

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

RHODA
FLEMING,
VOLUME 5

George Meredith
Rhoda Fleming. Volume 5

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George Meredith

Rhoda Fleming – Volume 5

CHAPTER XXXIX

Late into the afternoon, Farmer Fleming was occupying a chair in Robert's lodgings, where he had sat since the hour of twelve, without a movement of his limbs or of his mind, and alone. He showed no sign that he expected the approach of any one. As mute and unremonstrant as a fallen tree, nearly as insensible, his eyes half closed, and his hands lying open, the great figure of the old man kept this attitude as of stiff decay through long sunny hours, and the noise of the London suburb. Although the wedding people were strangely late, it was unnoticed by him. When the door opened and Rhoda stepped into the room, he was unaware that he had been waiting, and only knew that the hours had somehow accumulated to a heavy burden upon him.

"She is coming, father; Robert is bringing her up," Rhoda said.

"Let her come," he answered.

Robert's hold was tight under Dahlia's arm as they passed the doorway, and then the farmer stood. Robert closed the door.

For some few painful moments the farmer could not speak, and his hand was raised rejectingly. The return of human

animation to his heart made him look more sternly than he felt; but he had to rid himself of one terrible question before he satisfied his gradual desire to take his daughter to his breast. It came at last like a short roll of drums, the words were heard,—

"Is she an honest woman?"

"She is," said Rhoda.

The farmer was looking on Robert.

Robert said it likewise in a murmur, but with steadfast look.

Bending his eyes now upon Dahlia, a mist of affection grew in them. He threw up his head, and with a choking, infantine cry, uttered, "Come."

Robert placed her against her father's bosom.

He moved to the window beside Rhoda, and whispered, and she answered, and they knew not what they said. The joint moans of father and daughter—the unutterable communion of such a meeting—filled their ears. Grief held aloof as much as joy. Neither joy nor grief were in those two hearts of parent and child; but the senseless contentment of hard, of infinite hard human craving.

The old man released her, and Rhoda undid her hands from him, and led the pale Sacrifice to another room.

"Where's...?" Mr. Fleming asked.

Robert understood him.

"Her husband will not come."

It was interpreted by the farmer as her husband's pride. Or, may be, the man who was her husband now had righted her at

last, and then flung her off in spite for what he had been made to do.

"I'm not being deceived, Robert?"

"No, sir; upon my soul!"

"I've got that here," the farmer struck his ribs.

Rhoda came back. "Sister is tired," she said. "Dahlia is going down home with you, for...I hope, for a long stay."

"All the better, while home we've got. We mayn't lose time, my girl.

Gammon's on 's way to the station now. He'll wait. He'll wait till

midnight. You may always reckon on a slow man like Gammon for waitin'.

Robert comes too?"

"Father, we have business to do. Robert gives me his rooms here for a little time; his landlady is a kind woman, and will take care of me. You will trust me to Robert."

"I'll bring Rhoda down on Monday evening," Robert said to the farmer.

"You may trust me, Mr. Fleming."

"That I know. That I'm sure of. That's a certainty," said the farmer. "I'd do it for good, if for good was in the girl's heart, Robert. There seems," he hesitated; "eh, Robert, there seems a something upon us all. There's a something to be done, is there? But if I've got my flesh and blood, and none can spit on her, why should I be asking 'whats' and 'whys'? I bow my head; and God

forgive me, if ever I complained. And you will bring Rhoda to us on Monday?"

"Yes; and try and help to make the farm look up again, if Gammon'll do the ordering about."

"Poor old Mas' Gammon! He's a rare old man. Is he changed by adversity,

Robert? Though he's awful secret, that old man! Do you consider a bit

Gammon's faithfulness, Robert!"

"Ay, he's above most men in that," Robert agreed.

"On with Dahlia's bonnet—sharp!" the farmer gave command. He felt, now that he was growing accustomed to the common observation of things, that the faces and voices around him were different from such as the day brings in its usual course. "We're all as slow as Mas' Gammon, I reckon."

"Father," said Rhoda, "she is weak. She has been very unwell. Do not trouble her with any questions. Do not let any questions be asked of her at home. Any talking fatigues; it may be dangerous to her."

The farmer stared. "Ay, and about her hair...I'm beginning to remember. She wears a cap, and her hair's cut off like an oakum-picker's. That's more gossip for neighbours!"

"Mad people! will they listen to truth?" Rhoda flamed out in her dark fashion. "We speak truth, nothing but truth. She has had a brain fever. That makes her very weak, and every one must be silent at home. Father, stop the sale of the farm, for Robert will

work it into order. He has promised to be our friend, and Dahlia will get her health there, and be near mother's grave."

The farmer replied, as from a far thought, "There's money in my pocket to take down two."

He continued: "But there's not money there to feed our family a week on; I leave it to the Lord. I sow; I dig, and I sow, and when bread fails to us the land must go; and let it go, and no crying about it. I'm astonishing easy at heart, though if I must sell, and do sell, I shan't help thinking of my father, and his father, and the father before him— mayhap, and in most likelihood, artfuller men 'n me—for what they was born to they made to flourish. They'll cry in their graves. A man's heart sticks to land, Robert; that you'll find, some day. I thought I cared none but about land till that poor, weak, white thing put her arms on my neck."

Rhoda had slipped away from them again.

The farmer stooped to Robert's ear. "Had a bit of a disagreement with her husband, is it?"

Robert cleared his throat. "Ay, that's it," he said.

"Serious, at all?"

"One can't tell, you know."

"And not her fault—not my girl's fault, Robert?"

"No; I can swear to that."

"She's come to the right home, then. She'll be near her mother and me. Let her pray at night, and she'll know she's always near her blessed mother. Perhaps the women 'll want to take refreshment, if we may so far make free with your hospitality;

but it must be quick, Robert—or will they? They can't eat, and I can't eat."

Soon afterward Mr. Fleming took his daughter Dahlia from the house and out of London. The deeply-afflicted creature was, as the doctors had said of her, too strong for the ordinary modes of killing. She could walk and still support herself, though the ordeal she had gone through this day was such as few women could have traversed. The terror to follow the deed she had done was yet unseen by her; and for the hour she tasted, if not peace, the pause to suffering which is given by an act accomplished.

Robert and Rhoda sat in different rooms till it was dusk. When she appeared before him in the half light, the ravage of a past storm was visible on her face. She sat down to make tea, and talked with singular self command.

"Mr. Fleming mentioned the gossips down at Wrexby," said Robert: "are they very bad down there?"

"Not worse than in other villages," said Rhoda. "They have not been unkind. They have spoken about us, but not unkindly—I mean, not spitefully."

"And you forgive them?"

"I do: they cannot hurt us now."

Robert was but striving to master some comprehension of her character.

"What are we to resolve, Rhoda?"

"I must get the money promised to this man."

"When he has flung off his wife at the church door?"

"He married my sister for the money. He said it. Oh! he said it. He shall not say that we have deceived him. I told him he should have it. He married her for money!"

"You should not have told him so, Rhoda."

"I did, and I will not let my word be broken."

"Pardon me if I ask you where you will get the money? It's a large sum."

"I will get it," Rhoda said firmly.

"By the sale of the farm?"

"No, not to hurt father."

"But this man's a scoundrel. I know him. I've known him for years. My fear is that he will be coming to claim his wife. How was it I never insisted on seeing the man before—! I did think of asking, but fancied— a lot of things; that you didn't wish it and he was shy. Ah, Lord! what miseries happen from our not looking straight at facts! We can't deny she's his wife now."

"Not if we give him the money."

Rhoda spoke of "the money" as if she had taken heated metal into her mouth.

"All the more likely," said Robert. "Let him rest. Had you your eyes on him when he saw me in the vestry? For years that man has considered me his deadly enemy, because I punished him once. What a scene! I'd have given a limb, I'd have given my life, to have saved you from that scene, Rhoda."

She replied: "If my sister could have been spared! I ought to know what wickedness there is in the world. It's ignorance that

leads to the unhappiness of girls."

"Do you know that I'm a drunkard?"

"No."

"He called me something like it; and he said something like the truth. There's the sting. Set me adrift, and I drink hard. He spoke a fact, and I couldn't answer him."

"Yes, it's the truth that gives such pain," said Rhoda, shivering. "How can girls know what men are? I could not guess that you had any fault. This man was so respectful; he sat modestly in the room when I saw him last night—last night, was it? I thought, 'he has been brought up with sisters and a mother.' And he has been kind to my dear—and all we thought love for her, was—shameful! shameful!"

She pressed her eyelids, continuing: "He shall have the money—he shall have it. We will not be in debt to such a man. He has saved my sister from one as bad—who offered it to be rid of her. Oh, men!—you heard that?—and now pretends to love her. I think I dream. How could she ever have looked happily on that hateful face?"

"He would be thought handsome," said Robert, marvelling how it was that Rhoda could have looked on Sedgett for an instant without reading his villanous nature. "I don't wish you to regret anything you have done or you may do, Rhoda. But this is what made me cry out when I looked on that man, and knew it was he who had come to be Dahlia's husband. He'll be torture to her. The man's temper, his habits—but you may well say you are ignorant

of us men. Keep so. What I do with all my soul entreat of you is—to get a hiding-place for your sister. Never let him take her off. There's such a thing as hell upon earth. If she goes away with him she'll know it. His black temper won't last. He will come for her, and claim her."

"He shall have money." Rhoda said no more.

On a side-table in the room stood a remarkable pile, under cover of a shawl. Robert lifted the shawl, and beheld the wooden boxes, one upon the other, containing Master Gammon's and Mrs. Sumfit's rival savings, which they had presented to Dahlia, in the belief that her husband was under a cloud of monetary misfortune that had kept her proud heart from her old friends. The farmer had brought the boxes and left them there, forgetting them.

"I fancy," said Robert, "we might open these."

"It may be a little help," said Rhoda.

"A very little," Robert thought; but, to relieve the oppression of the subject they had been discussing, he forthwith set about procuring tools, with which he split first the box which proved to be Mrs. Sumfit's, for it contained, amid six gold sovereigns and much silver and pence, a slip of paper, whereon was inscribed, in a handwriting identified by Rhoda as peculiar to the loving woman,—

"And sweetest love to her ever dear."

Altogether the sum amounted to nine pounds, three shillings, and a farthing.

"Now for Master Gammon—he's heavy," said Robert; and he made the savings of that unpretentious veteran bare. Master Gammon had likewise written his word. It was discovered on the blank space of a bit of newspaper, and looked much as if a fat lobworm had plunged himself into a bowl of ink, and in his literary delirium had twisted uneasily to the verge of the paper. With difficulty they deciphered,—

"Complemens."

Robert sang, "Bravo, Gammon!" and counted the hoard. All was in copper coinage, Lycurgan and severe, and reached the sum of one pound, seventeen shillings. There were a number of farthings of Queen Anne's reign, and Robert supposed them to be of value. "So that, as yet, we can't say who's the winner," he observed.

Rhoda was in tears.

"Be kind to him, please, when you see him," she whispered. The smaller gift had touched her heart more tenderly.

"Kind to the old man!" Robert laughed gently, and tied the two hoards in separate papers, which he stowed into one box, and fixed under string. "This amount, put all in one, doesn't go far, Rhoda."

"No," said she: "I hope we may not need it." She broke out: "Dear, good, humble friends! The poor are God's own people. Christ has said so. This is good, this is blessed money!" Rhoda's cheeks flushed to their orange-rounded swarthy red, and her dark eyes had the fervour of an exalted earnestness. "They are my

friends for ever. They save me from impiety. They help me, as if God had answered my prayer. Poor pennies! and the old man not knowing where his days may end! He gives all—he must have true faith in Providence. May it come back to him multiplied a thousand fold! While I have strength to work, the bread I earn shall be shared with him. Old man, old man, I love you—how I love you! You drag me out of deep ditches. Oh, good and dear old man, if God takes me first, may I have some power to intercede for you, if you have ever sinned! Everybody in the world is not wicked. There are some who go the ways directed by the Bible. I owe you more than I can ever pay."

She sobbed, but told Robert it was not for sorrow. He, longing to catch her in his arms, and punctilious not to overstep the duties of his post of guardian, could merely sit by listening, and reflecting on her as a strange Biblical girl, with Hebrew hardness of resolution, and Hebrew exaltation of soul; beautiful, too, as the dark women of the East. He admitted to himself that he never could have taken it on his conscience to subdue a human creature's struggling will, as Rhoda had not hesitated to do with Dahlia, and to command her actions, and accept all imminent responsibilities; not quailing with any outcry, or abandonment of strength, when the shock of that revelation in the vestry came violently on her. Rhoda, seeing there that it was a brute, and not a man, into whose hand she had perilously forced her sister's, stood steadying her nerves to act promptly with advantage; less like a woman, Robert thought, than a creature born for battle. And she

appeared to be still undaunted, full of her scheme, and could cry without fear of floods. Something of the chivalrous restraint he put upon the motions of his heart, sprang from the shadowy awe which overhung that impressible organ. This feeling likewise led him to place a blind reliance on her sagacity and sense of what was just, and what should be performed.

"You promised this money to him," he said, half thinking it incredible.

"On Monday," said Rhoda.

"You must get a promise from him in return."

She answered: "Why? when he could break it the instant he cared to, and a promise would tempt him to it. He does not love her."

"No; he does not love her," said Robert, meditating whether he could possibly convey an idea of the character of men to her innocent mind.

"He flung her off. Thank heaven for it! I should have been punished too much—too much. He has saved her from the perils of temptation. He shall be paid for it. To see her taken away by such a man! Ah!" She shuddered as at sight of a hideous pit.

But Robert said: "I know him, Rhoda. That was his temper. It'll last just four-and-twenty hours, and then we shall need all our strength and cunning. My dear, it would be the death of Dahlia. You've seen the man as he is. Take it for a warning. She belongs to him. That's the law, human and divine."

"Not when he has flung her off, Robert?" Rhoda cried

piteously.

"Let us take advantage of that. He did fling her off, spat at us all, and showed the blackest hellish plot I ever in my life heard of. He's not the worst sinner, scoundrel as he is. Poor girl! poor soul! a hard lot for women in this world! Rhoda, I suppose I may breakfast with you in the morning? I hear Major Waring's knock below. I want a man to talk to."

"Do come, Robert," Rhoda said, and gave him her hand. He strove to comprehend why it was that her hand was merely a hand, and no more to him just then; squeezed the cold fingers, and left her.

CHAPTER XI

So long as we do not know that we are performing any remarkable feat, we may walk upon the narrowest of planks between precipices with perfect security; but when we suffer our minds to eye the chasm underneath, we begin to be in danger, and we are in very great fear of losing our equal balance the moment we admit the insidious reflection that other men, placed as we are, would probably topple headlong over. Anthony Hackbut, of Boyne's Bank, had been giving himself up latterly to this fatal comparison. The hour when gold was entrusted to his charge found him feverish and irritable. He asked himself whether he was a mere machine to transfer money from spot to spot, and he spurned at the pittance bestowed upon honesty in this life. Where could Boyne's Bank discover again such an honest man as he? And because he was honest he was poor! The consideration that we alone are capable of doing the unparalleled thing may sometimes inspire us with fortitude; but this will depend largely upon the antecedent moral trials of a man. It is a temptation when we look on what we accomplish at all in that light. The temptation being inbred, is commonly a proof of internal corruption. "If I take a step, suppose now, to the right, or to the left," Anthony had got into the habit of saying, while he made his course, and after he had deposited his charge he would wipe his moist forehead, in a state of wretched exultation over his renowned trustworthiness.

He had done the thing for years. And what did the people in the streets know about him? Formerly, he had used to regard the people in the streets, and their opinions, with a voluptuous contempt; but he was no longer wrapped in sweet calculations of his savings, and his chances, and his connection with a mighty Bank. The virtue had gone out of him. Yet he had not the slightest appetite for other men's money; no hunger, nor any definite notion of enjoyment to be derived from money not his own. Imagination misled the old man. There have been spotless reputations gained in the service of virtue before now; and chaste and beautiful persons have walked the narrow plank, envied and admired; and they have ultimately tottered and all but fallen; or they have quite fallen, from no worse an incitement than curiosity. Cold curiosity, as the directors of our human constitution tell us, is, in the colder condition of our blood, a betraying vice, leading to sin at a period when the fruits of sin afford the smallest satisfaction. It is, in fact, our last probation, and one of our latest delusions. If that is passed successfully, we may really be pronounced as of some worth. Anthony wished to give a light indulgence to his curiosity; say, by running away and over London Bridge on one side, and back on the other, hugging the money. For two weeks, he thought of this absurd performance as a comical and agreeable diversion. How would he feel when going in the direction of the Surrey hills? And how, when returning, and when there was a prospect of the Bank, where the money was to be paid in, being shut? Supposing that

he was a minute behind his time, would the Bank-doors remain open, in expectation of him? And if the money was not paid in, what would be thought? What would be thought at Boyne's, if, the next day, he was late in making his appearance?

"Holloa! Hackbut, how's this?"—"I'm a bit late, sir, morning."—"Late! you were late yesterday evening, weren't you?"—"Why, sir, the way the clerks at that Bank of Mortimer and Pennycuick's rush away from business and close the doors after 'em, as if their day began at four p.m., and business was botheration: it's a disgrace to the City o' London. And I beg pardon for being late, but never sleeping a wink all night for fear about this money, I am late this morning, I humbly confess. When I got to the Bank, the doors were shut. Our clock's correct; that I know. My belief, sir, is, the clerks at Mortimer and Pennycuick's put on the time."—"Oh! we must have this inquired into."

Anthony dramatized the farcical scene which he imagined between himself and Mr. Sequin, the head clerk at Boyne's, with immense relish; and terminated it by establishing his reputation for honesty higher than ever at the Bank, after which violent exercise of his fancy, the old man sank into a dulness during several days. The farmer slept at his lodgings for one night, and talked of money, and of selling his farm; and half hinted that it would be a brotherly proceeding on Anthony's part to buy it, and hold it, so as to keep it in the family. The farmer's deep belief in the existence of his hoards always did Anthony peculiar

mischievous. Anthony grew conscious of a giddiness, and all the next day he was scarcely fit for his work. But the day following that he was calm and attentive. Two bags of gold were placed in his hands, and he walked with caution down the steps of the Bank, turned the corner, and went straight on to the West, never once hesitating, or casting a thought behind upon Mortimer and Pennycuick's. He had not, in truth, one that was loose to be cast. All his thoughts were boiling in his head, obfuscating him with a prodigious steam, through which he beheld the city surging, and the streets curving like lines in water, and the people mixing and passing into and out of one another in an astonishing manner—no face distinguishable; the whole thick multitude appearing to be stirred like glue in a gallipot. The only distinct thought which he had sprang from a fear that the dishonest ruffians would try to steal his gold, and he hugged it, and groaned to see that villany was abroad. Marvellous, too, that the clocks on the churches, all the way along the Westward thoroughfare, stuck at the hour when Banks are closed to business! It was some time, or a pretence at some time, before the minute-hands surmounted that difficulty. Having done so, they rushed ahead to the ensuing hour with the mad precipitation of pantomimic machinery. The sight of them presently standing on the hour, like a sentinel presenting arms, was startling—laughable. Anthony could not have flipped with his fingers fifty times in the interval; he was sure of it, "or not much more," he said. So the City was shut to him behind iron bars.

Up in the West there is not so much to be dreaded from the rapacity of men. You do not hear of such alarming burglaries there every day; every hand is not at another's throat there, or in another's pocket; at least, not until after nightfall; and when the dark should come on, Anthony had determined to make for his own quarter with all speed. Darkness is horrible in foreign places, but foreign places are not so accusing to you by daylight.

The Park was vastly pleasant to the old man.

"Ah!" he sniffed, "country air," and betook himself to a seat. "Extraordinary," he thought, "what little people they look on their horses and in their carriages! That's the aristocracy, is it!" The aristocracy appeared oddly diminutive to him. He sneered at the aristocracy, but, beholding a policeman, became stolid of aspect. The policeman was a connecting link with his City life, the true lord of his fearful soul. Though the moneybags were under his arm, beneath his buttoned coat, it required a deep pause before he understood what he had done; and then the Park began to dance and curve like the streets, and there was a singular curtsying between the heavens and the earth. He had to hold his money-bags tight, to keep them from plunging into monstrous gulfs. "I don't remember that I've taken a drink of any sort," he said, "since I and the old farmer took our turn down in the Docks. How's this?" He seemed to rock. He was near upon indulging in a fit of terror; but the impolicy of it withheld him from any demonstration, save an involuntary spasmodic ague. When this had passed, his eyesight and sensations grew

clearer, and he sat in a mental doze, looking at things with quiet animal observation. His recollection of the state, after a lapse of minutes, was pleasurable. The necessity for motion, however, set him on his feet, and off he went, still Westward, out of the Park, and into streets. He trotted at a good pace. Suddenly came a call of his name in his ear, and he threw up one arm in self-defence.

"Uncle Anthony, don't you know me?"

"Eh? I do; to be sure I do," he answered, peering dimly upon Rhoda: "I'm always meeting one of you."

"I've been down in the City, trying to find you all day, uncle. I meet you—I might have missed! It is direction from heaven, for I prayed."

Anthony muttered, "I'm out for a holiday."

"This"—Rhoda pointed to a house—"is where I am lodging."

"Oh!" said Anthony; "and how's your family?"

Rhoda perceived that he was rather distraught. After great persuasion, she got him to go upstairs with her.

"Only for two seconds," he stipulated. "I can't sit."

"You will have a cup of tea with me, uncle?"

"No; I don't think I'm equal to tea."

"Not with Rhoda?"

"It's a name in Scripture," said Anthony, and he drew nearer to her.

"You're comfortable and dark here, my dear. How did you come here?"

What's happened? You won't surprise me."

"I'm only stopping for a day or two in London, uncle."

"Ah! a wicked place; that it is. No wickeder than other places, I'll be bound. Well; I must be trotting. I can't sit, I tell you. You're as dark here as a gaol."

"Let me ring for candles, uncle."

"No; I'm going."

She tried to touch him, to draw him to a chair. The agile old man bounded away from her, and she had to pacify him submissively before he would consent to be seated. The tea-service was brought, and Rhoda made tea, and filled a cup for him. Anthony began to enjoy the repose of the room. But it made the money-bags' alien to him, and serpents in his bosom. Fretting—on his chair, he cried: "Well! well! what's to talk about? We can't drink tea and not talk!"

Rhoda deliberated, and then said: "Uncle, I think you have always loved me."

It seemed to him a merit that he should have loved her. He caught at the idea.

"So I have, Rhoda, my dear; I have. I do."

"You do love me, dear uncle!"

"Now I come to think of it, Rhoda—my Dody, I don't think ever I've loved anybody else. Never loved e'er a young woman in my life. As a young man."

"Tell me, uncle; are you not very rich?"

"No, I ain't; not 'very'; not at all."

"You must not tell untruths, uncle."

"I don't," said Anthony; only, too doggedly to instil conviction.

"I have always felt, uncle, that you love money too much. What is the value of money, except to give comfort, and help you to be a blessing to others in their trouble? Does not God lend it you for that purpose? It is most true! And if you make a store of it, it will only be unhappiness to yourself. Uncle, you love me. I am in great trouble for money."

Anthony made a long arm over the projection of his coat, and clasped it securely; sullenly refusing to answer. "Dear uncle; hear me out. I come to you, because I know you are rich. I was on my way to your lodgings when we met; we were thrown together. You have more money than you know what to do with. I am a beggar to you for money. I have never asked before; I never shall ask again. Now I pray for your help. My life, and the life dearer to me than any other, depend on you. Will you help me, Uncle Anthony? Yes!"

"No!" Anthony shouted.

"Yes! yes!"

"Yes, if I can. No, if I can't. And 'can't' it is. So, it's 'No.'"

Rhoda's bosom sank, but only as a wave in the sea-like energy of her spirit.

"Uncle, you must."

Anthony was restrained from jumping up and running away forthwith by the peace which was in the room, and the dread of being solitary after he had tasted of companionship.

"You have money, uncle. You are rich. You must help me.

Don't you ever think what it is to be an old man, and no one to love you and be grateful to you? Why do you cross your arms so close?"

Anthony denied that he crossed his arms closely.

Rhoda pointed to his arms in evidence; and he snarled out. "There, now; 'cause I'm supposed to have saved a trifle, I ain't to sit as I like. It's downright too bad! It's shocking!"

But, seeing that he did not uncross his arms, and remained bunched up defiantly, Rhoda silently observed him. She felt that money was in the room.

"Don't let it be a curse to you," she said. And her voice was hoarse with agitation.

"What?" Anthony asked. "What's a curse?"

"That."

Did she know? Had she guessed? Her finger was laid in a line at the bags. Had she smelt the gold?

"It will be a curse to you, uncle. Death is coming. What's money then? Uncle, uncross your arms. You are afraid; you dare not. You carry it about; you have no confidence anywhere. It eats your heart. Look at me. I have nothing to conceal. Can you imitate me, and throw your hands out—so? Why, uncle, will you let me be ashamed of you? You have the money there.

"You cannot deny it. Me crying to you for help! What have we talked together?—that we would sit in a country house, and I was to look to the flower-beds, and always have dishes of green peas for you-plenty, in June; and you were to let the village boys know

what a tongue you have, if they made a clatter of their sticks along the garden-rails; and you were to drink your tea, looking on a green and the sunset. Uncle! Poor old, good old soul! You mean kindly. You must be kind. A day will make it too late. You have the money there. You get older and older every minute with trying to refuse me. You know that I can make you happy. I have the power, and I have the will. Help me, I say, in my great trouble. That money is a burden. You are forced to carry it about, for fear. You look guilty as you go running in the streets, because you fear everybody. Do good with it. Let it be money with a blessing on it! It will save us from horrid misery! from death! from torture and death! Think, uncle! look, uncle! You with the money—me wanting it. I pray to heaven, and I meet you, and you have it. Will you say that you refuse to give it, when I see—when I show you, you are led to meet me and help me? Open;—put down that arm."

Against this storm of mingled supplication and shadowy menace, Anthony held out with all outward firmness until, when bidding him to put down his arm, she touched the arm commandingly, and it fell paralyzed.

Rhoda's eyes were not beautiful as they fixed on the object of her quest. In this they were of the character of her mission. She was dealing with an evil thing, and had chosen to act according to her light, and by the counsel of her combative and forceful temper. At each step new difficulties had to be encountered by fresh contrivances; and money now— money alone had become

the specific for present use. There was a limitation of her spiritual vision to aught save to money; and the money being bared to her eyes, a frightful gleam of eagerness shot from them. Her hands met Anthony's in a common grasp of the money-bags.

"It's not mine!" Anthony cried, in desperation.

"Whose money is it?" said Rhoda, and caught up her hands as from fire.

"My Lord!" Anthony moaned, "if you don't speak like a Court o' Justice.

Hear yourself!"

"Is the money yours, uncle?"

"It—is," and "isn't" hung in the balance.

"It is not?" Rhoda dressed the question for him in the terror of contemptuous horror.

"It is. I—of course it is; how could it help being mine? My money? Yes. What sort o' thing's that to ask—whether what I've got's mine or yours, or somebody else's? Ha!"

"And you say you are not rich, uncle?"

A charming congratulatory smile was addressed to him, and a shake of the head of tender reproach irresistible to his vanity.

"Rich! with a lot o' calls on me; everybody wantin' to borrow—I'm rich! And now you coming to me! You women can't bring a guess to bear upon the right nature o' money."

"Uncle, you will decide to help me, I know."

She said it with a staggering assurance of manner.

"How do you know?" cried Anthony.

"Why do you carry so much money about with you in bags, uncle?"

"Hear it, my dear." He simulated miser's joy.

"Ain't that music? Talk of operas! Hear that; don't it talk? don't it chink? don't it sing?" He groaned "Oh, Lord!" and fell back.

This transition from a state of intensest rapture to the depths of pain alarmed her.

"Nothing; it's nothing." Anthony anticipated her inquiries. "They bags is so heavy."

"Then why do you carry them about?"

"Perhaps it's heart disease," said Anthony, and grinned, for he knew the soundness of his health.

"You are very pale, uncle."

"Eh? you don't say that?"

"You are awfully white, dear uncle."

"I'll look in the glass," said Anthony. "No, I won't." He sank back in his chair. "Rhoda, we're all sinners, ain't we? All—every man and woman of us, and baby, too. That's a comfort; yes, it is a comfort. It's a tremendous comfort—shuts mouths. I know what you're going to say—some bigger sinners than others. If they're sorry for it, though, what then? They can repent, can't they?"

"They must undo any harm they may have done. Sinners are not to repent only in words, uncle."

"I've been feeling lately," he murmured.

Rhoda expected a miser's confession.

"I've been feeling, the last two or three days," he resumed.

"What, uncle?"

"Sort of taste of a tremendous nice lemon in my mouth, my dear, and liked it, till all of a sudden I swallowed it whole—such a gulp! I felt it just now. I'm all right."

"No, uncle," said Rhoda: "you are not all right: this money makes you miserable. It does; I can see that it does. Now, put those bags in my hands. For a minute, try; it will do you good. Attend to me; it will. Or, let me have them. They are poison to you. You don't want them."

"I don't," cried Anthony. "Upon my soul, I don't. I don't want 'em.

I'd give—it is true, my dear, I don't want 'em. They're poison."

"They're poison to you," said Rhoda; "they're health, they're life to me. I said, 'My uncle Anthony will help me. He is not—I know his heart—he is not a miser.' Are you a miser, uncle?"

Her hand was on one of his bags. It was strenuously withheld: but while she continued speaking, reiterating the word "miser," the hold relaxed. She caught the heavy bag away, startled by its weight.

He perceived the effect produced on her, and cried; "Aha! and I've been carrying two of 'em—two!"

Rhoda panted in her excitement.

"Now, give it up," said he. She returned it. He got it against his breast joylessly, and then bade her to try the weight of the two. She did try them, and Anthony doated on the wonder of her face.

"Uncle, see what riches do! You fear everybody—you think there is no secure place—you have more? Do you carry about all your money?"

"No," he chuckled at her astonishment. "I've... Yes. I've got more of my own." Her widened eyes intoxicated him. "More. I've saved. I've put by. Say, I'm an old sinner. What'd th' old farmer say now? Do you love your uncle Tony? 'Old Ant,' they call me down at—" "The Bank," he was on the point of uttering; but the vision of the Bank lay terrific in his recollection, and, summoned at last, would not be wiped away. The unbearable picture swam blinking through accumulating clouds; remote and minute as the chief scene of our infancy, but commanding him with the present touch of a mighty arm thrown out. "I'm honest," he cried. "I always have been honest. I'm known to be honest. I want no man's money. I've got money of my own. I hate sin. I hate sinners. I'm an honest man. Ask them, down at—Rhoda, my dear! I say, don't you hear me? Rhoda, you think I've a turn for misering. It's a beastly mistake: poor savings, and such a trouble to keep honest when you're poor; and I've done it for years, spite o' temptation 't 'd send lots o' men to the hulks. Safe into my hand, safe out o' my hands! Slip once, and there ain't mercy in men. And you say, 'I had a whirl of my head, and went round, and didn't know where I was for a minute, and forgot the place I'd to go to, and come away to think in a quiet part.'..." He stopped abruptly in his ravings. "You give me the money, Rhoda!"

She handed him the money-bags.

He seized them, and dashed them to the ground with the force of madness. Kneeling, he drew out his penknife, and slit the sides of the bags, and held them aloft, and let the gold pour out in torrents, insufferable to the sight; and uttering laughter that clamoured fierily in her ears for long minutes afterwards, the old man brandished the empty bags, and sprang out of the room.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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