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Red Pottage

By

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AUTHOR OF

"THE DANVERS JEWELS"

"After the Red Pottage comes the exceeding bitter cry"



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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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CHAPTER I

In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed 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 allur-

ing 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

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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-shaven 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 chromo-lithograph. Of course, tastes differ. Some people like chromo-lithographs, 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 chromes 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."