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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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May Brooke

Anna Hanson Dorsey

Imprint

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CONSCIENCE;

OR,

THE TRIALS OF MAY BROOKE.

CHAPTER I.

UNCLE STILLINGHAST.

"Do you think they will be here to-night, sir?"

"Don't know, and don't care."

"The road is very bad,"—after a pause, "that skirts the Hazel property."

"Well, what then; what then, little May?"

"The carriage might be overturned, sir; or, the horses might shy a little to the left, and go over the precipice into the creek."

"Is that all?"

"Is it not dreadful to think of, sir?"

"Well, I don't know; I should be sorry to lose the horses—"

"Oh, sir! and my cousin! Did you forget her?"

"I *care* nothing about her. I suppose my forefathers must have committed some crime for which I am to suffer, by being made, willy-nilly, the guardian of two silly, mawkish girls."

"But, sir, you have been very kind to me, and it shall be the endeavor of my life to prove my gratitude."

"Very fine, without being in the least consoling! I'd as lief have two African monkeys under my care—don't laugh—it exasperates, and makes me feel like doing as I should do, if I had the cursed animals—"

"How is that, sir?"

"Beat you. I hate womankind. Most of all do I hate them in their transition stages. They are like sponges, and absorb every particle of evil that the devil sprinkles in the air, until they learn to be young hypocrites—triflers—false—heartless."

"Oh, dear uncle! has such been your experience? Have you ever met with such women?"

"Have I ever met with such women, you holy innocent? I have never met with any other. Now, be still."

"Oh! Uncle Stillinghast—"

"What!"

"I pity you, sir; indeed, I pity you. Something very dreadful must in times past have embittered you—"

"You are a fool, little May. Don't interrupt me again at your peril."

"No, sir."

And so there was a dead silence, except when the rain and sleet lashed the window-panes, or a lump of coal crumbled into a thousand glowing fragments, and opened a glowing abyss in the grate; or the cat uncurled herself on the rug, and purred, while she fixed her great winking eyes on the blaze. The two persons who occupied the room were an old man and a young maiden. He was stern, and sour-looking, as he sat in his high-back leather chair, with a pile of ledgers on the table before him,—the pages of which he examined with the most incomparable patience. A snuff-colored wig sat awry on his head, and a snuff-colored coat, ornamented with large horn buttons, drooped ungracefully from his high, stooping shoulders. His neckcloth was white, but twisted, soiled, and tied carelessly around his thin, sinewy throat. His legs were cased in gray lamb's-wool stockings, over which his small-clothes were fastened at the knees with small silver buckles. His face was not originally cast in such a repulsive mould, but commerce with the world, and a succession of stinging disappointments in his early manhood, had woven an ugly mask over it, from behind which glimpses of his former self, on rare occasions, shone out. Such was Mark Stillinghast at the opening of our story: old, cynical, and rich, but poor in friendship,

and without any definite ideas of religion, except, that if such a thing really existed, it was a *terra incognita*, towards which men rather stumbled than ran.

Opposite to him, on a low crimson chair, as antique in its pattern as the owner of the mansion, sat a maiden, who might have passed her seventeenth summer. She was not beautiful, and yet her face had a peculiar charm, which appealed directly to the softer and kindlier emotions of the heart. Her eyes, large, gray and beautifully fringed with long, black lashes, reminded one of calm mountain lakes, into whose very depths the light of sun and stars shine down, until they beam with tender sweetness, and inward repose. There was a glad, happy look in her face, which came not from the fitful, feverish glow of earth, but, like rays from an inner sanctuary, the glorious realities of faith, hope, and love, which possessed her soul, diffused their mysterious influence over her countenance. Thick braids of soft, brown hair, were braided over her round, childlike forehead: and her dress of some dark, rich color, was in admirable harmony with her peculiar style. Her proportions were small and symmetrical, and it was wonderful to see the serious look of dignity with which she sat in that old crimson chair, knitting away on a comfort, as fast as her little white fingers could shuffle the needles. For what purpose could such a fragile small creature have been created? She looked as if it would not be amiss to put her under a glass-case, or exhibit her as a specimen of wax-work; or hire her out, at so much per night, to fashionable parties, to play "*fairy*" in the Tableaux. But the wind howled; the leafless branches of the old trees without were crushed up, shivering and creaking against the house; the frozen snow beat a wild *reville* on the windows, and May's face grew very sad and thoughtful. She dropped her knitting, and with lips apart listened intently.

"Thank God! They are come. I am sure I hear carriage-wheels, uncle!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands together.

"Of course; I knew they would come. There was to be no such good luck as their *not* coming," said Mr. Stillinghast, looking annoyed. "One sister ran off—married a papist—died, and left *you* on my hands. I was about sending you off again, when news came that your father had died on his voyage home from Canton, and been

buried in the deep: so here you stayed. Brother—spendthrift, shiftless, improvident—marries a West Indian papist; turns one; dies with his wife, or, at least, soon after her leaving another ne'er-do-weel on my hands. I wish you'd all gone to purgatory together. To be shut up in my old days with two wild papists is abominable!" muttered the old man, slamming the ledgers together, until every thing on the table danced. He pushed back his chair, and in another moment the door opened, and a tall, slender, beautiful girl entered, clad in deep mourning, with a wealth of golden curls rolling over her transparently fair cheeks. She came with a graceful, but timid air, towards Mr. Stillinghast; and holding out her hand, said in a low, sweet tone,

"My uncle?"

"Yes, I have the misfortune to be your uncle; how do you do?"

"I am well, sir, I thank you," she replied, whilst she cast down her eyes to conceal the tears which suffused them.

"I won't pretend," he said, at last, "to say you are welcome, or that I am glad to see you, because I should lie; but you are here now, and I can't help it, neither can you, I suppose; therefore, settle yourself as quickly as possible in your new way of living. *She* will show you what is necessary, and both of you keep as much out of my way as possible." He then took his candlestick, lighted his candle, and retired, leaving the poor girl standing with a frightened, heart-broken look, in the middle of the floor. For a moment she looked after him; then a sharp cry burst from her lips, and she turned to rush out into the wintry storm, when she suddenly felt herself enfolded in some one's arms, who led her to the warmest corner of the sofa, untied her bonnet, folded back the dishevelled curls, and kissed the tears away from her cold, white cheeks. It was May, whose heart had been gushing over with tenderness and sympathy, who had longed to throw her arms around her, and, welcome her home the moment she entered the house, but who dared not interfere with her uncle's peculiar ways, or move until he led.

"Do not mind him, dear Helen; it is his ways: he seems rough and stern, but in reality he is kind and good, dear," she exclaimed.

"You are very kind; but, oh, I did not expect such a reception as this. I hoped for something very, very different. I cannot stay here—it would kill me," she sobbed, struggling to disengage her hand from Mary's.

"Yes you will, dear," pleaded May. "Uncle Stillinghast is like our old clock—it never strikes the hour true, yet the hands are always right to a second. So do try, and not to mind."

"Who are you?"

"I?" asked May, looking with a smile of astonishment at her. "I am your cousin, May Brooke; an orphan like yourself, dear, to whom our uncle has given house and home."

"Are you happy here?"

"Very happy. I have things to contend with sometimes which are not altogether agreeable, but I trip along over them just as I do over muddy places in the street, for fear, you know, of soiling my robe, if I floundered in them!" said May, laughing. Helen did not understand the hidden and beautiful meaning couched under May's expressions; she had heard but little of her baptismal robe since the days of her early childhood, and had almost forgotten that she was "to carry it unspotted to the judgment-seat of Christ."

"I am glad you are here—such a nice, soft-voiced little one," said Helen, passing her long, white hand over May's head.

"I am glad, too; so come with me, and take something warm. Your supper is on the kitchen hearth. Come," said May, rising.

"Where—to the kitchen? Do you eat in the kitchen?"

"I lunch there sometimes; it is a very nice one."

"Excuse me; I do not wish any thing."

"But a cup of hot tea, and some nice toast, after your fatiguing, wet journey," argued May.

"Nothing, I thank you," was the haughty reply.

"Perhaps you wish to retire?"

"Yes! Oh, that I could go to sleep, and never wake again," she cried, bursting into tears.

"You will feel better to-morrow, dear," said May, gently, "and then it will soothe you to reflect that each trial has its heavenly mission; and the thorns which pierce us here give birth to flowers in heaven, which angels weave into the crown for which we contend!"

"I am not a saint!" was the curt reply.

"But you are a Catholic?" asked May, chilled by her cold manner.

"Yes," she replied, languidly, "but I am too ill to talk."

Refusing all aid, after they got into their chamber, Helen disrobed herself; and while May's earnest soul was pouring out at the foot of the cross its adoration and homage, she threw herself on her knees, leaned her head on her arm, and yielded to a perfect storm of grief and fury; which, although unacknowledged, raged none the less, while her burning tears, unsanctified by humility, or resignation, embittered the selfish heart which they should have sweetened and refreshed.

CHAPTER II.

MAY BROOKE.

May slept but little that night. The low sobs and shivering sighs of Helen, disturbed and troubled her, and she longed to go to her, and whisper in her ear all those arguments and hopeful promises which she *felt* would have consoled her under the same circumstances; but it was a wild, defiant kind of grief, which she thought had better exhaust itself, so she lay quite still until towards dawn, when it ceased, and the sound of low regular breathing, assured her that she had fallen asleep. She rose up gently, wrapped her wadded gown about her, lowered the blinds, and closed the shutters, that the light might not disturb Helen; then laid an additional blanket over her, for it was bitter cold, and placed the candle which she had lighted behind an old-timed Chinese screen, that formed a sort of a niche in a corner of the room, which she, in her pious thoughtfulness, had converted into an oratory. A small round table, covered with white drapery, supported a statue of the Immaculate Mother, a porcelain shelf for holy water and her prayer-book. Over it hung an old and rare crucifix of carved ivory, stained with color which time had softened to the hues of life, while the features wore that mingled look of divine dignity and human woe which but few artists, in their delineations of the "thorn-crowned head," can successfully depict. It had been brought from Spain many years before by her father, with a cabinet picture of Mater Dolorosa, which now hung over it. Both were invaluable, not only on account of their artistic excellence and age, but as mementos of her father, and incentives to devotion. Thither she now went to offer the first fruits of the day to heaven in mingled thanksgiving and prayer. Almost numbed with the intense cold, she felt inclined to abridge her devotions, but she remembered the cold, dreary journey of the holy family from Nazareth to Bethlehem—the ruggedness of the road, and the bitter winds which swept through the mountain defiles around them—then she lingered in the poor stable, and knelt with the shepherds beside the manger where Jesus Christ in the humility of his sacred humanity

reposed. She pictured to herself the Virgin Mother in the joyful mystery of her maternity, bending over him with a rapture too sublime for words; and St. Joseph—wonderfully dignified as the guardian of divinity, and of her whom the most high had honored, leaning on his staff near them. "Shall I dare complain?" thought May, while these blessed images came into her heart warming it with generous love. "No sweet and divine Lord, let all human ills, discomforts, repinings, and love of self vanish before these sweet contemplations. With thee, in Bethlehem, poverty and sorrow grow light; and the weariness of the rough ways of life no more dismay. Let me follow with thee, sweet mother, after his footsteps, until Calvary is crowned by a sacrifice and victim so divine that angels, men, and earth wonder; let me, with thee, linger by his cross, follow him to his sepulture, and rejoice with thee in his resurrection." Do not let us suppose that May, in the overflowing of her devout soul, forgot others, and thought only of herself; oh, no! that charity, without which, all good works are as "sounding brass," animated her faith; as tenderly and lovingly she plead at the mercy seat for her stern old guardian; and although she knew that he scorned all religion, and would have given her rough jibes and scoffs for her charity, she prayed none the less for his salvation; and now she sought Heaven to strengthen and console the wounded and bereaved stranger who had come amongst them. By the time she left her oratory, she had laid by a store of strength and happiness, more than sufficient for the trials of the day. Yet May was not faultless. She had a quickness and sharpness of temper, which very often tempted her to the indulgence of malice and uncharitableness; and a proud spirit, which could scarcely brook injustice. But these natural defects were in a measure counterbalanced by a high and lofty sense of responsibility to Almighty God—a feeling of compassion and forgiveness for the frailties and infirmities of others, and a generous and discriminating consideration for the errors of all.

When Mr. Stillinghast came down that morning, everything was bright and comfortable in the sitting-room. A clear fire burned in the grate; the toast and coffee sent up an inviting odor; and the table was spread with the whitest of linen, on which the cups and saucers were neatly arranged. The morning paper was drying on a chair by the fire, and over all, flickered the glorious sunshine, as it gushed

like a golden flood through the clustering geraniums in the window.

"Good morning, sir!" said May, blithely, as she came in from the kitchen with a covered plate in her hand.

"Good morning," he growled; "give me my breakfast."

"I thought you'd like a relish for your breakfast, sir, and I broiled a few slices of beef; see how very nice it is," said May, uncovering the plate, and placing it before him.

"Humph! well, don't do it again. I cannot afford such extravagance; I must curtail my expenses. 'Gad! if I should have another beggar thrown on my hands, we must starve," he said, bitterly.

May did not relish this speech at all; up rose the demon, *pride*, in her soul, instigating her to a sharp retort, and vindictive anger; but she thought of Bethlehem, and grew calm.

"I hope not, sir," she said, gently. "You have cast bread on the waters; after many days it will return unto you—perhaps in an hour, and at a time, dear uncle, when it will be much needed."

"Fudge, fudge!" he said, testily; "*I—I* cast bread on the waters, do I? Well, I am doing what is equally as foolish—it *is* truly like throwing bread into a *fish-pond*; but where's what's her name?"

"She slept poorly last night, and I would not awaken her this morning," said May, diverted in spite of herself.

"How do you know she didn't sleep, pray? did she tell you so?"

"No, sir; I heard her weeping all night, and, indeed, sir, I hope you'll speak kindly to Helen when you come in this evening, because she feels so very sorrowful on account of her recent losses, and—and—"

"And what, Miss Pert?"

"Her dependence, sir!" said May, bravely.

"She's no more dependent than you are."

"No, sir; but—but then I am happy somehow. It is the state of life Almighty God has chosen for me, and I should be very ungrateful to him and you if I repined and grumbled," said May, cheerfully.

"If He chose it for you, I suppose he chose it for her too; for *I didn't*. At any rate, don't waste any more candles or coal sitting up to watch people crying, and tell what's-her-name to rise when you do; she's no better than you are; and let her take her share of the duties of the house to-morrow," said Mr. Stillinghast, surlily.

"Helen will soon feel at home, sir, no doubt; only do—do, dear uncle, try and speak kindly to her for a few days, on account of her lonely situation."

"Fudge! eat your breakfast. Hold your plate here for some of this broiled beef, and eat it to prevent its being wasted."

"Thank you, sir," said May, laughing, as he laid a large slice on her plate, which, however she did not touch, but put it aside for Helen; then observing that Mr. Stillinghast had finished his breakfast, she wheeled his chair nearer the fire, handed him his pipe, and the newspaper, and ran upstairs, to see if Helen was awake. But she still slept, and looked so innocently beautiful, that May paused a few moments by her pillow, to gaze at her. "She is like the descriptions which the old writers give us of the Blessed Virgin," thought May; "that high, beautifully chiseled nose; those waves of golden hair; those calm finely cut lips, that high, snowy brow, and those long, shadowy eyelashes, lying so softly on her fair cheeks, oh, how beautiful! It seems almost like a vision, only—only *I know* that this is a poor frail child of earth; but, oh! immaculate Mother, cherish, guard, and guide her, that her spirit may be conformed to thine."

"I suppose," said Mr. Stillinghast, when May came down, "that you'll go trotting presently through the snow and ice to church."

"No, sir; I fear I cannot go this morning," said May.

"Cannot go? well, really! I wonder if an earthquake will swallow me before I get to the wharf today," said Mr. Stillinghast, drawing on his boots.

"I trust not, sir; I'd be happier to go, but Helen is a stranger, and she might awake when I am gone, and want something. To-morrow we will go together."

"So, there's to be a regular popish league in my house, under my very nose," he growled.

"Which will do you no evil, dear uncle, in soul, body, or estate; but you had better wrap this comfort around your throat; I finished knitting it last night for you," said May, in her quiet, cheerful way.

"For me, eh? It is very nice and soft—so—that does very well," said Mr. Stillinghast, while one of those rare gleams, like sunshine, shot over his countenance.

"I shall be very happy all day, sir," said May, gathering up the cups and saucers.

"Why?"

"Because, sir, I thought—you might—"

"Throw it at your head, or in the fire, eh? I shall do neither; I shall wear it. I have not forgot that confounded attack of quinsy I had last winter, nor the doctor's bill that followed it, and which was worse on me than the choking I got," said Mr. Stillinghast, while the old, grim look settled on his face again. He went away, down to his warehouse on the wharf, to grip and wrestle with *gain*, and barter away the last remnants of his best and holiest instincts, little by little; exchanging hopes of heaven for perishable things, and crushing down the angel *conscience*, who would have led him safely to eternal life, for the accumulated and unholy burthen of Mammon.

And May, singing cheerily, cleaned, and swept and rubbed, and polished, and touched up things a little here and there, until the room was arranged with exquisite taste and neatness; then took her work-basket, in which lay a variety of little infant's socks, and fine fleecy under-garments, knit of zephyr worsted, which looked so pure and soft that even she touched them daintily, as she lifted them out to find her needles, and sat down by the fire. "Now for a *nubae*," she said, throwing on stitch after stitch; "ladies who frequent theatres and balls find them indispensable: *this* shall be the handsomest one of the season—worth, at least four dollars."

CHAPTER III.

THE MORNING ERRAND.

After the slender ivory needles had traversed the fleecy mesh backwards and forwards some three or four times, May suddenly bethought herself of Helen, and laying her work carefully down in her basket, she ran upstairs to see if she was awake. Turning the knob of the door softly, she entered with a noiseless step, and went towards the bed; but a low, merry laugh, and a "good morning," assured her that her kind caution had all been needless.

"Dear Helen, how are you to-day?"

"Very well, thank you, little lady, how do you do, and what time is it?"

"Half-past nine. You need your breakfast, I am sure. Shall I fetch it to you?"

"Just tell me, first, have you a fire downstairs?"

"A very nice one!"

"And we can't have one here?"

"Decidedly — no."

"Decidedly, then, I shall accompany you downstairs, if that horrid old man is gone. Oh, I never was so terrified in my life; I thought he'd beat me last night. Is he gone?"

"Uncle Stillinghast has been gone an hour or more," replied May, gravely.

"Do tell me, May, does he always jump and snarl so at folk as he did at me?" inquired Helen; seriously.

"I see that I must initiate you, dear Helen, in the mysteries of our domicile," said May, pleasantly. "I must be plain with you, and hope you will not feel wounded at my speech. Our uncle is very eccentric, and says a great many sharp, disagreeable things; and his manners, generally, do not invite affection. But, on the other hand, I do

not think his health is quite sound, and I have heard that in his early life he met with some terrible disappointments, which have doubtless soured him. He knows nothing of the consolations of religion, or of those divine hopes which would sweeten the bitter fountains of his heart, like the leaves which the prophet threw into Marah's wave. His commerce is altogether with and of the world, and he spares no time for superfluous feelings: but notwithstanding all this there is, *I am sure*, a warm, bright spot in his heart, or he never would have taken you and me from the cold charities of the world, to shelter and care for us. Now, dear, you *must* endeavor to fall in with his humor."

"And if I should happen to please him?" inquired Helen, sweeping back the golden curls from her forehead and cheeks.

"You will be happy in the consciousness of duties well done," replied May, looking with her full, earnest eyes, in Helen's face. "It is a bad thing, dear, to stir up bitterness and strife in a soul which is not moored in the faith and love of God; as it is a good work to keep it, as far as we can, from giving further offence to heaven by provoking its evil instincts, and inciting it, as it were, to fresh rebellions. But I am sure, dear Helen, you will endeavor to do right."

"Yes," said Helen, slowly, "it will be the best policy; but, May Brooke, I feel as if I am in a panther's den, or, better still, it's like Beauty and the Beast, only, instead of an enchanted lover, I have an excessively cross and impracticable old uncle to be amiable to. Does he give you enough to eat?"

"Have I a starved look?" asked May, laughing.

"No; I confess you look in tolerably good plight. Do you ever see company?"

"Not often. My uncle's habits are those of a recluse. When he comes home from the bustle of the city, it would be a great annoyance to have company around him: in *fact*, I do not care for it, and, I dare say, we shall get on merrily without it."

"I dare say I shall die. Have you a piano here?"

May laughed outright, and answered in the negative.