

Chapter 29

The recollection of about three days and nights succeeding this is very dim in my mind. I can recall some sensations felt in that interval; but few thoughts framed, and no actions performed. I knew I was in a small room and in a narrow bed. To that bed I seemed to have grown; I lay on it motionless as a stone; and to have torn me from it would have been almost to kill me. I took no note of the lapse of time — of the change from morning to noon, from noon to evening. I observed when any one entered or left the apartment: I could even tell who they were; I could understand what was said when the speaker stood near to me; but I could not answer; to open my lips or move my limbs was equally impossible. Hannah, the servant, was my most frequent visitor. Her coming disturbed me. I had a feeling that she wished me away: that she did not understand me or my circumstances; that she was prejudiced against me. Diana and Mary appeared in the chamber once or twice a day. They would whisper sentences of this sort at my bedside -

“It is very well we took her in. ”

“Yes; she would certainly have been found dead at the door in the morning had she been left out all night. I wonder what she has gone through? ”

“Strange hardships, I imagine — poor, emaciated, pallid wanderer? ”

“She is not an uneducated person, I should think, by her manner of speaking; her accent was quite pure; and the clothes she took off, though splashed and wet, were little worn and fine. ”

“ She has a peculiar face; fleshless and haggard as it is, I rather like it; and when in good health and animated, I can fancy her physiognomy would be agreeable. ”

Never once in their dialogues did I hear a syllable of regret at the hospitality they had extended to me, or of suspicion of, or aversion to, myself. I was comforted.

Mr. St. John came but once: he looked at me, and said my state of lethargy was the result of reaction from excessive and protracted fatigue. He pronounced it needless to send for a doctor: nature, he was sure, would manage best, left to herself. He said every nerve had been overstrained in some way, and the whole system must sleep torpid a while. There was no disease. He imagined my recovery would be rapid enough when once commenced. These opinions he delivered in a few words, in a quiet, low voice; and added, after a pause, in the tone of a man little accustomed to expansive comment, “ Rather an unusual physiognomy; certainly, not indicative of vulgarity or degradation. ”

“Far otherwise,” responded Diana. “To speak truth, St. John, my heart rather warms to the poor little soul. I wish we may be able to benefit her permanently. ”

“That is hardly likely, ” was the reply. “You will find she is some young lady who has had a misunderstanding

with her friends, and has probably injudiciously left them. We may, perhaps, succeed in restoring her to them, if she is not obstinate: but I trace lines of force in her face which make me sceptical of her tractability. ” He stood considering me some minutes; then added, “ She looks sensible, but not at all handsome. ”

“ She is so ill, St. John. ”

“ Ill or well, she would always be plain. The grace and harmony of beauty are quite wanting in those features. ”

On the third day I was better; on the fourth, I could speak, move, rise in bed, and turn. Hannah had brought me some gruel and dry toast, about, as I supposed, the dinner-hour. I had eaten with relish: the food was good — void of the feverish flavour which had hitherto poisoned what I had swallowed. When she left me, I felt comparatively strong and revived: ere long satiety of repose and desire for action stirred me. I wished to rise; but what could I put on? Only my damp and bemired apparel; in which I had slept on the ground and fallen in the marsh. I felt ashamed to appear before my benefactors so clad. I was spared the humiliation.

On a chair by the bedside were all my own things, clean and dry. My black silk frock hung against the wall. The traces of the bog were removed from it; the creases left by the wet smoothed out: it was quite

decent. My very shoes and stockings were purified and rendered presentable. There were the means of washing

in the room, and a comb and brush to smooth my hair. After a weary process, and resting every five minutes, I succeeded in dressing myself. My clothes hung loose on me; for I was much wasted, but I covered deficiencies with a shawl, and once more, clean and respectable looking — no speck of the dirt, no trace of the disorder I so hated, and which seemed so to degrade me, left — I crept down a stone staircase with the aid of the banisters, to a narrow low passage, and found my way presently to the kitchen.

It was full of the fragrance of new bread and the warmth of a generous fire. Hannah was baking. Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones. Hannah had been cold and stiff, indeed, at the first: latterly she had begun to relent a little; and when she saw me come in tidy and well-dressed, she even smiled.

“What, you have got up!” she said. “You are better, then. You may sit you down in my chair on the hearthstone, if you will. ”

She pointed to the rocking-chair: I took it. She bustled about, examining me every now and then with the corner of her eye. Turning to me, as she took some loaves from the oven, she asked bluntly -

“ Did you ever go a-begging afore you came here? ”

I was indignant for a moment; but remembering that anger was out of the question, and that I had indeed appeared as a beggar to her, I answered quietly, but still not without a certain marked firmness -

“You are mistaken in supposing me a beggar. I am no beggar; any more than yourself or your young ladies. ”

After a pause she said, “I dunnut understand that: you’ ve like no house, nor no brass, I guess?”

“The want of house or brass (by which I suppose you mean money) does not make a beggar in your sense of the word. ”

“ Are you book- learned?” she inquired presently.

“Yes, very. ”

“ But you’ ve never been to a boarding- school?”

“ I was at a boarding- school eight years. ”

She opened her eyes wide. “Whatever cannot ye keep yourself for, then?”

“I have kept myself; and, I trust, shall keep myself again. What are you going to do with these gooseberries?” I inquired, as she brought out a basket of the fruit.

“ Mak’ ‘em into pies. ”

“ Give them to me and I’ ll pick them. ”

“ Nay; I dunnut want ye to do nought. ”

“ But I must do something. Let me have them. ”

She consented; and she even brought me a clean towel to spread over my dress, “lest,” as she said, “I should mucky it. ”

“Ye’ve not been used to sarvant’s wark, I see by your hands,” she remarked. “Happen ye’ve been a dressmaker? ”

“ No, you are wrong. And now, never mind what I have been: don’ t trouble your head further about me; but tell me the name of the house where we are. ”

“Some calls it Marsh End, and some calls it Moor House. ”

“And the gentleman who lives here is called Mr. St. John? ”

“Nay; he doesn’t live here: he is only staying a while. When he is at home, he is in his own parish at Morton. ”

“ That village a few miles off?

“Aye. ”

“ And what is he? ”

“ He is a parson. ”

I remembered the answer of the old housekeeper at the parsonage, when I had asked to see the clergyman.
“ This, then, was his father’ s residence? ”

“Aye; old Mr. Rivers lived here, and his father, and grandfather, and gurt (great) grandfather afore him. ”

“The name, then, of that gentleman, is Mr. St. John Rivers?”

“Aye; St. John is like his kirstened name. ”

“And his sisters are called Diana and Mary Rivers?”

“Yes. ”

“Their father is dead?”

“Dead three weeks sin’ of a stroke. ”

“They have no mother?”

“The mistress has been dead this mony a year. ”

“Have you lived with the family long?”

“I’ve lived here thirty year. I nursed them all three. ”

“That proves you must have been an honest and faithful servant. I will say so much for you, though you have had the incivility to call me a beggar. ”

She again regarded me with a surprised stare. “I believe, ” she said, “I was quite mista’ en in my thoughts of you: but there is so mony cheats goes about, you mun forgie me. ”

“And though,” I continued, rather severely, “you wished to turn me from the door, on a night when you should not have shut out a dog. ”

“Well, it was hard: but what can a body do? I thought more o’ th’ childer nor of mysel: poor things! They’ve like nobody to tak’ care on ‘em but me. I’m like to look sharpish. ”

I maintained a grave silence for some minutes.

“You munnot think too hardly of me,” she again remarked.

“But I do think hardly of you,” I said; “and I’ll tell you why — not so much because you refused to give me shelter, or regarded me as an impostor, as because you just now made it a species of reproach that I had no ‘brass’ and no house. Some of the best people that ever lived have been as destitute as I am; and if you are a Christian, you ought not to consider poverty a crime. ”

“No more I ought,” said she: “Mr. St. John tells me so too; and I see I wor wrang — but I’ve clear a different notion on you now to what I had. You look a raight down dacent little crater. ”

“That will do — I forgive you now. Shake hands. ”

She put her floury and horny hand into mine; another and heartier smile illumined her rough face, and from that moment we were friends.

Hannah was evidently fond of talking. While I picked the fruit, and she made the paste for the pies, she proceeded to give me sundry details about her deceased master and mistress, and “the childer,” as she called the young people.

Old Mr. Rivers, she said, was a plain man enough, but a gentleman, and of as ancient a family as could be found. Marsh End had belonged to the Rivers ever since it was a house: and it was, she affirmed, "aboon two hundred year old — for all it looked but a small, humble place, naught to compare wi' Mr. Oliver's grand hall down i' Morton Vale. But she could remember Bill Oliver's father a journeyman needlemaker; and th' Rivers wor gentry i' th' owd days o' th' Henrys, as onybody might see by looking into th' registers i' Morton Church vestry." Still, she allowed, "the owd maister was like other folk — naught mich out o' t' common way: stark mad o' shooting, and farming, and sich like." The mistress was different. She was a great reader, and studied a deal; and the "bairns" had taken after her. There was nothing like them in these parts, nor ever had been; they had liked learning, all three, almost from the time they could speak; and they had always been "of a mak' of their own." Mr. St. John, when he grew up, would go to college and be a parson; and the girls, as soon as they left school, would seek places as governesses: for they had told her their father had some years ago lost a great deal of money by a man he had trusted turning bankrupt; and as he was now not rich enough to give them fortunes, they must provide for themselves. They had lived very little at home for a long while, and were only come now to stay a few weeks on account of their father's death; but they did so like Marsh End and Morton, and all these moors and hills about. They had been in London, and many other grand towns; but they always said there was no

place like home; and then they were so agreeable with each other — never fell out nor “threaped.” She did not know where there was such a family for being united.

Having finished my task of gooseberry picking, I asked where the two ladies and their brother were now.

“Gone over to Morton for a walk; but they would be back in half-an-hour to tea.”

They returned within the time Hannah had allotted them: they entered by the kitchen door. Mr. St. John, when he saw me, merely bowed and passed through; the two ladies stopped: Mary, in a few words, kindly and calmly expressed the pleasure she felt in seeing me well enough to be able to come down; Diana took my hand: she shook her head at me.

“You should have waited for my leave to descend,” she said. “You still look very pale — and so thin! Poor child! — poor girl!”

Diana had a voice toned, to my ear, like the cooing of a dove. She possessed eyes whose gaze I delighted to encounter. Her whole face seemed to me full of charm. Mary’s countenance was equally intelligent — her features equally pretty; but her expression was more reserved, and her manners, though gentle, more distant. Diana looked and spoke with a certain authority: she had a will, evidently. It was my nature to feel pleasure in yielding to an authority supported like hers, and to bend, where my conscience and self-respect permitted, to an active will.

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