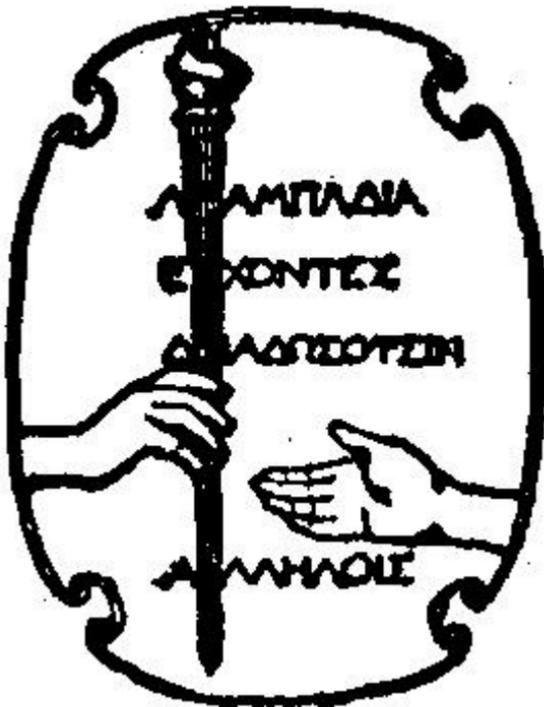


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"After the Red Pottage comes the exceeding bitter cry"



TO

VICTORIA

Good things have not kept aloof,

I have not lack'd thy mild reproof,
Nor golden largesse of thy praise.

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RED POTTAGE

CHAPTER I

In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betray'd by what is false within.
—GEORGE MEREDITH.

"I can't get out," said Sterne's starling, looking through the bars of his cage.

"I will get out," said Hugh Scarlett to himself, seeing no bars, but half conscious of a cage. "I will get out," he repeated, as his hansom took him swiftly from the house in Portman Square, where he had been dining, towards that other house in Carlton House Terrace, whither his thoughts had travelled on before him, out-distancing the *trip-clip-clop, trip-clip-clop* of the horse.

It was a hot night in June. Hugh had thrown back his overcoat, and the throng of passers-by in the street could see, if they cared to see, "the glass of fashion" in the shape of white waistcoat and shirt front, surmounted by the handsome, irritated face of their owner, leaning back with his hat tilted over his eyes.

Trip-clip-clop went the horse.

A great deal of thinking may be compressed into a quarter of an hour, especially if it has been long eluded.

"I will get out," he said again to himself with an impatient movement. It was beginning to weary him, this commonplace intrigue which had been so new and alluring a year ago. He did not own it to himself, but he was tired of it. Perhaps the reason why good resolutions have earned for themselves such an evil repute as paving-stones is because they are often the result, not of repentance, but of the restlessness that dogs an evaporating pleasure. This liaison had been alternately his pride and his shame for many months. But now it was becoming something more—which it had been all the time, only he had not noticed it till lately—a fetter, a clog, something irksome, to be cast off and pushed out of sight. Decidedly the moment for the good resolution had arrived.

"I will break it off," he said again. "Thank Heaven, not a soul has ever guessed it."

How could any one have guessed it?

He remembered the day when he had first met her a year ago, and had looked upon her as merely a pretty woman. He remembered other days, and the gradual building up between them of a fairy palace. He had added a stone here, she a stone there, until suddenly it became—a prison. Had he been tempter or tempted? He did not know. He did not care. He wanted only to be out of it. His better feelings and his conscience had been awakened by the first touch of weariness. His brief infatuation had run its course. His judgment had been whirled—he told himself it had been whirled, but it had really only been tweaked—from its centre, had performed its giddy orbit, and now the check-string had brought it back to the point from whence it had set out, namely, that she was merely a pretty woman.

"I will break with her gradually," he said, like the tyro he was, and he pictured to himself the wretched scenes in which she would abuse him, reproach him, probably compromise herself, the letters she would write to him. At any rate, he need not read them. Oh! how tired he was of the whole thing beforehand. Why had he been such a fool? He looked at the termination of the liaison as a bad sailor looks at an inevitable sea passage at the end of a journey. It must be gone through, but the prospect of undergoing it filled him with disgust.

A brougham passed him swiftly on noiseless wheels, and the woman in it caught a glimpse of the high-bred, clean-shaved face, half savage, half sullen, in the hansom.

"Anger, impatience, and remorse," she said to herself, and finished buttoning her gloves.

"Thank Heaven, not a soul has ever guessed it," repeated Hugh, fervently, as the hansom came suddenly to a stand-still.

In another moment he was taking Lady Newhaven's hand as she stood at the entrance of her amber drawing-room beside a grove of pink orchids.

He chatted a moment, greeted Lord Newhaven, and passed on into the crowded rooms. How could any one have guessed it? No breath of scandal had ever touched Lady Newhaven. She stood beside her pink orchids, near her fatigued-looking, gentle-mannered husband, a very pretty woman in white satin and diamonds. Perhaps her blond hair was a shade darker at the roots than in its waved coils; perhaps her blue eyes did not look quite in harmony with their blue-black lashes; but the whole effect had the delicate, conventional perfection of a cleverly touched-up chromolithograph. Of course, tastes differ. Some people like chromolithographs, others don't. But even those who do are apt to become estranged. They may inspire love, admiration, but never fidelity. Most of us have in our time hammered nails into our walls which, though they now decorously support the engravings and etchings of our maturer years, were nevertheless originally driven in to uphold the cherished, the long since discarded chromos of our foolish youth.

The diamond sun upon Lady Newhaven's breast quivered a little, a very little, as Hugh greeted her, and she turned to offer the same small smile and gloved hand to the next comer, whose name was leaping before him from one footman to another.

"Mr. Richard Vernon."

Lady Newhaven's wide blue eyes looked vague. Her hand hesitated. This strongly built, ill-dressed man, with his keen, brown, deeply scarred face and crooked mouth, was unknown to her.

Lord Newhaven darted forward.

"Dick!" he exclaimed, and Dick shot forth an immense mahogany hand and shook Lord Newhaven's warmly.

"Well," he said, after Lord Newhaven had introduced him to his wife, "I'm dashed if I knew who either of you were. But I found your invitation at my club when I landed yesterday, so I decided to come and have a look at you. And so it is only you, Cackles, after all"—(Lord Newhaven's habit of silence had earned for him the sobriquet of "Cackles")—"I quite thought I was going into—well, ahem!—into society. I did not know you had got a handle to your name. How did you find out I was in England?"

"My dear fellow, I didn't," said Lord Newhaven, gently drawing Dick aside, whose back was serenely blocking a stream of new arrivals. "I fancy—in fact, I'm simply delighted to see you. How is the wine getting on? But I suppose there must be other Dick Vernons on my wife's list. Have you the card with you?"

"Rather," said Dick; "always take the card with me since I was kicked out of a miner's hop at Broken Hill because I forgot it. 'No gentleman will be admitted in a paper shirt' was mentioned on it, I remember. A concertina, and candles in bottles. Ripping while it lasted. I wish you had been there."

"I wish I had." Lord Newhaven's tired, half-closed eye opened a little. "But the end seems to have been unfortunate."

"Not at all," said Dick, watching the new arrivals with his head thrown back. "Fine girl that; I'll take a look at the whole mob of them directly. They came round next day to say it had been a mistake, but there were four or five cripples who found that out the night before. Here is the card."

Lord Newhaven glanced at it attentively, and then laughed.

"It is four years old," he said; "I must have put you on my mother's list, not knowing you had left London. It is in her writing."

"I'm rather late," said Dick, composedly; "but I am here at last. Now, Cack—Newhaven, if that's your noble name—as I am here, trot out a few heiresses, would you? I want to take one or two back with me. I say, ought I to put my gloves on?"

"No, no. Clutch them in your great fist as you are doing now."

"Thanks. I suppose, old chap, I'm all right? Not had on an evening-coat for four years."

Dick's trousers were too short for him, and he had tied his white tie with a waist to it. Lord Newhaven had seen both details before he recognized him.

"Quite right," he said, hastily. "Now, who is to be the happy woman?"

Dick's hawk eye promenaded over the crowd in the second room, in the door-way of which he was standing.

"That one," he said; "the tall girl in the green gown talking to the Bishop."

"You have a wonderful eye for heiresses. You have picked out the greatest in London. That is Miss Rachel West. You say you want two."

"One at a time, thanks. I shall take her down to supper. I suppose—er—there is supper at this sort of thing, isn't there?"

"Of a kind. You need not be afraid of the claret; it isn't yours."

"Catch you giving your best at a crush," retorted Dick. "The Bishop's moving. Hurry up."

CHAPTER II

But as he groped against the wall, two hands upon him fell,
The King behind his shoulder spake: "Dead man, thou dost not
well."

—RUDYARD KIPLING.

Hugh had gone through the first room, and, after a quarter of an hour, found himself in the door-way of the second. He had arrived late, and the rooms were already thinning.

A woman in a pale-green gown was standing near the open window, her white profile outlined against the framed darkness, as she listened with evident amusement to the tall, ill-dressed man beside her.

Hugh's eyes lost the veiled scorn with which it was their wont to look at society and the indulgent patronage which lurked in them for pretty women.

Rachel West slowly turned her face towards him without seeing him, and his heart leaped. She was not beautiful except with the beauty of health, and a certain dignity of carriage which is the outcome of a head and hands and body that are at unity with each other, and with a mind absolutely unconscious of self. She had not the long nose which so frequently usurps more than its share of the faces of the well-bred, nor had she, alas! the short upper lip which redeems everything. Her features were as insignificant as her coloring. People rarely noticed that Rachel's hair was brown, and that her

deep-set eyes were gray. But upon her grave face the word "Helper" was plainly written—and something else. What was it?

Just as in the faces of seamen we trace the onslaught of storm and sun and brine, and the puckering of the skin round the eyes that comes of long watching in half-lights, so in some faces, calm and pure as Rachel's, on which the sun and rain have never beaten, there is an expression betokening strong resistance from within of the brunt of a whirlwind from without. The marks of conflict and endurance on a young face—who shall see them unmoved! The Mother of Jesus must have noticed a great difference in her Son when she first saw Him again after the temptation in the wilderness.

Rachel's grave, amused glance fell upon Hugh. Their eyes met, and he instantly perceived, to his astonishment, that she recognized him. But she did not bow, and a moment later left the nearly empty rooms with the man who was talking to her.

Hugh was excited out of recognition of his former half-scornful, half-*blasé* self. That woman must be his wife. She would save him from himself, this cynical, restless self, which never remained in one stay. The half-acknowledged weakness in his nature unconsciously flung itself upon her strength, a strength which had been tried. She would love him, and uphold him. There would be no more yielding to circumstances if that pure, strong soul were close beside him. He would lean upon her, and the ugly by-paths of these last years would know him no more. Her presence would leaven his whole life. In the momentary insanity, which was perhaps, after all, only a prophetic intuition, he had no fears, no misgivings. He thought that with that face it was not possible that she could be so wicked as to refuse him.

"She will marry me," he said to himself. "She must."

Lady Newhaven touched him gently on the arm.

"I dared not speak to you before," she said. "Nearly every one has gone. Will you take me down to supper? I am tired out."

He stared at her, not recognizing her.

"Have I vexed you?" she faltered.

And with a sudden horrible revulsion of feeling he remembered. The poor chromo had fallen violently from its nail. But the nail remained—ready. He took her into the supper-room and got her a glass of champagne. She subsided on to a sofa beside another woman, vaguely suspecting trouble in the air. He felt thankful that Rachel had already gone. Dick, nearly the last, was putting on his coat, arranging to meet Lord Newhaven the following morning at his club. They had been in Australia together, and were evidently old friends.

Lord Newhaven's listless manner returned as Dick marched out. Hugh had got one arm in his coat. An instinct of flight possessed him, a vague horror of the woman in diamonds furtively watching him under her lowered eyelids through the open door.

"Oh, Scarlett!" said Lord Newhaven, detaining him languidly, "I want three minutes of your valuable time. Come into my study."

"Another cross-bow for Westhope Abbey?" said Hugh, trying to speak unconcernedly, as he followed his host to a back room on the ground floor. Lord Newhaven was collecting arms for the hall of his country-house.

"No; much simpler than those elaborate machines," said the older man, turning on the electric light. Hugh went in, and Lord Newhaven closed the door.

Over the mantel-shelf were hung a few old Japanese inlaid carbines, and beneath them an array of pistols.

"Useless now," said Lord Newhaven, touching them affectionately. "But," he added, with a shade more listlessness than before, "Society has become accustomed to do without them, and does ill without them, but we must conform to her." Hugh started slightly, and then remained motionless. "You observe these two paper lighters, Scarlett? One is an inch shorter than the other. They have been waiting on the mantel-shelf for the last month, till I had an opportunity of drawing your attention to them. I am sure we perfectly understand each other. No name need be mentioned. All scandal is avoided. I feel confident you will not hesitate to make me the only reparation one man can make another in the somewhat hackneyed circumstances in which we find ourselves."

Lord Newhaven took the lighters out of the glass. He glanced suddenly at Hugh's stunned face and went on:

"I am sorry the idea is not my own. I read it in a magazine. Though comparatively modern, it promises soon to become as customary as the much-to-be-regretted pistols for two and coffee for four. I hold the lighters thus, and you draw. Whoever draws or keeps the short one is pledged to leave this world within four months, or shall we say five, on account of the pheasant shooting? Five be it. Is it agreed? Just so! Will you draw?"

A swift spasm passed over Hugh's face, and a tiger glint leaped into Lord Newhaven's eyes, fixed intently upon him.

There was a brief second in which Hugh's mind wavered, as the flame of a candle wavers in a sudden draught. Lord Newhaven's eyes glittered. He advanced the lighters an inch nearer.

If he had not advanced them that inch Hugh thought afterwards that he would have refused to draw.

He backed against the mantel-piece, and then put out his hand suddenly and drew. It seemed the only way of escape.

The two men measured the lighters on the table under the electric light.

Lord Newhaven laughed.

Hugh stood a moment, and then went out.

CHAPTER III

"Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband?"

When Lady Newhaven slipped out of the supper-room after her husband and Hugh, and lingered at the door of the study, she did not follow them with the deliberate intention of eavesdropping, but from a vague impulse of suspicious anxiety. Yet she crouched in her white satin gown against the door listening intently.

Neither man moved within, only one spoke. There was no other sound to deaden her husband's distinct, low voice. The silence that followed his last words, "Will you draw?" was broken by his laugh, and she had barely time to throw herself back from the door into a

dark recess under the staircase before Hugh came out. He almost touched her as he passed. He must have seen her, if he had been capable of seeing anything; but he went straight on unheeding. And as she stole a few steps to gaze after him, she saw him cross the hall and go out into the night without his hat and coat, the amazed servants staring after him.

She drew back to go up-stairs, and met her husband coming slowly out of the study. He looked steadily at her, as she clung trembling to the banisters. There was no alteration in his glance, and she suddenly perceived that what he knew now he had always known. She put her hand to her head.

"You look tired," he said, in the level voice to which she was accustomed. "You had better go to bed."

She stumbled swiftly up-stairs, catching at the banisters, and went into her own room.

Her maid was waiting for her by the dressing-table with its shaded electric lights. And she remembered that she had given a party, and that she had on her diamonds.

It would take a long time to unfasten them. She pulled at the diamond sun on her breast with a shaking hand. Her husband had given it to her when her eldest son was born. Her maid took the tiara gently out of her hair, and cut the threads that sewed the diamonds on her breast and shoulders. Would it never end? The lace of her gown, cautiously withdrawn through its hundred eyelet-holes, knotted itself.

"Cut it," she said, impatiently. "Cut it."

At last she was in her dressing-gown and alone. She flung herself face downwards on the sofa. Her attitude had the touch of artificiality which was natural to her.

The deluge had arrived, and unconsciously she met it, as she would have made a heroine meet it had she been a novelist, in a white dressing-gown and pink ribbons in a stereotyped attitude of despair on a divan.

Conscience is supposed to make cowards of us all, but it is a matter of common experience that the unimaginative are made cowards of only by being found out.

Had David qualms of conscience when Uriah fell before the besieged city? Surely if he had he would have winced at the obvious parallel of the prophet's story about the ewe lamb. But apparently he remained serenely obtuse till the indignant author's "Thou art the man" unexpectedly nailed him to the cross of his sin.

And so it was with Lady Newhaven. She had gone through the twenty-seven years of her life believing herself to be a religious and virtuous person. She was so accustomed to the idea that it had become a habit, and now the whole of her self-respect was in one wrench torn from her. The events of the last year had not worn it down to its last shred, had not even worn the nap off. It was dragged from her intact, and the shock left her faint and shuddering.

The thought that her husband knew, and had thought fit to conceal his knowledge, had never entered her mind, any more than the probability that she had been seen by some of the servants kneeling listening at a keyhole. The mistake which all unobservant people make is to assume that others are as unobservant as themselves.

By what frightful accident, she asked herself, had this catastrophe come about? She thought of all the obvious incidents which would have revealed the secret to herself—the dropped letter, the altered countenance, the badly arranged lie. No. She was convinced her secret had been guarded with minute, with scrupulous care. The only thing she had forgotten in her calculations was her husband's character, if, indeed, she could be said to have forgotten that which she had never known.

Lord Newhaven was in his wife's eyes a very quiet man of few words. That his few words did not represent the whole of him had never occurred to her. She had often told her friends that he walked through life with his eyes shut. He had a trick of half shutting his eyes which confirmed her in this opinion. When she came across persons who were after a time discovered to have affections and interests of which they had not spoken, she described them as "cunning." She had never thought Edward "cunning" till to-night. How