

# A SEVERE TRIAL;

## OR, THE MEMORY OF A BOY WITH DARK EYES.

### CHAPTER VIII.—(Cont'd)

"Rosalie, will you let me try to make you happy? Will you try to care for me a little? I love you—I have loved you since the first moment I saw your face. Don't you think I could make you happy, loving you so much as that?"

I do not answer for a moment. I do not seriously entertain the thought even for one second of time. A year ago it might have seemed to me a very desirable arrangement. It would restore Woodhay to the man who I always felt ought to have had it. But a year ago I did not care for any one else. Now my heart lies in the grave that was dug for it down among the tangled ferns and leaves and grasses in my shadowycombe one day—a grave whose fresh sods I have never visited—a grave where with my dead love I have buried all hope, all pleasure, all desire of life.

"I am sorry if you care for me, Cousin Ronald. I don't know how you can—smiling slightly—knowing how cross I am!"

"May I ask you one question, Rosalie?" I know what the question is before I look round into his face.

"Yes," I answer gravely. "I suppose you have a right to ask it by reason of your right, and you are not bound to answer me."

"No; I am not bound to answer you." "Rosalie, have you ever fancied that you cared for any other man?" The question is put so gravely, so composedly, that it does not startle me. I answer it just as gravely, just as composedly, looking straight before me at the smooth gray terrace-walk.

"Not fancied it, Cousin Ronald! I have cared for another man so much that, though you are a hundred times better, a thousand times worthier, you can never be to me what he once was."

"I am not going to ask you his name. But this man, Rosalie, it cannot be but that he loved you in return?"

"Oh, yes, he loved me!"

"Then he is dead?"

"No; I answer, with a strange little smile; 'he is married.'"

For one moment Ronald Scott stands beside me in dead silence. I do not look at him; but I can fancy the astonishment—the disgust, perhaps—in his grave stern face—his silence might mean either or both.

"Poor child," he says at last—and his tone is only pitiful, not disgusted at all—"poor child!"

I do not look at him, and I do not think he is looking at me. But two great tears well into my eyes and fall upon my ashy purple gown.

"I will not trouble you any more, dear," he says, gently. "I would never have asked that question if I had dreamed what your answer would be. But I could not think you cared for any one—it seemed so unlikely that—he would not care for you at all."

I hold out my left hand to him—the one next to him—without turning my head. The foolish tears drop down my cheeks and fall upon the gown whose dead violet shade Olive abhors.

"I shall be your friend always, Rosalie—remember that!"

"Yes," I say vaguely, not dreaming how soon I shall make trial of his friendship; "I shall remember."

He stoops and kisses my hand gravely, dispassionately, and walks out of the room just as Olive and Mr. Lockhart come into it.

"There is no news in the paper to-day," Olive says, picking up the "Times" from the floor where Ronald Scott had thrown it.

"Is there not?" I answer languidly, still standing in the deep bay window looking out.

"Nothing that I call news. Oh, what is this?"

She does not speak again for a minute or two. I suppose she is studying the paragraph which seemed to have attracted her attention. I am studying the sunset colors in the sky—the mystic glory of my sunset hill, the deep ruddy green of my shadowy woods. Mr. Lockhart has just wished us good-bye and left the room; Digges has carried away the tea things; Olive has more than once suggested that it is time for my ante-prandial drive; but I am in no mood for exerting myself even to the extent of putting on my hat.

"Such a horrible thing!" Olive exclaims. "Allie, did you know that unfortunate Gerard Baxter was married?"

"Yes," I answer calmly, without turning my head. "I knew it some time ago. I declare I don't like to tell you about it—it is enough to shock you if you had never known the wretched boy."

"What is it?" I ask, confronting her. The girl is sitting on the corner of the sofa, looking up at me with a white startled face.

### CHAPTER IX.

Olive Deane went away this morning, and Ronald Scott left after luncheon—the house seems quite lonely and deserted. But I am not thinking of either my friend or my cousin, as I sit alone in my brown-paneled morning room at Woodhay, holding in my hand the "Times" of yesterday. I have hidden the paper away that I might study something in it at my leisure to-day—something that I already know by heart. As I sit in the deep old-fashioned bay-window, with the paper in my hand, my eyes are on the blaze of color without, intently staring. I see no sky, no sun, no trees, no hills, no tall green hedges topped by the blue sky. I see a man in a prison-cell—gaunt, haggard—the man whom I still love with all the reckless obstinacy of my nature—the boy whose weakness of purpose has spoiled both his life and my own.

I believe every word of the story he told me, though, in the face of such overwhelming evidence as was produced against him, I do not see that there was any course open to the magistrate but the course he adopted, of committing him to prison to take his trial at the October Sessions. I have hidden the paper away that I might study something in it at my leisure to-day—something that I already know by heart. As I sit in the deep old-fashioned bay-window, with the paper in my hand, my eyes are on the blaze of color without, intently staring. I see no sky, no sun, no trees, no hills, no tall green hedges topped by the blue sky. I see a man in a prison-cell—gaunt, haggard—the man whom I still love with all the reckless obstinacy of my nature—the boy whose weakness of purpose has spoiled both his life and my own.

Three weeks before the day Gerard Baxter was arrested on the charge of having murdered away with his rifle on the twenty-third of July—the day Mrs. Haag, Eliza White, deposed to having gone to his lodgings to visit her daughter. The prisoner opened the door for her, and told her that her daughter had gone out, about half an hour before to buy something in a neighboring street. She had gone home, and had intended to call again in the evening, but some business of her own prevented her doing this, and when she repeated her visit on the following morning, she was rather surprised to hear from her son-in-law that her daughter had again

gone out. On neither occasion had he invited her into the room, but had stood in the doorway to answer her inquiries. He said her daughter was quite well and that he expected her in every minute; but he did not ask her to wait; nor had she time to waste waiting for her. She thought Gerard Baxter's manner rather odd and surly; but then he never had a very pleasant manner, and it made no impression upon her. She was so sure that he had been telling her the truth on both occasions that she never thought of making any inquiries among the neighbors. In answer to the magistrate, she said the lodgings were very poor ones. Gerard Baxter was an artist, and could not always sell his pictures; but he had made some copies of the pictures of churches, she thought, and they had brought in some money. They never were in actual want.

She went on to say that she had not called again for several days, being rather hurt with her daughter for never coming near her. She had been in the habit of running into her house every evening almost when her husband went out. They had not got to bed together. Her daughter was a child almost, and very thoughtless, and Gerard Baxter was sored by disappointment and poverty, and had lately begun to drink—not hard, but more than was good for him; but he was never cruel to his wife at the worst times, so far as she knew. Mrs. Eliza White's evidence was so impartial that it produced a strong impression in her favor in the court.

For a whole week she saw nothing of her daughter, nor did she go to her lodgings to inquire after her. She blamed herself very much for it afterward; but she had to earn her own bread by washing, and had lodgers to look after. At the end of a week she went, however, and found the door locked; then she turned into the room of a neighbor on the next floor, a woman named Haag, the wife of a German who played the violin in the orchestra of some theatre; she forgot what theatre. Mrs. Haag said that she was surprised to hear her making inquiries for her daughter, since Baxter had told them all she had gone to stay with some cousins in the country. They had not seen or heard anything of her in that time, since the twenty-fourth of July; Mrs. White herself had seen her on the twenty-first.

Mrs. White then resolved to wait till her son-in-law should come in; but, though she sat with Mrs. Haag for more than two hours, Baxter did not make his appearance. Meanwhile Mrs. Haag told her all she knew of her daughter. Baxter had told them, when they inquired for his wife, that she had just gone out and would be in presently, and on the fourth had told her—Mrs. Haag—that she had gone to visit some cousins in the country. The neighbors suspected nothing. When she had heard that she had had letters from her, and even gave them messages which she sent to them in the letters. He looked dark, Mrs. Haag said; but then he always did look dark, and kept himself very much to himself. She did not think they had got on very well. Her own wife alone very much, and all she pitied her—she was so young—a mere child, and so pretty. On the morning of the twenty-second, they had words about something; she—Mrs. Haag—heard him threaten to rid himself of her—to choke her, she thought he said; but such threats were common enough that tenement-house; she had never given them a second thought.

Mrs. White, finding Baxter did not come back, left Mrs. Haag, and went home. She knew Lily—her daughter's name was Eliza—the same as her own, but she always called her Lily. She had seen her in Kent; and, though she was surprised to hear she had gone to pay them a visit, it was not outside the bounds of probability that she should have done so. And, being troubled with her own concerns, she gave no more thought to the matter until the afternoon of the fourteenth day of August.

Here the witness was so overcome by grief that it was some time before the examination could proceed.

On the afternoon of the fourteenth of August a policeman came to her, to take her to the mortuary. A body had been found floating in the river near Blackfriars Bridge; Mr. Haag had happened to see it, and at once recognized it as the body of Mrs. Baxter, and the girl's mother was sent for to identify it, as her husband was not to be found.

Mrs. White had no difficulty in identifying the body, though it had been in the water a considerable time—three weeks, the surgeon said, who made the post-mortem examination. The face was much disfigured from the action of the water; but the beautiful red gold hair, the small even teeth, the girl's height and age, the wedding-ring on her finger, were all there, and she recognized them. Her clothes were poor, and had no mark upon them—a black cashmere dress, black jacket, and a little brooch with hair in it, which Mrs. White at once recognized as having been a present from herself to her daughter—she had put the hair into it herself—it was her father's brooch, though it had been had also identified the clothes, but she could not remember the brooch. Mrs. Haag being called up, corroborated Mrs. White's evidence in every particular. The prisoner obstinately refused to answer any questions put to him by the bench, and maintained all through the inquiry a sullen demeanor, which had considerably prejudiced the court against him.

So much I had read, studying every word—I think the sentences have burned themselves into my brain. They were no marks of violence on the body, so far as could be ascertained; but, from the state it was in when found, this could scarcely be satisfactorily proved. It was supposed that Baxter had pushed his wife into the river on the night of the twenty-second of July—the day Mrs. Haag had heard him threatening to take away her life.

I believe Gerard Baxter to be innocent of the crime imputed to him. I have not asked Ronald Scott his opinion, nor Uncle Tod—I could not trust myself to ask them any questions. But I had heard Olive ask Uncle Tod at breakfast what they would do to Gerard Baxter, and Uncle Tod said they would try him, and him guilty most probably, and condemn him to death. The guilt seemed most conclusively brought to him—whether he would be recommended to mercy or not, he could not say. It might come out that there had been extenuating circumstances; but, to Uncle Tod's mind, there were no extenuating circumstances. It was a horrible business altogether.

It is a horrible business. I think so, as I sit staring into my quiet sunny garden, into which even the echo of such evil deeds has never come. It is all so peaceful, so orderly—the blackbirds and thrushes hop in and out of the tall thick walls of yew and beech, my peacock glimmers up and down in the distance, faint pearly clouds float across the serene sky. How different it is from the wretched London street, perhaps more wretched court or alley, where the man to whom I would have as freely given Woodhay, with all its gardens and terraces, woods and meadows, has worked and starved till it seems that his misery has driven him mad! I hate the blue sky, the orderly flower-beds, the ruddy gables, and

carved window-settings of my quaint old house. I cannot bear to look at them, thinking how little happiness they have given me. If I had been what he imagined me the penniless girl learning music as a means of future well-being, would have married him, and we should have been happy. But I refused him, because I was Miss Somers Scott of Woodhay Manor. And now all my woods and moors and meadows have turned to ashes between my teeth.

"Aunt Rosa, I am going up to London." "To London!" Aunt Rosa repeats, staring at me through her spectacles, aghast. "Yes; I am going up on business."

"But, my dear Rosalie, you are no more fit to travel."

"My dear Aunt Rosa, it is just what I want—some variety. I have telegraphed to Mrs. Wauchope to have my old rooms in Carleton street ready for me to-morrow."

"You have telegraphed to Mrs. Wauchope! Do you mean to tell me that you are going up to those dreadful lodgings again—alone?"

"Where else would you have me go, Aunt Rosa?"

"Why, I thought you might be going to Olive's, or to the Rollestons?"

"The Rollestons are in Denmark; and I don't want to catch another fever in Dexter Square."

"Dear me, I forgot that!"

"Not that I am afraid of the fever," I am bound to add honestly. "I am not in the least afraid of it; but I prefer going to Carleton Street for a great many reasons."

"If you go, I shall go with you," Aunt Rosa, says decisively.

"And leave Uncle Tod with that cold on his chest? My dear Aunt Rosa, I assure you I am very well able to take care of myself."

"You will take Nannette with you, of course?"

"Indeed I shall do no such thing," I answer at once. "My new maid is a weariness to me. If old nurse Marjory had not been past her work, I would never have installed her in the lodge and hired this pert French scoubrette in her stead."

"But, my dear child, it is an unheard-of thing for a girl in your position to go up to lodgings in London alone."

"Nobody need know. And it is not as if Mrs. Wauchope were not an old friend; and she shall only be gone a day or two probably. If anything should happen to detain me in town, you may follow me if you like, and if Uncle Tod's cold is better."

Aunt Rosa does not like the arrangement from any point of view.

"You are very self-willed, Rosalie. You were always headstrong, since you were a baby of three years old. If ever a girl went to a father's mother to control her, I think you wanted them as for your Uncle Todhunter, if he had cried for the moon, he would have tried to get it for you. I often told you he spoiled you, and so he did."

"I think I was always obstinate, whether Uncle Tod spoiled me or not. Aunt Rosa, do you know Cousin Ronald's address in town?"

"Yes, I know it," she says, scandalized—this time over the rim of her spectacles. "My dear Rosalie, are you going to Sir Ronald Scott's hotel in London to call upon him?"

"Not unless—should want him, auntie. But it is always well to know the address of a friend in London."

"He is staying at the hotel your uncle always goes to in London. But I do hope, Rosalie, that you will not do anything unbecoming. My dear Aunt Rosa, I can be very steady—when I like; and I am sure you can trust to the chivalry of your friend Ronald Scott."

"Sir Ronald Scott is a perfect gentleman. What will he think of this freak of yours, Rosalie? Do you suppose he will approve of your going up to London to see him?"

"Ronald Scott's opinion of my proceedings is not of vital importance," I answer, throwing up my head. "Whether he is pleased or displeased matters very little to me. I am going up to London on business which nobody else could manage for me. If he chooses to disbelieve my assertion—should I feel called upon to make it—it is nothing to me." Aunt Rosa says a little wistfully, looking at me. "He is a fine fellow—a true gentleman; and he cares for you, Rosalie—he asked your Uncle Todhunter's permission to pay his addresses to you. But I suppose you snubbed him, as you snubbed all the rest."

"Dear Aunt Rosa," I answer gravely, "you cannot like Ronald better than I do, and what I said to him I said as gently as I could."

"Why must you have said it at all, child?"

"Because I could not care enough for him to marry him, auntie."

Aunt Rosa sighs. She would be so glad to hand me over to some good steady man like Ronald Scott, who could keep me in order. She would be so thankful to wash her hands of me and my vagaries, fond as she is of me, once and for ever.

"I don't despair but that you will come to your senses some day, and marry him," she says, deliberately, getting up from the luncheon table. "I think your Uncle Todhunter would die happy if he knew that you were married to such a man as Sir Ronald Scott."

"You're looking poorly enough still," Mrs. Wauchope says, regarding me by the light of the gas in her great dingy drawing-room. "I don't know whether it's the bonnet, or what; but you look ten years older than you did when you were up here with me in the spring."

Mrs. Wauchope is truthful, if she is not complimentary. Glancing at myself in the sea-green depths of the mirror over the mantelpiece, I am forced to acknowledge that I do look ten years older than when I last saw myself reflected between the tall vases of imitation Bohemian glass which grace the mantelshelf. In deference to Aunt Rosa's old-fashioned notions, and for other reasons, I have endeavored to give myself as staid an appearance as possible, wearing the close black bonnet which Olive always said gave me a demure look, though my dimples were against me. And I am wrapped up in my long fur-lined cloak, and have altogether the look of a respectable young widow, as I say to Mrs. Wauchope, laughing, while she gets my tea ready with her own plump hands.

"Isn't this a terrible business about Mr. Baxter?" she remarks presently. "I never got such a turn in my life as when I saw all about it in the paper. And such a young lad as he is, too; and I believe she was little more than a child!"

"Do you think he did it?" I ask, standing on the rug. My landlady is busied at the table, with her back toward me; she does not look round, though I can scarcely hear my voice steady while I speak the six words.

"Oh, everybody knows he did it!"

"How can they know?"

"But there was no one else to do it."

"That proves nothing."

"Oh, but he was heard to threaten her! And then the stories he made up! And I believe she was a mighty little thing, and too pretty for her station in life. Those painters had spoiled her, for ever painting her picture. It was only the other day I found her photograph up in his studio—pinned to the wall."



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"Have you seen him since he gave up painting here, Mrs. Wauchope?"

"Once or twice—not more than that. I heard he was married; and I was sorry to hear it, knowing the kind of person he married. There was a great deal of good in him, poor lad; but he was as unstable as water—he never finished anything. There are upward of twenty pictures upstairs, not one of them finished. If they were any good, I'll sell them to pay up his arrears of rent; but they're nothing but useless lumber."

"I wish you would let me see them, Mrs. Wauchope. I shouldn't mind taking some of them off your hands. And if Mr. Baxter ever comes to claim them, you can refer him to me."

"You are welcome to see them, Miss Allie. The studio is just as he left it—I never even let the bedroom since. You see I had a regard for him, having known him so long; and I thought he would come back to me some day till I heard he had married that girl."

"After tea, Mrs. Wauchope takes me upstairs. If the studio had had an untidy look when I first saw it, it looks like nothing now but a gloomy attic full of lumber—the empty easel pushed into a corner, the unfinished canvases covered with gray cobwebs, every chair and table covered inch-deep with dust."

"Here is the photograph," Mrs. Wauchope says, taking something from the table, and wiping it with her black apron. "A pretty face, isn't it? I've known a man to lose his life for a face that wasn't half as pretty as that."

"But what had her face to do with it?" I ask vaguely.

"Why, they say he was jealous, you know. She was a mighty little thing, and some artist was painting her picture, and Mr. Gerard didn't like it. That was what they were quarreling about on the morning of the day it happened."

I stand in the light of Mrs. Wauchope's mold candle, looking at the photograph in my hand. It is a beautiful face—an exquisite face—soft and bright and innocent as a child's.

"I will keep this for the present, Mrs. Wauchope. May I?"

Mrs. Wauchope nods. Lily Baxter's photograph is in all the shop windows; but she does not care to have it at all.

### CHAPTER X.

Early the next morning I transgress all Aunt Rosa's rules of propriety by taking a cab and driving to my Cousin Ronald Scott's hotel. I find him finishing breakfast, half a dozen business-letters scattered about the table.

"Ronald," I say, in my honest fearless way, "I have come to put a promise you made me to the test."

"I am glad to hear it, Rosalie," he answers, standing by the table. "I have refused the chair he offered me, with the plea that my cab was waiting below."

"Do you remember the promise, cousin?"

"I have forgotten nothing," he says, smiling a little.

"I should like to manage an interview with that man—Gerard Baxter—who is in prison for murdering his wife."

Ronald Scott looks profoundly surprised. "For me or for you?" he asks, his eyes on my white face.

"For me. You can be present, of course; I should wish you to be present. And it need not last more than five minutes, if so long."

Ronald Scott makes no answer whatever for a minute or two. He is standing by the table, one hand resting upon it, looking down at me as I look up at him.

"Do you think you can do this for me, Ronald?"

"I can try. Was he an acquaintance of yours?"

"He was a friend—was, and is."

"I should say 'was,' Ronald observes, shrugging his shoulders.

"I say 'is,'" I repeat stubbornly. "Gerard Baxter is a friend of mine."

Ronald's dark brows met in a rather heavy frown.

"May I ask how you made his acquaintance, Rosalie?"

"We lodged in the same house in London—the house in Carleton Street where I am staying now."

I cannot help laughing outright at the exceeding gravity of his face. I think of the bunch of violets; but I do not tell Ronald about them—it is so different relating a piece of thoughtless folly like that—it would seem so much more heinous an offense repeated under the cold unsympathetic eyes of my judicial cousin.

"I cannot think how you ever made his acquaintance, Rosalie. If you had been lodging in the same house for fifty years, you should have had no acquaintance with him."

"Oh, he was quite respectable! I met him in other places—in society. The Rollestons knew him—he was at their house every day."

"As to his respectability," Ronald says coldly, "that must be a matter of opinion. Subsequent events have proved that he could not have been a very respectable acquaintance for you or any one else!"

"Oh, subsequent events!"

"But supposing there were no subsequent events. This Baxter was a poor artist—a Bohemian—not exactly the kind of friend Miss Scott's friend's would have chosen for her—at least, I think not."

"We will not quarrel about that, Ronald. I dare say you are right; but it is too late to bemoan my want of exclusiveness now. What I want you to do is to manage that I may see my friend—if it is only for one moment."

"For what?" he asks rather sharply.

"Merely to ask him a single question."

He looks at me doubtfully. His face has grown pale under all its sunburn—as pale as my own.

"I will keep my promise, Rosalie. But it will be altogether in defiance of my better judgment."

"Then so much the more I thank you for keeping it. If it cost one nothing to keep a promise, there would not be occasion for much gratitude, would there?"

He does not answer, standing before me, still leaning on the table, still studying my face. "Then, since that is settled, I shall wish you good-bye, Cousin Ronald."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Carleton street. I have written to Olive to come to see me."

"It was to—see this man that you came up to town?"

"Yes."

"But what is he to you, Rosalie, that you should concern yourself in his affairs?"

"He is nothing to me."

"Then why mix yourself up in such a disgraceful business?"

"Because the man is innocent, and I must prove it."

"Prove it, my poor child! How could you prove it?"

"There must be some way to prove it—if the man is innocent."

I believe he thinks my mind has not quite recovered from the effects of the fever—he certainly looks at me as if he thought me slightly deranged.

"I have not studied the case. But my own impressions are that the man is guilty. If I can manage what you want me to do, where shall I meet you?"

"If you come to Carleton Street, for me, I shall be ready to go with you."

"I will very likely be to-morrow. Then I shall remain at home all to-morrow. And, if you fail, you will let me know?"

"I will let you know. I hope you are taking care of yourself, Cousin Rosalie. You look thoroughly worn out."

"Oh I am very well—a little tired from the journey perhaps!"

I wrap my fur cloak about me, shivering, though it is August. Ronald walks down the hotel-stairs with me across the hall, in a silence which I do not care to break. He puts me into the cab in the same almost stern silence. I do not glance back at him as the cab leaves the door, though he stands there bareheaded, looking after me. I am thinking of a man in prison—a man whom I seem to love the more the world hates him—the more he seems to have made shipwreck of his own most miserable life.

I have seen Gerard in prison. Ronald Scott managed it all for me—came with me himself to the prisoner's cell.

I have heard Gerard's story—I have asked the single question I wanted to ask; and the answer has confirmed my own belief—Gerard Baxter is innocent of the horrible crime imputed to him. I believe every word of the story he has told me, as firmly as I believe that I am a living woman. He knows no more of the manner in which his wretched wife met her death than I do, except that he had no hand or part in it.

(To be continued.)

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As will be seen from these comparisons, the Bank has experienced a wonderfully prosperous year.