

# The Independent

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## AN AFTERNOON'S DRAMA.

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

IT was an afternoon in early August. The sea beat softly as a whispered song all along the beautiful Massachusetts coast, and the blue sky bent close to listen. The wind lay breathless upon the water, and against the horizon a fleet of boats stood motionless, with white sails spread, as if waiting for the signal to depart.

A wheel-chair was drawn up on a lonely bluff commanding a wide view across the water, and a short distance away two young girls sat chatting on the green slope of the hill. The occupant of the chair was a girl, too, but with something in her grave, wan beauty that belied her years, her face having a strange power of silence and endurance in it, while her great blue eyes had a look of repressed suffering difficult to meet unmoved, tho, also, one of pride that forbade even the lightest expression of sympathy. She was near enough to her companions to hear every word they spoke, but their gay talk fell upon her abstracted mood like the accents of an unknown tongue. She lay back upon the pillows, silent and un-participant, her ungloved hands loosely clasped before her, and her eyes fixed on the horizon with an expression as if she were freighting those white-sailed ships with the garnered prayers of a lifetime, to be borne away by them to some distant and haply merciful port.

Of the two girls beyond, Rose, her sister, attired in an extreme of simplicity be-tokening a slender purse, was a charming little creature, with a wild-flower face that matched her name. The other, a recent seaside acquaintance of the sisters, was as plain as youth, health and good temper ever permit any one to be, but exquisitely dressed, and with an air of well-being that lent her a certain challenging sort of attraction, wealth seeming in her person to put forward all its possible advantages as in a skillful advertisement.

The two prattled on in that easy comradeship so readily established between young people at any summer hotel, now and then glancing toward the invalid and lowering their voices apprehensively, un-

til, becoming aware of their solicitude, she turned her face aside and closed her eyes.

"Ruth is asleep," said Rose, with a sigh of relief. "I am so glad, for she had a bad night. She never sleeps well, I am afraid; but we only know it positively when we happen to watch. She never tells."

"She is not like you, then," returned the other, with a smile. "I doubt if you could keep even a pin prick to yourself."

Rose had flung herself at full length on the grass. She turned her delicate face toward her companion, and laughed softly.

"And why should I, Mary, if pin pricks may be kissed away?"

"Oh, of course! tho worse wounds than those do not always get kissed away for the telling," responded Mary, with matter-of-fact wisdom. "But, at any rate, you are not an atom like your sister."

"Never mind, I love her as if I were made in her likeness twice over."

"Do you? Ruth seems so reserved, I supposed she must hold even you at arm's length."

Rose shook her dainty head.

"You do not begin to know her, Mary. One has to love Ruth to understand her. She may be reserved to others, but she is not to me. I know her through and through. I know her every thought. Fancy her keeping *me* at a distance! I do not believe there ever were two sisters as intimate. I go to her with everything. To be sure, I haven't told her about that letter," Rose continued, after an instant's pause. "But that is because it is so sad. It haunts me, it's so sad; and I don't want Ruth haunted, too."

"Haunted by a letter?" asked Mary, incredulously. "Whose letter?"

"Why, that's it. I don't know. Nobody knows. I keep wondering and wondering who wrote it. It has no signature. That was just the trouble. The dead-letter office people couldn't find out the writer, to return it."

"The dead-letter office people!" echoed Mary, opening two very practical brown eyes. "But how, pray, did you come by it?"

"Oh, I haven't the real letter, of course. Mine's only a copy. But Carrie Woods had a friend in the dead-letter office who

told her about it and who lent her the letter to read, and Carrie copied it on the sly. I've her copy in my pocket, now. Don't you want to see it, Mary? Here. Do read it."

"No address and no signature!" Mary commented, unfolding the sheets. "And no date. A woman's letter, of course."

Rose drew nearer to look over her friend's shoulder.

"Carrie said the postmark on the envelop showed the date. It was posted in New York last year—the 9th of February, 1889, I think it was. That's all the clue they had except the handwriting, and of course nobody in the dead-letter office knew that. Read it, Mary. I want to see what you make of it."

Mary spread out the letter on her lap and read it aloud, Rose bending forward to follow, and both so interested that for the time they forgot Ruth. At the first line, however, Ruth suddenly raised her head; an uncontrollable spasm crossed her face; her cheeks blanched to marble and then flamed scarlet. She leaned out of her chair toward the reader, reaching out both arms in dumb entreaty. But the movement, abrupt and impassioned as it was, made no sound, neither Mary nor Rose looked round, and Ruth drew swiftly back again, cowering down in the chair like one stricken with shame, and thrusting her head deep among the pillows, shutting her lips sternly upon any involuntary outcry. She might have swooned, she lay so utterly still, only that the red flush slowly spread from her cheeks to her brow and neck, and even to her arms and hands, and stayed there as if scorched in. Mary read:

"Oh, my darling, why do you not write to me? You are not dead or I should know it; yet it is seven weeks since you left, and in all that eternity I have had no word. This is my fourth letter, tho I had vowed never to write again. But I can endure it no longer. This one time more I must put my poor pride aside. I *must* write this once more or go mad. Oh, what has happened? What has come between us? I am beating my heart out against the blank wall of this inexplicable silence. Even yet I fight against the doubt of you as I would against the thought of sin. It cannot be you have so soon forgotten! I cling to the memory of those last few blessed days as a dying man holds by the cross. Whatever has come over you, at least you loved me then. It *must* be there is some explanation—some simple reason that I have not guessed. I will not believe that you could willingly torture me so—that you could be false to such a love as mine. Oh, darling! I cannot tear the love out of my heart. I cannot give only to your giving. I cannot prune it down to your measure. It has grown out of my control, and now it is suffocating me. Oh, write to me, or I shall

die. I am frenzied with this intolerable suspense. The days are one long, agonized watching for your letter. I see the postman further off than sight can reach, and each time all over again I turn giddy and sick with hope. By the time he has reached the house there is a cloud across my senses and the universe is blotted out. If he goes by something snaps in my heart, and thought stops. Or if he turns in at our door—ah, Heaven forgive you for the delirium of joy that rushes upon me! There is a whirling in my brain as of wheels set loose. I cannot stir. I cannot breathe. I sit as one paralyzed, waiting for the servant to bring me up your letter, and straining my ears for his steps till hundreds of mocking footfalls echo all along the stairs and drive me wild. Then a clock strikes, and suddenly I realize that I have waited so for the best part of an hour, and the shock galvanizes me back to miserable life. Four times daily I go through this crucifixion. Then follows the endless, horrible night, when I can but wish it away that my torture may recommence, praying to God to give me courage only to wait so long! Oh, darling! you cannot mean to leave me in this way. I am so weak—so despairing. I cannot bear it. If your love is gone, is not even pity left? Put me out of agony. Write to me if but to cast me off. Do not be afraid that I will blame you. I will not breathe one syllable of reproach. Whatever you may say, I will pray God to bless you still—to bless you always—always—and die on my knees in the prayer. Only have mercy now. Write to me—write to me—write to me! For God's sake write to me, if only to give me leave to die!"

The sun was stooping in the west. The sky and the sea made one blinding sheen together. The boats had drifted quietly away out of sight, all but one that lingered as if for some last message. The water was very still. It would have seemed a painted sea except for a little lapping sound it made from time to time against the rocks, as of some gentle creature drinking.

Ruth was still lying motionless in her chair, with set features and closed eyes. Her hands lay out upon her lap, open, as if all strength were gone from them. But for a fluttering breath that now and then faintly stirred the light robe thrown over her she was as one to whom death had already brought its peace.

"Oh, how cruel!" Mary exclaimed slowly folding up the letter. "It must surely be better to die than ever to love like that."

"Don't you think she is dead now?" suggested Rose. "It was a year and a half ago, you see. Don't you think she must be dead by this time?"

"Yes. Or mad, perhaps. One may suppose everything."

"I wonder if she ever told any one,"

said Rose, thoughtfully. "I hate to think of her bearing it alone. I wish she had been my sister. I would have found it out even if she hadn't told me. She could never have hidden it from any one who loved her, as I do my Ruth, for instance. Perhaps she had no sister."

"She had no pride, anyway," Mary added, bluntly. "She wrote him four times. I wonder she would do it. I would never have written but the once."

"Oh, you! You don't know what love is, you phlegmatic soul!" laughed Rose, with pretty scorn. "You have only half a heart. What could love ever be to *you*?"

Mary looked at Rose curiously, and then glanced away. An unwonted softness crept into the lines about her mouth.

"Do you think I might not learn to love perhaps, if somebody very—very loving, taught me how?"

"No," declared Rose, emphatically. "You are too cold, too unromantic, too self-reliant ever to learn to love. Besides, to love one must just know how. One does not *learn* it. Love isn't mathematics. Give me back the letter, please. I don't want Ruth to see it. I hate her to know sad things. She has had quite enough to be sorry over for herself, poor dear, ever since that horrid accident."

"What was the accident?"

"She fell downstairs. Something startled her—a pull at the bell, I believe—you know how sharply those messenger boys ring sometimes—and she turned dizzy and lost her balance. She can't have been well to be so easily frightened. But she had only just come home from a long visit in New York where she had been no end gay, and I daresay she was worn out. It's over a year since that fall. I do wish she would get well faster. Well, what do you think of the letter, Mary? Do you wonder I can't get the poor girl out of my thoughts?"

"I keep thinking of the man," Mary answered. "What a brute he was not to write! I don't understand it, tho. Why didn't he get the letter?"

"That is the mystery of it," said Rose. "It was addressed plainly enough to the Palmer House, Chicago."

"To Chicago? My city?" Mary exclaimed, with added interest. "Well?"

"Well, it seems he was away, and the letter was opened by somebody else—somebody I suppose who took charge of his correspondence in his absence and who mistook this for a business letter—and it was forwarded on to him, and kept following him about till he came back to the Palmer House, and it finally reached him there."

"Why then he did get it!"

"Yes; but he sent it back to the post

office with word that it was not meant for him."

"Then there must be somebody else of the same name to whom it does belong."

"Well, perhaps," Rose answered, doubtfully. "Only it wasn't such a common name."

"Oh, do you know his name? What was it?"

"Theodore Harmon."

"What! Who?"

"Theodore Harmon," repeated Rose. "Nice name, isn't it? But do speak lower, Mary; you'll waken Ruth."

"Theodore Harmon?" said Mary, blankly. "And he was at the Palmer House—Chicago—last year—last spring? You are *sure*, Rose?"

"Yes, yes, *sure*," Rose whispered. "Oh, I am afraid Ruth is stirring! Dear me, I don't want Ruth waked. She does so need that sleep. Do, please, let us keep quiet a moment. She was so tired, poor darling!"

She looked anxiously off at her sister, and Mary brusquely got up and walked away to some distance, and bent down to retie first one shoelace and then the other. It took a long while to fasten them to her mind. When she came back her face was darkly flushed.

"Yes, Rose, it is extremely improbable that there should be two Theodore Harmons," she began, abruptly, in her usual manner, tho her voice sounded curiously rough and hoarse. "So it is safe to believe that the one who got the letter was the one to whom it was written, in spite of his denial. Only why did he send it back? Why did he not simply destroy it?"

"I think I have puzzled that out," Rose replied, confident that Ruth slept and willingly returning to the subject. "You see, somebody opened the letter before this Theodore Harmon got it. Now, if he was on with some new love and wanted to be off with the old one, he couldn't, of course, have a letter like this known about; and since it had already been seen, the only thing left to do would be to pretend that it wasn't his. Don't you think that must have been the reason for it all, Mary—that he fell in love with somebody else?"

"No!" said Mary, with a sort of sneer. "According to *my* idea of that romantic thing that you think beyond my experience, such a man as that knows nothing about love. It is likely enough, tho, that he wished to get rid of her, that he found it expedient to marry somebody else—that's a different affair. Probably he met some richer girl"—she gave a short laugh—"some Chicago millionaire's fascinating daughter, doubtless. Heiresses

are always fascinating, are they not? It is God who creates them so, is it not? She never supposed Theodore Harmon courted her for anything but love of her, of course; that is, if heiresses can love. Oh, the traitor! the traitor!"

"Do be careful!" implored Rose. "Oh dear! it's too late. Ruth is awake. And there comes some one. Gracious, what a good-looking fellow! Who is it, Mary? I never saw the man before. Do you know him?"

A young man was hurrying toward them across the rocks, eagerly lifting his hat as he came. Mary looked at him somberly, then drew herself up stiffly.

"Yes, I know him—*slightly*," she said, beneath her breath, with an odd emphasis. "I was expecting him. He wrote that he would be here this afternoon. He comes on an errand. He will not stay long."

She moved forward a few paces and stood waiting for him. She was breathing fast, but her face was bitterly hard.

"Miss Moore—Mary!" he began, breathlessly, as he reached her, holding out his hand with a radiant smile. "They told me I should find you here. I could not wait. I have come!"

Mary deliberately put her hands behind her as she confronted him. Her eyes looked through and through him. The scorn in her face lent its commonplaceness dignity.

"Stop! Not a step nearer!" she said, imperiously, tho so low that only he could hear. "You were to come to-day for my answer. I wanted time to decide. I have decided. Thank Heaven I know you in time. It is *no!* It is *no—no—no*, as long as life lasts! Go now. Go at once and never dare to come back to me!"

The young man stood riveted to the spot with astonishment. This was by no means the reception he had anticipated. As she spoke Mary moved aside with a gesture of ineffable contempt, as if scorning to breathe the same air with him, and his glance, passing her, suddenly met that of Ruth beyond. He turned ashen white to the lips, and involuntarily retreated a step, staring round like one caught in a trap. His handsome face grew weak, wicked, ashamed, all in a moment.

Ruth looked steadily down at him. Not a muscle quivered. She sat erect and strong. Her face in its proud expressionlessness was as if wrought of stone, but her eyes were those of a judge meting out a life sentence.

"Why, Ruth," murmured Rose, catching at her hand, "how straight you are sitting up! Doesn't it hurt, dear? And who is it, Ruth? Does he know you?"

Ruth kept her inexorable eyes on the quailing face before her.

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"No, he does not know me," she said, aloud, with an intonation so deliberate, so distinct, so icy-cold that Rose scarcely recognized her sister's voice. "It is some one who has mistaken me."

A long moment passed. No one moved. Not another word was spoken. The young man looked uncertainly from Ruth to Mary, bent irresolutely toward the latter, wavered and fell back again, standing shamefacedly before them like one who knows himself unmasked. Then a bright red spot dyed the center of each cheek like a stain, he dropped his head guiltily, hesitated an instant longer, and, turning, went away as he had come.

Mary laughed derisively—his pace quickened at the sound—and going to the brow of the hill she watched him out of sight. There was a peculiar smile upon her lips when she returned. Otherwise she was wholly her ordinary, apathetic self again.

Ruth was still sitting upright, disdaining the pillows which Rose had pushed against her for support. She seemed miraculously to have recovered strength and vigor in the last few moments. Her eyes and Mary's met. There was nothing in the face of either indicating that she had discovered the other's secret.

"Your business did not take long," Ruth said, very quietly. And then she let herself fall back upon the pillows, and turned her face again toward the sky.

There was a wonderful sunset. In the west the golden sea and the golden sky were melted still more indistinguishably into one, while in the east, above a broad line of purple dividing the pale blue of the horizon from the paler azure of the sea, the clouds lay piled in great feathery blocks of bird's-breast yellow, flecked here and there with vivid spots as of flames bursting through from fires hidden at their hearts. All sounds had ceased. The world held its breath.

Rose forgot Mary's erratic acquaintance as she watched Ruth's stedfast gaze, and, kneeling on the turf, she laid her pretty head contentedly on her sister's lap.

"How magnificent it all is!" she said. "And do you know, Ruthie, the glory of it got into your face while you slept. You are positively sunburned at last, and your eyes shine like steady stars. You do look so well! Have you had a restful sleep, dear?"

Ruth looked at Rose and smiled. Her eyes, underneath their pride and pain and repression, held a look of that enduring courage that overcomes.

"Yes, I have been dreaming, Rose," she replied, in a deep, sweet voice. "And I am stronger now. Please move aside a little, dear. I want to look at the sunset!"

I cannot believe that I am ever again to go back into the dark."

Thus many a life drama acts itself out before our eyes without our knowing it, and the hearts of our nearest and dearest are often the furthest from our reach.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

## BALTIMORE AMERICAN

FEBRUARY 29, 1896.

### IN AN ECLIPSE.

Whene'er in the course of life's daytime

of doing,

While high overhead stands the sun,  
The night of inaction, our footsteps pur-

suing,

Bids halt, though our best be undone.  
Oh, then, if we faint not for grief and  
surprise,

All the stars that we steer by will show

in God's skies!

GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

## THE EVENING STAR.

MARCH 10, 1896.

### In Memoriam.

NICHOLSON. When MARY P. NICHOLSON passed away in this city on March 3, 1896, in the thirtieth year of her age, all who knew her mourned the loss of a rare and noble woman. It would seem an extravagance of praise to speak rightly of her sterling worth of heart and brain, of her indomitable courage, her loyalty to all trusts, her generous impulses, her enthusiastic love of the beautiful and eager thirst for knowledge, her super-excellence in her profession, her magnetic personality, her unvarying brightness and buoyancy and charm. But the many by whose bedside she has watched with such disinterested devotion, such loving skill and self-forgetfulness, knew her for what she was, and will need no other record of her than the memory engraven on their hearts. It is lives like hers, spent all in doing others service, that are least blazoned before the world, but are also the last forgotten.

## THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

JANUARY, 1897.

### ENNUI.

A WIDE, bare field 'neath blinding skies,  
Where no tree grows, no shadow lies,  
Where no wind stirs, where no bee flies.

A roadway, even, blank, and white,  
That swerves not left, that swerves not right,  
That stretches, changeless, out of sight.

Footprints midway adown its dust;  
Two lagging, leaden feet, that just  
Trail on and on, because they must.

Grace Denio Litchfield.