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Chapter 56 - The Means

THE new day dawned; the sun rose; the household was astir again. Inside the spare room, and outside the spare room, nothing had happened.

At the hour appointed for leaving the cottage to pay the promised visit to Holchester House, Hester Dethridge and Geoffrey were alone together in the bedroom in which Anne had passed the night.

"She's dressed, and waiting for me in the front garden," said Geoffrey. "You wanted to see me here alone. What is it?"

Hester pointed to the bed.

"You want it moved from the wall?"

Hester nodded her head.

They moved the bed some feet away from the partition wall. After a momentary pause, Geoffrey spoke again.

"It must be done to-night," he said. "Her friends may interfere; the girl may come back. It must be done to-night."

Hester bowed her head slowly.

"How long do you want to be left by yourself in the house?"

She held up three of her fingers.

"Does that mean three hours?"

She nodded her head.

"Will it be done in that time?"

She made the affirmative sign once more.

Thus far, she had never lifted her eyes to his. In her manner of listening to him when he spoke, in the slightest movement that she made when necessity required it, the same lifeless submission to him, the same mute horror of him, was expressed. He had, thus far, silently resented this, on his side. On the point of leaving the room the restraint which he had laid on himself gave way. For the first time, he resented it in words.

"Why the devil can't you look at me?" he asked

She let the question pass, without a sign to show that she had heard him. He angrily repeated it. She wrote on her slate, and held it out to him--still without raising her eyes to his face.

"You know you can speak," he said. "You know I have found you out. What's the use of playing the fool with _me?_"

She persisted in holding the slate before him. He read these words:

" I am dumb to you, and blind to you. Let me be."

"Let you be!" he repeated. "It's a little late in the day to be scrupulous, after what you have done. Do you want your Confession back, or not?"

As the reference to the Confession passed his lips, she raised her head. A faint tinge of color showed itself on her livid cheeks; a momentary spasm of pain stirred her deathlike face. The one last interest left in the woman's life was the interest of recovering the manuscript which had been taken from her. To _that_ appeal the stunned intelligence still faintly answered--and to no other.

"Remember the bargain on your side," Geoffrey went on, "and I'll remember the bargain on mine. This is how it stands, you know. I have read your Confession; and I find one thing wanting. You don't tell how it was done. I know you smothered him--but I don't know how. I want to know. You're dumb; and you can't tell me. You must do to the wall here what you did in the other house. You run no risks. There isn't a soul to see you. You have got the place to yourself. When I come back let me find this wall like the other wall--at that small hour of the morning you know, when you were waiting, with the towel in your hand, for the first stroke of the clock. Let me find that; and to-morrow you shall have your Confession back again."

As the reference to the Confession passed his lips for the second time, the sinking energy in the woman leaped up in her once more. She snatched her slate from her side; and, writing on it rapidly, held it, with both hands, close under his eyes. He read these words:

"I won't wait. I must have it to-night."

"Do you think I keep your Confession about me?" said Geoffrey. "I haven't even got it in the house."

She staggered back; and looked up for the first time.

"Don't alarm yourself," he went on. "It's sealed up with my seal; and it's safe in my bankers' keeping. I posted it to them myself. You don't stick at a trifle, Mrs. Dethridge. If I had kept it locked up in the house, you might have forced the lock when my back was turned. If I had kept it about me--I might have had that towel over my face, in the small hours of the morning! The bankers will give you back your Confession--just as they have received it from me--on receipt of an order in my handwriting. Do what I have told you; and you shall have the order to-night."

She passed her apron over her face, and drew a long breath of relief. Geoffrey turned to the door.

"I will be back at six this evening," he said. "Shall I find it done?"

She bowed her head.

His first condition accepted, he proceeded to the second.

"When the opportunity offers," he resumed, "I shall go up to my room. I shall ring the dining room bell first. You will go up before me when you hear that--and you will show me how you did it in the empty house?"

She made the affirmative sign once more.

At the same moment the door in the passage below was opened and closed again. Geoffrey instantly went down stairs. It was possible that Anne might have forgotten something; and it was necessary to prevent her from returning to her own room.

They met in the passage.

"Tired of waiting in the garden?" he asked, abruptly.

She pointed to the dining-room.

"The postman has just given me a letter for you, through the grating in the gate," she answered. "I have put it on the table in there."

He went in. The handwriting on the address of the letter was the handwriting of Mrs. Glenarm. He put it unread into his pocket, and went back to Anne.

"Step out!" he said. "We shall lose the train."

They started for their visit to Holchester House.