek sounded from the passage, a shriek that brought the old doctor in trembling haste from his study, to find his youngest child stretched upon the floor in her bridal array. Rachel tried to raise her, but with wild shrieks and sobs, and wilder laughter, she repulsed her; and it was long before, the very passion of her grief exhausting itself, she could be raised and carried to her room.

Late that night, when Esther lay sleeping like a worn-out child, Rachel stood at the open doorway, letting the soft darkness unfold her, if perchance it might bring peace to her spirit. She still wore the red satin, in which she had that morning dressed herself, and the light from inside touched its folds with fiery streams. Her arms and neck were bare, and to any passer-by, she might have seemed the spectre of some French court dame returning to the scene of some secret crime, rather than the old parson's daughter, Rachel Emslie. Standing there, she heard the echo of a footstep, and Harry came softly around from the farm buildings.

"How is she now?" he asked eagerly.

"She is worn out and sleeping. I think that she may sleep all night."

"Tis but waking to her sorrow on the morn."

"But it gives her strength to bear it," then, hesitating for a moment, "you have seen him," she asked.

"Yes, he is in the village now, I tried to make him leave to night, but he would not stir."

"Why does he wait?"

In both hearts there was the same dark thought of danger to them in his neighborhood, of worse sorrow to be guarded against.

Harry's voice was husky as he answered: "He begged on his knees and with tears—he, the terror of a whole state, with a woman's tears, to see her but to say farewell. And I, his old comrade, swore to him by all I hold sacred, that he should only pass to a sight of her face over my dead body. Was I right?"

"Yes," came softly as a sigh of the night wind.

"But I have pledged my word to ontreat you to see him."

"I! Oh Harry, I cannot!" she cried wildly, clinging to his arm.

"My poor girl. 'Tis hard on you, and yet believe me, 'twere a Christian charity to him."

"It will kill me to see his pain," she sobbed, then with an effort, "but I will do it, Harry."

"That is right. Then to-morrow at noon go down to the three-acre wood lot. He will be there. And now to bed my poor Rachel, and get some rest after this heavy day. Would the sun had never risen on it."

They parted, and the silence of the night settled down over the farmhouse.

On the morrow, at noon, Rachel made her way down through the dry brown meadows to the maple wood, where the leaves were already showing red and gold. The sleepy sunshine lay like a blessing over the land, a blessing of peace and fruition, but it was unshared by the human hearts sore with life's combat.

The foliage having lost its summer density, as Rachel sank upon a moss-covered log to regain strength, she could see De La Tour's figure coming towards her through its shining vistas. The tall dark figure seemed a gloom upon the fair day, and as he drew near she read that in his face which made her shiver in the sunshine. The haggard and livid features, the eyes in which glowed so sullen a fire, the droop of the whole figure, those were the outward tokens of the deep waters which had submerged his life. He spoke in a hollow, unnatural voice, as if using a strong self-restraint.

"I trust it was not too much to ask that you should once more look on the wretch who has worked such mischief."

Rachel had risen. "Not you! not you!" she said, holding out her hands as though appealing against some judgment, but he waved his own as though to set aside the plea.

"Mine! Through the weakest folly my life long sin and remorse. But what avails that now. Tell me of her."

"What is there to tell. Spent with her sorrow, she lies to-day white and still, scarce answering a yes or no."

He turned from her and leant against a tree, his strong frame shaken by the might of his passions. She must breathe some word of comfort.

"But that must pass. To-morrow she will be stronger again." She paused, then with a sob went on. "I dared not—I could not if I had dared, ask her for one word or token for you; but," she drew one hand from under her apron, "I brought you a curl of hair which I cut this morning as she slept."

Groveling before her, with wild tears kissing the hand that held such a treasure, this abasement of the strong man was a haunting memory to Rachel's after life. Presently he was able to speak with outward calm.

"In an hour I start on the road that leads me away from her. Last night I swore that, in spite of all God or man's laws, I would carry her off."

Rachel shuddered to hear what she had already guessed.

"In those hours I went down into hell, and was tempted of the furies." The echo of that dread hour was still in his voice. "But now you need not fear, I am sane again. I see the road, and walk on it with bleeding feet. To-day I ride to the accursed inn where my bride," he laughed, "awaits me. Poor wretch! It was not her sin, and she is an honest girl they say. I will take her home to my mother's care, and then I will try for the commission offered me last year."

"And you would desert the poor girl?"

"Desert her," he said, fiercely, "am I not giving her my name and the shelter of my mother's home? If over the day comes that I can bear to look upon her face—"

"God grant it may."

"God grant that before it comes I may be lying on some battlefield, my face upturned to the stars. And now farewell, Rachel, for I have far to ride to-day. God bless you for your goodness to a desperate man."

As he turned and left her, Rachel dropped upon the old log and hid her face from the brightness of the day.

More than a year had gone, and Esther reigned as Harry's wife in the farmhouse, while Rachel and her father had moved into the new parsonage before tidings came to Rachel, in a black-edged letter written in Madame De La Tour's fine French handwriting, that De La Tour's wish was fulfilled, and that he had died a soldier's death.

Rachel had taken the letter into the maple wood, where she had once met him, and then, sitting on the old log, as she finished reading the letter of the heart-broken mother, she breathed out the words of the burial prayer: "We give Thee hearty thanks that it hath pleased Thee to deliver our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world."

Rachel lived to be a white-haired woman, to see Esther's children and grandchildren grow up around her, to see her sister go before her to the grave, and yet the personal stay of her life was finished that day in the maple wood.

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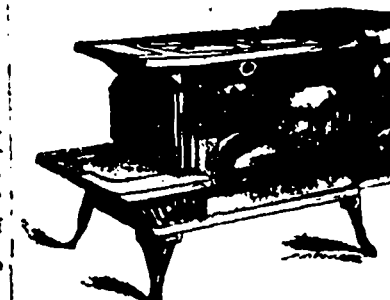
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