

NELLY CHANNELL.

Sarah Doudney



“Until she came to the side of the brook.”—

NELLY CHANNELL.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“Strangers Yet,” “A Woman’s Glory,” “What’s in a Name,” “Nothing but Leaves,” etc.

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CHAPTER I.

THE HOME AT HUNTSDEAN AND ITS NEW INMATES.

IT was the dreariest of November days. The only bright spot was a crimson sumach, spreading its gorgeous foliage against the watery grey of the sky, and misty back-ground of fog-hidden fields. It was a day that made the burdens of life seem heavier than they really were, and set the heart aching for the sunshine of the vanished summer.

The scene was as still as death. There was not wind enough to lift the pale vapours that hung over the meadows. No kindly breezes came to the poor brown leaves, heaped on the wayside, and carried them off to quiet hollows where they might have decent burial. Better rain and tempest than such a gloomy calm as this; and better the roar and rattle of the train than the heavy jog-trot of the carrier's horses, and the rumble of his wagon.

"It will never be the same home again," said Rhoda Farren to herself, as the old grey cottage came in sight. There was the low, moss-grown wall, built of flints—there were the splendid sumachs, brightening the desolate garden. Rhoda and her cousin Helen had chased each other along those grassy paths when they were children. But they were women now, and had put away childish things. Rhoda loved her cousin reasonably well, yet not well enough to give up her own bedroom to her and her baby.

The baby was the principal grievance. Rhoda had had very little to do with children; and being of a studious turn, she did not want to improve her acquaintance with them. In reading her favourite books she always skipped the parts that related their sayings and doings. It was, therefore, no small cross to find an infant of two months old introduced into the family circle. For there she had hoped to reign supreme.

She had a presentiment that there would be rivalry between the baby and herself—a struggle for mastery, in which her little opponent might possibly

be victor. “Baby lips would laugh her down,” if she attempted remonstrance. Even parents and a fond brother might be won over to the cause of the small usurper.

For three years Rhoda Farren had been living away from home, only coming back for a fortnight at Christmas, and sometimes for a few days in midsummer. Neighbours and friends had looked upon her as fortunate. She had held the post of companion to the rich widow of a London merchant, and had been well treated, and not ill remunerated.

The widow was lately dead, and Miss Farren was returning to her home with an annuity of twenty pounds, to be paid regularly by Mrs. Elton’s executors.

Mrs. Elton had not been difficult to live with; and her companion had adapted herself to her ways more readily than most girls of twenty would have done. The quiet house in Cavendish Square had been no uncheerful home. But the mode of life there had strengthened Rhoda’s habits of self-indulgence. She had had ample time for reading and musing. No harsh words had chafed her temper, no small nuisances had planted thorns in her path. They had few visitors. Weeks would pass without their hearing other voices than those of the servants. It did not matter to them that there were mighty things done in the great world. It was an unwholesome life for two women to lead—a life of cramped interests and narrow thoughts.

Helen had been living in Islington, while Rhoda was in Cavendish Square. But in those days Miss Farren never went to see anybody; and she excused herself for not visiting Helen by saying that Mrs. Elton did not like her to be gadding about. Thus it came to pass that she had not even once seen her cousin’s husband.

She knew that Robert Clarris had taken Helen from her situation of nursery governess, and had married her after a brief acquaintance. Rhoda’s parents were Helen’s only surviving relatives, and they had given their full consent to the match. It was not a bad match for a penniless girl

to make; for Robert Clarris was a confidential clerk in the office of Mr. Elton, son of the widow in Cavendish Square.

It was in July that Mrs. Elton's health began to fail. Rhoda Farren saw the change stealing over her day by day, and knew what it portended. In a certain way she had been fond of the old woman; but it was an attachment without love. There would be no great pain when the ties between them were broken, and Rhoda was conscious of this. She was even angry with herself for not being more sorry that Mrs. Elton was dying.

"The worry of life is wearing me out, Rhoda," said the widow one day, when Miss Farren had found her violently agitated, and in tears. It surprised her not a little to hear that Mrs. Elton had any worries. But when the wind shakes the full tree, there is always a great rustling of the leaves. The bare bough does not quake; it has nothing to lose. Mrs. Elton had been a rich woman from her youth upward, and she could not bear that a single leaf should be torn from her green branches.

"I have had a dreadful loss, Rhoda," she continued; "a loss in my business. The business is mine, you know. I always said my son should never have it while I was alive. But of course I have let him carry it on for me, and very badly he has managed! That confidential clerk of his—Clarris—has robbed me of three hundred pounds!"

"You surely don't mean my cousin Helen's husband, Mrs. Elton?" cried Rhoda.

"How should I know anything about his being your cousin's husband?" said the old lady peevishly. "His wife is a very unlucky woman, whoever she is. Three hundred pounds have been paid into Clarris's hands for me, and he has embezzled every shilling of it. My son always had a ridiculous habit of petting the people he employed. This is what has come of it."

"Is he in prison?" faltered Rhoda.

“No; I am sorry to say that he isn’t. Those lazy idiots, the detectives, have let him slip. He has had the impertinence to write a canting letter to my son, telling him that every farthing shall be restored.”

The fugitive was not captured. Perhaps Mr. Elton had a secret liking for the *ci-devant* clerk, and did not care to have him too hotly pursued. Poor lonely Helen had travelled without delay to her uncle’s house, and there her little girl had entered this troublesome world. At the end of October Mrs. Elton had ceased to fret for the three hundred pounds, and had gone where gold and silver are of small account. And on this November afternoon Rhoda Farren had returned to her old home once more.

Bond, the carrier, had picked up Miss Farren and her belongings when the train had set her down at the rural railway station. Then came the five mile drive to Huntsdean, over the roads that she had often traversed in her girlhood. The pallid mist clung to every branch of the familiar trees, and veiled the woodland alleys where she had watched the rabbits and squirrels in bygone times. Not a gleam of sunshine welcomed her back to the old haunts; not a brown hare leaped across her path; not a bird sent forth a note of welcome. Nature and Rhoda were in the same mood on that memorable day.

But if the whole scene had been radiant with flowers, Rhoda would still have chosen to “sit down upon her little handful of thorns.” She told herself again and again that her good days were done. Was she not coming home to find the house invaded, and her own room occupied, by the wife and child of a thief?

Yes, a thief. She called him that hard name a dozen times, and even whispered it as she sat under the wagon-tilt. It is a humbling fact, that humanity finds relief in calling names. Ay, it is a miserable thing to know that we have fastened many a bitter epithet on some whose names are written in the Book of Life.

“Wo!” cried Bond to his horses.

The ejaculation might have been applied to Rhoda; for it was a woful visage that emerged from the tilt and met the gaze of John Farren as he came out of the garden gate.

“You don’t look quite so young as you did, Rhoda,” he said when he had lifted her from the wagon and set her on her feet.

There are birds that pluck the feathers from their own breasts. For hours Rhoda had been silently graving lines upon her face, and deliberately destroying the bloom and freshness that God meant her to keep. But she did not like to be told of her handiwork. When Miss So-and-so’s friends remark that she is getting *passé*, is it any comfort to her to know that her own restless nature, and not Time, has deprived her of her comeliness? Many a woman is lovelier in her maturity than in her youth. But it is a kind of beauty that comes with the knowledge of “the things that belong unto her peace.”

John looked after her boxes, and paid the carrier. The wagon rumbled on through the village, the black retriever barking behind it, to the exasperation of Bond’s dog, which was tethered under the wain. Then the brother put his hands on his sister’s shoulders, glanced at her earnestly for a moment, and kissed her.

“Mother’s waiting for you,” he said.

As he spoke, Mrs. Farren appeared in the porch, and at the sight of her Rhoda’s ill-temper was ready to take flight. But Helen was behind her, waiting too—waiting to weary her cousin with all the details of her wretched story, and expecting her, perhaps, to pity Robert Clarris.

“It’s good to have you back again, my dear,” said the mother’s soft voice and glistening eyes.

“Ah, Rhoda!” piped Helen’s treble, “we were children together, were we not? Oh! what sorrows I’ve gone through, and how I have been longing to talk to you!”

Before Miss Farren could reply, a feeble wail arose from the adjoining room. The baby had lost no time in announcing its presence, and Helen hurried in to the cradle. Dim as the light was, her mother must have detected the annoyance on Rhoda's face. Or perhaps her quick instinct served her instead of sight, for she hastened to say—

“It doesn't often cry, poor little mite! But it has been ailing to-day.”

There was only one flight of stairs in the house. As Rhoda slowly ascended them, the loud, steady ticking of the old clock brought back many a childish memory. Would the hours pass as swiftly and brightly as they had done in earlier years? She sighed as she thought of all the small miseries that would make time hang heavily on her hands. It never even occurred to her then that

“No true life is long.”

A fretful spirit will spin hours out of minutes, and weeks out of days.

“I told you, Rhoda, my dear, that we had given your room to Helen. I said so in a letter, didn't I?” remarked Mrs. Farren, leading the way into the chamber that she had prepared for her daughter. “This is nearly as good. And I felt sure that you would not grudge the larger room to that poor thing and her child.”

“What is to be, must be,” Rhoda replied.

“Don't stop to unpack anything,” continued her mother, trying not to notice the gloomy answer. “Come downstairs again as soon as you can. There's a good fire, and a bit of something nice for tea. It's a kind of day that takes the light and colour out of everything,” she added, with a slight shiver. “I'll never grumble at the weather that God sends; yet I'm always glad when we've got through November.”

It was Rhoda who had brought the damp mist indoors. It was Rhoda—God forgive her—who had taken the light and colour out of everything. In looking back upon our lives, we must always see the dark spots where we

cast our shadow on another's path—a path which, perhaps, ran very close beside our own. It may be that our dear ones, enfolded in the sunlight of Paradise, have forgotten the gloom that we once threw over their earthly way. But we never can.

When Rhoda went down into the old parlour, she found it glowing with fire and candle light. Her father had come in from the wet fields and the sheepfolds, and was waiting to give her a welcome. Red curtains shut out the foggy evening; red lights danced on the well-spread table. The baby, lying open-eyed on Helen's lap, had its thumb in its mouth, and seemed disposed for quiet contemplation. The black retriever, stretched upon the hearth-rug, had finished a hard day's barking, and was taking his well-earned repose.

They gave her the best chair and the warmest seat. All that household love could do was done; and she began to thaw a little under its influence.

Once or twice Helen tried to introduce the subject of her troubles, but the farmer and his wife quietly put it aside. Rhoda had made no secret of her resentment. There were many other things to be told; little episodes in village lives; little stories of neighbours and friends. The talk flowed on like a woodland stream that glides over this obstacle and under that. It was threading a difficult and intricate way, but it kept on flowing, till night broke up the family group.

CHAPTER II.

BROTHER AND SISTER.—RHODA FARREN PERPLEXED.

THE father and mother retired first, then Helen. John seated himself in the farmer's large arm-chair, and looked at Rhoda as she sat on the other side of the fire. These after-supper talks had been a custom with them in the old days. The sister knew by her brother's glance that he understood her mood, and was prepared for a long chat.

It is a trying thing for a woman that a man will seldom begin a subject, however full his heart may be of it. He will wait, with indomitable patience, until she speaks the first word, and after that he will go on glibly enough. Rhoda first learned to understand something of man's nature by studying John, and she knew perfectly well that she should never get a sentence out of him unless she broke the silence.

"Well," she said at last, with a little movement of impatience, "this is a miserable business. I never thought that I should come back to the old home and find the wife and child of a felon comfortably settled in it. But there is no end to sin—no limit to the audacity of criminals. It is not enough for Robert Clarris to rob his employer, he must also thrust his own lawful burdens on other folks' shoulders."

"When one commits a crime," replied John gravely, "one never foresees what it entails. When Clarris found that discovery was inevitable, he came home to his wife and asked her to fly with him. But she would not go——"

"How could she go?" interrupted Rhoda indignantly. "Think of her condition, and of the misery and disgrace of following his fortunes. He is a base man indeed."

John moved uneasily in his chair, and kept his eyes fixed on the burning log in the grate. More than once his lips opened and shut again.

“I suppose you’ll be very hard on me,” he said at length, “if I own that I’ve a sort of tenderness for this poor sinner. I don’t mean to make light of his crime, but I believe that when he took the money he intended to pay it back.”

“Oh, John,” said Rhoda severely, “I am really ashamed of you! What has come to your moral perceptions? There is a saying that the way to hell is paved with good intentions;—of course this man will try to excuse himself. The world has got into a habit of petting its criminals, and it is one of the worst signs of the times. As Mrs. Elton used to say, it would be well if we could have the good old days back again!”

“The good old days when men were hung for sheep-stealing, and starving women were sentenced to death for taking a loaf!” retorted John with unusual heat. “How I hate to hear that cant about the good old days! And when the gallows and the pillory and the stocks were so busy, did they stop the Mohawks in their fiendish pranks at night? or did they put down the Gordon riots till the mob had begun to sack and pillage London? I am glad the world is changed, and I hope it will go on changing.”

“If we change from over-severity to over-mercy, we shall just have to go back to over-severity again,” replied Rhoda.

“No, Rhoda,” he said more calmly. “By that time we shall have got to the days ‘when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the seas.’”

Rhoda looked at her brother and wondered. These were strange words to hear from a young man living in a Hampshire village, where everything seemed to be standing still. There was no more talk that night. It was evident to Rhoda that John had shot ahead of her in the road of life. Not being able to say whether he were in a bad way or a good way, she said nothing and went to bed.

CHAPTER III.

A SPARED LIFE.—NEWS FROM ROBERT CLARRIS.

A GREAT sorrow is like a mountain in our way: we must either climb to its top, or lie grovelling at its base. If we grovel, the path of life is blocked up for ever, and the shadow of our misery is upon us night and day. If we climb, we shall find purer air and fairer regions. Heaven will be nearer to us, the world will lie beneath our feet;—we shall bless God for the trial that has lifted us so high above our old selves. We shall comprehend a little of the vast Love that reared the mountain;—ay, we shall break forth into singing, “Thou, Lord, of Thy goodness, hast made my hill so strong!”

It was clear that Helen would never climb her mountain. In the old days, although she was three years older than her cousin, Rhoda had found out that nothing would ever lift her above the dead level of life. Always beautiful, always common-place, always a little sly—such were her childish characteristics, and they were unaltered by time. Her beauty was of that kind which inevitably gives a false impression. Every smile was a poem; every glance seemed to tell of thoughts too deep for words. She was the very impersonation of the German Elle-maid—as hollow a piece of loveliness as ever sat by the roadside in the old Schwarzwald, and lured unwary travellers to accept the fatal goblet or kiss.

When she said, tearfully, that Robert Clarris had fallen in love at their first interview, and would not rest till he had married her, Rhoda knew that she spoke the simple truth. No one who looked into the eloquent brown eyes, and watched the play of the sweet lips, could marvel at Robert's impetuosity. One could understand how that fair face had drawn out the old Samson cry, “Get her for me, for she pleaseth me well.”

“I might have done far better, Rhoda,” she said, plaintively; “but I had a hard situation, and I wanted to get out of it. You don't know the misery of

being nursery governess. One is just like the bat in the fable, neither a bird nor a beast—neither a lady nor a servant. The position is bad enough for an ugly girl; but it is ten times worse for a pretty one.”

No one could blame Helen for speaking of her beauty as an established fact.

“When I was married to Robert,” she continued, “I soon began to be disappointed in him. There was an end to all the nice little attentions. I was almost his goddess until I became his wife.”

“Oh, that’s a very old story,” responded Rhoda. “Lovers are just like our old apple trees; one would think to see the quantity of blossom that there would be a deal of fruit; but there never is. Great promise and small fulfilment—that’s always the case with men.”

“He was dreadfully stingy,” went on Helen. “He worried me sadly about my expenses. I was not allowed enough money to keep myself decently dressed. I think he liked to see me shabby.”

“You are wearing a very good dress at this moment,” remarked Rhoda.

“Yes, this is well enough,” answered her cousin, colouring slightly. “I was obliged to get things without his leave sometimes, or I should have looked like a scarecrow. Robert would never believe that I wanted any clothes.”

“What did he do with the money that he stole?” Rhoda asked abruptly.

“How should I know?” sighed Helen. “He never gave a shilling of it to me. One day he came home and told me, quite suddenly, that his sin must be discovered. I thought that he was crazed, and when I found that he was in his right mind, I nearly lost my senses. Never get married, Rhoda; take my advice, and be a single woman. It’s the only way to keep out of misery.”

“I’m not thinking of marrying, Helen,” replied Rhoda, rather sharply; “but every marriage is not such a mistake as yours has been. God knew what He was about, I suppose, when He brought Adam and Eve together.

There's little sense in abusing a good road just because you couldn't walk upright on it."

"You would not have found it easy to walk with Robert," said Helen, mournfully. "And now he has gone off, and has left me sticking in the mire! It's worse than being a widow."

Rhoda melted at once at the thought of Helen's desolate condition.

"Perhaps he may really get on in Australia," she rejoined, trying to speak hopefully; "and then he may send for you and the child."

"Oh, I hope not!" returned Helen, with a little start. "If he gets on, he will send home money for us; but I do not want to live with him again."

There can be no separation so utter and hopeless as that which parts two who have been made one. The closer the union, the more complete is the disunion. Even at that moment, when Rhoda's wrath was hot against Robert Clarris, she was struck with Helen's entire lack of wifely feeling. She could almost have pitied the man who had so thoroughly alienated the mother of his child. And then she reflected that this dread of reunion on Helen's part told fearfully against him. Helen was weak, but was she not also gentle and affectionate? Better, indeed, was it for them to keep asunder until another life should present each to the other under a new aspect.

She did not pursue the subject further. With a sudden desire to be away from Helen and her troubles, she wrapped herself in a thick shawl, and went up the fields that rose behind the cottage. On the highest land the farmer was mending a fence. She could hear the strokes of his mallet as he drove the stakes into the ground.

As Rhoda drew near, she stood still and looked at him—a hale, handsome man, whose face, fringed by an iron-grey beard, was like a rosy russet apple set in grey lichen. His smock-frock showed white against the dark

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