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| XXXVIThere was a garden out in the suburbs; a small, leafy corner, with a few green tables under the orange trees. An old cat slept all day on the stone step in the sun, and an old mulatress slept her idle hours away in her chair at the open window, till, someone happened to knock on one of the green tables. She had milk and cream cheese to sell, and bread and butter. There was no one who could make such excellent coffee or fry a chicken so golden brown as she.The place was too modest to attract the attention of people of fashion, and so quiet as to have escaped the notice of those in search of pleasure and dissipation. Edna had discovered it accidentally one day when the high-board gate stood ajar. She caught sight of a little green table, blotched with the checkered sunlight that filtered through the quivering leaves overhead. Within she had found the slumbering mulatress, the drowsy cat, and a glass of milk which reminded her of the milk she had tasted in Iberville.She often stopped there during her perambulations; sometimes taking a book with her and sitting an hour or two under the trees when she found the place deserted. Once or twice she took a quiet dinner there alone, having instructed Celestine beforehand to prepare no dinner at home. It was the last place in the city where she would have expected to meet anyone she knew.Still she was not astonished when, as she was partaking of a modest dinner late in the afternoon, looking into an open book, stroking the cat, which had made friends with her—she was not greatly astonished to see Robert come in at the tall garden gate.“I am destined to see you only by accident,” she said, shoving the cat off the chair beside her. He was surprised, ill at ease, almost embarrassed at meeting her thus so unexpectedly.“Do you come here often?” he asked.“I almost live here,” she said.“I used to drop in very often for a cup of Catiche’s good coffee. This is the first time since I came back.”“She’ll bring you a plate, and you will share my dinner. There’s always enough for two—even three.” Edna had intended to be indifferent and as reserved as he when she met him; she had reached the determination by a laborious train of reasoning, incident to one of her despondent moods. But her resolve melted when she saw him before designing Providence had led him into her path.“Why have you kept away from me, Robert?” she asked, closing the book that lay open upon the table.“Why are you so personal, Mrs. Pontellier? Why do you force me to idiotic subterfuges?” he exclaimed with sudden warmth. “I suppose there’s no use telling you I’ve been very busy, or that I’ve been sick, or that I’ve been to see you and not found you at home. Please let me off with any one of these excuses.”“You are the embodiment of selfishness,” she said. “You save yourself something—I don’t know what—but there is some selfish motive, and in sparing yourself you never consider for a moment what I think, or how I feel your neglect and indifference. I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly, but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like.”“No; I only think you cruel, as I said the other day. Maybe not intentionally cruel; but you seem to be forcing me into disclosures which can result in nothing; as if you would have me bare a wound for the pleasure of looking at it, without the intention or power of healing it.”“I’m spoiling your dinner, Robert; never mind what I say. You haven’t eaten a morsel.”“I only came in for a cup of coffee.” His sensitive face was all disfigured with excitement.“Isn’t this a delightful place?” she remarked. “I am so glad it has never actually been discovered. It is so quiet, so sweet, here. Do you notice there is scarcely a sound to be heard? It’s so out of the way; and a good walk from the car. However, I don’t mind walking. I always feel so sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.“Catiche’s coffee is always hot. I don’t know how she manages it, here in the open air. Celestine’s coffee gets cold bringing it from the kitchen to the dining-room. Three lumps! How can you drink it so sweet? Take some of the cress with your chop; it’s so biting and crisp. Then there’s the advantage of being able to smoke with your coffee out here. Now, in the city—aren’t you going to smoke?”“After a while,” he said, laying a cigar on the table.“Who gave it to you?” she laughed.“I bought it. I suppose I’m getting reckless; I bought a whole box.” She was determined not to be personal again and make him uncomfortable. The cat made friends with him and climbed into his lap when he smoked his cigar. He stroked her silky fur and talked a little about her. He looked at Edna’s book, which he had read; and he told her the end, to save her the trouble of wading through it, he said.Again he accompanied her back to her home; and it was after dusk when they reached the little “pigeon-house.” She did not ask him to remain, which he was grateful for, as it permitted him to stay without the discomfort of blundering through an excuse which he had no intention of considering. He helped her to light the lamp; then she went into her room to take off her hat and to bathe her face and hands.When she came back Robert was not examining the pictures and magazines as before; he sat off in the shadow, leaning his head back on the chair as if in a reverie. Edna lingered a moment beside the table, arranging the books there. Then she went across the room to where he sat. She bent over the arm of his chair and called his name.“Robert,” she said, “are you asleep?”“No,” he answered, looking up at her.She leaned over and kissed him—a soft, cool, delicate kiss, whose voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being-then she moved away from him. He followed, and took her in his arms, just holding her close to him. She put her hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against her own. The action was full of love and tenderness. He sought her lips again. Then he drew her down upon the sofa beside him and held her hand in both of his.“Now you know,” he said, “now you know what I have been fighting against since last summer at Grand Isle; what drove me away and drove me back again.”“Why have you been fighting against it?” she asked. Her face glowed with soft lights.“Why? Because you were not free; you were Leonce Pontellier’s wife. I couldn’t help loving you if you were ten times his wife; but so long as I went away from you and kept away I could help telling you so.” She put her free hand up to his shoulder, and then against his cheek, rubbing it softly. He kissed her again. His face was warm and flushed.“There in Mexico I was thinking of you all the time, and longing for you.”“But not writing to me,” she interrupted.“Something put into my head that you cared for me; and I lost my senses. I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife.”“Your wife!”“Religion, loyalty, everything would give way if only you cared.”“Then you must have forgotten that I was Leonce Pontellier’s wife.”“Oh! I was demented, dreaming of wild, impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free, we have heard of such things.”“Yes, we have heard of such things.”“I came back full of vague, mad intentions. And when I got here—”“When you got here you never came near me!” She was still caressing his cheek.“I realized what a cur I was to dream of such a thing, even if you had been willing.”She took his face between her hands and looked into it as if she would never withdraw her eyes more. She kissed him on the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, and the lips.“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.”His face grew a little white. “What do you mean?” he asked.There was a knock at the door. Old Celestine came in to say that Madame Ratignolle’s servant had come around the back way with a message that Madame had been taken sick and begged Mrs. Pontellier to go to her immediately.“Yes, yes,” said Edna, rising; “I promised. Tell her yes—to wait for me. I’ll go back with her.”“Let me walk over with you,” offered Robert.“No,” she said; “I will go with the servant. She went into her room to put on her hat, and when she came in again she sat once more upon the sofa beside him. He had not stirred. She put her arms about his neck.“Good-by, my sweet Robert. Tell me good-by.” He kissed her with a degree of passion which had not before entered into his caress and strained her to him.“I love you,” she whispered, “only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! you have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence. I must go to my friend; but you will wait for me? No matter how late; you will wait for me, Robert?”“Don’t go; don’t go! Oh! Edna, stay with me,” he pleaded. “Why should you go? Stay with me, stay with me.”“I shall come back as soon as I can; I shall find you here.” She buried her face in his neck and said good-by again. Her seductive voice, together with his great love for her, had enthralled his senses, had deprived him of every impulse but the longing to hold her and keep her.XXXVIIEdna looked in at the drug store. Monsieur Ratignolle was putting up a mixture himself, very carefully, dropping a red liquid into a tiny glass. He was grateful to Edna for having come; her presence would be a comfort to his wife. Madame Ratignolle’s sister, who had always been with her at such trying times, had not been able to come up from the plantation, and Adele had been inconsolable until Mrs. Pontellier so kindly promised to come to her. The nurse had been with them at night for the past week, as she lived a great distance away. And Dr. Mandelet had been coming and going all the afternoon. They were then looking for him any moment.Edna hastened upstairs by a private stairway that led from the rear of the store to the apartments above. The children were all sleeping in a back room. Madame Ratignolle was in the salon, whither she had strayed in her suffering impatience. She sat on the sofa, clad in an ample white *peignoir*, holding a handkerchief tight in her hand with a nervous clutch.Her face was drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural. All her beautiful hair had been drawn back and plaited. It lay in a long braid on the sofa pillow, coiled like a golden serpent. The nurse, a comfortable looking Griffe woman in white apron and cap, was urging her to return to her bedroom.“There is no use, there is no use,” she said at once to Edna. “We must get rid of Mandelet; he is getting too old and careless. He said he would be here at half-past seven; now it must be eight. See what time it is, Josephine.”The woman was possessed of a cheerful nature, and refused to take any situation too seriously, especially a situation with which she was so familiar. She urged Madame to have courage and patience. But Madame only set her teeth hard into her under lip, and Edna saw the sweat gather in beads on her white forehead. After a moment or two she uttered a profound sigh and wiped her face with the handkerchief rolled in a ball. She appeared exhausted. The nurse gave her a fresh handkerchief, sprinkled with cologne water.“This is too much!” she cried. “Mandelet ought to be killed! Where is Alphonse? Is it possible I am to be abandoned like this-neglected by everyone?”“Neglected, indeed!” exclaimed the nurse. Wasn’t she there? And here was Mrs. Pontellier leaving, no doubt, a pleasant evening at home to devote to her? And wasn’t Monsieur Ratignolle coming that very instant through the hall? And Josephine was quite sure she had heard Doctor Mandelet’s coupe. Yes, there it was, down at the door.Adele consented to go back to her room. She sat on the edge of a little low couch next to her bed. Doctor Mandelet paid no attention to Madame Ratignolle’s upbraidings. He was accustomed to them at such times and was too well convinced of her loyalty to doubt it.He was glad to see Edna and wanted her to go with him into the salon and entertain him. But Madame Ratignolle would not consent that Edna should leave her for an instant. Between agonizing moments, she chatted a little, and said it took her mind off her sufferings.Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go.She began to wish she had not come; her presence was not necessary. She might have invented a pretext for staying away; she might even invent a pretext now for going. But Edna did not go. With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture.She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later she leaned over her friend to kiss her and softly say good-by. Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!”XXXVIIIEdna still felt dazed when she got outside in the open air. The Doctor’s coupe had returned for him and stood before the porte cochere. She did not wish to enter the coupe and told Doctor Mandelet she would walk; she was not afraid and would go alone. He directed his carriage to meet him at Mrs. Pontellier’s, and he started to walk home with her.Up—away up, over the narrow street between the tall houses, the stars were blazing. The air was mild and caressing, but cool with the breath of spring and the night. They walked slowly, the Doctor with a heavy, measured tread and his hands behind him; Edna, in an absent-minded way, as she had walked one night at Grand Isle, as if her thoughts had gone ahead of her and she was striving to overtake them.“You shouldn’t have been there, Mrs. Pontellier,” he said. “That was no place for you. Adele is full of whims at such times. There were a dozen women she might have had with her, unimpressionable women. I felt that it was cruel, cruel. You shouldn’t have gone.”“Oh, well!” she answered, indifferently. “I don’t know that it matters after all. One has to think of the children some time or other; the sooner the better.”“When is Leonce coming back?”“Quite soon. Sometime in March.”“And you are going abroad?”“Perhaps—no, I am not going. I’m not going to be forced into doing things. I don’t want to go abroad. I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to me—or it did seem—” She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts and stopped abruptly.“The trouble is,” sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, “that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.”“Yes,” she said. “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life.”“It seems to me, my dear child,” said the Doctor at parting, holding her hand, “you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, And I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear.”“Some way I don’t feel moved to speak of things that trouble me. Don’t think I am ungrateful or that I don’t appreciate your sympathy. There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter-still, I shouldn’t want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don’t know what I’m saying, Doctor. Good night. Don’t blame me for anything.”“Yes, I will blame you if you don’t come and see me soon. We will talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before. It will do us both good. I don’t want you to blame yourself, whatever comes. Good night, my child.”She let herself in at the gate, but instead of entering she sat upon the step of the porch. The night was quiet and soothing. All the tearing emotion of the last few hours seemed to fall away from her like a somber, uncomfortable garment, which she had but to loosen to be rid of. She went back to that hour before Adele had sent for her; and her senses kindled afresh in thinking of Robert’s words, the pressure of his arms, and the feeling of his lips upon her own. She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one. His expression of love had already given him to her in part. When she thought that he was there at hand, waiting for her, she grew numb with the intoxication of expectancy. It was so late; he would be asleep perhaps. She would awaken him with a kiss. She hoped he would be asleep that she might arouse him with her caresses.Still, she remembered Adele’s voice whispering, “Think of the children; think of them.” She meant to think of them; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound—but not to-night. To-morrow would be time to think of everything.Robert was not waiting for her in the little parlor. He was nowhere at hand. The house was empty. But he had scrawled on a piece of paper that lay in the lamplight:“I love you. Good-by—because I love you.”Edna grew faint when she read the words. She went and sat on the sofa. Then she stretched herself out there, never uttering a sound. She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. The lamp sputtered and went out. She was still awake in the morning, when Celestine unlocked the kitchen door and came in to light the fire.XXXIXVictor, with hammer and nails and scraps of scantling, was patching a corner of one of the galleries. Mariequita sat nearby, dangling her legs, watching him work and handing him nails from the tool-box. The sun was beating down upon them. The girl had covered her head with her apron folded into a square pad. They had been talking for an hour or more. She was never tired of hearing Victor describe the dinner at Mrs. Pontellier’s. He exaggerated every detail, making it appear a veritable Lucullean feast. The flowers were in tubs, he said. The champagne wasquaffed from huge golden goblets. Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty and diamonds at the head of the board, while the other women were all of them youthful houris, possessed of incomparable charms. She got it into her head that Victor was in love with Mrs. Pontellier, and he gave her evasive answers, framed so as to confirm her belief. She grew sullen and cried a little, threatening to go off and leave him to his fine ladies. There were a dozen men crazy about her at the Cheniere; and since it was the fashion to be in love with married people, why, she could run away any time she liked to New Orleans with Celina’s husband.Celina’s husband was a fool, a coward, and a pig, and to prove it to her, Victor intended to hammer his head into a jelly the next time he encountered him. This assurance was very consoling to Mariequita. She dried her eyes and grew cheerful at the prospect.They were still talking of the dinner and the allurements of city life when Mrs. Pontellier herself slipped around the corner of the house. The two youngsters stayed dumb with amazement before what they considered to be an apparition. But it was really she in flesh and blood, looking tired and a little travel-stained.“I walked up from the wharf”, she said, “and heard the hammering. I supposed it was you, mending the porch. It’s a good thing. I was always tripping over those loose planks last summer. How dreary and deserted everything looks!”It took Victor some little time to comprehend that she had come in Beaudelet’s lugger, that she had come alone, and for no purpose but to rest.“There’s nothing fixed up yet, you see. I’ll give you my room; it’s the only place.”“Any corner will do,” she assured him.“And if you can stand Philomel’s cooking,” he went on, “though I might try to get her mother while you are here. Do you think she would come?” turning to Mariequita.Mariequita thought that perhaps Philomel’s mother might come for afew days, and money enough. Beholding Mrs. Pontellier make her appearance, the girl had at once suspected a lovers’ rendezvous. But Victor’s astonishment was so genuine, and Mrs. Pontellier’s indifference so apparent, that the disturbing notion did not lodge long in her brain. She contemplated with the greatest interest this woman who gave the most sumptuous dinners in America, and who had all the men in New Orleans at her feet.“What time will you have dinner?” asked Edna. “I’m very hungry; but don’t get anything extra.”“I’ll have it ready in little or no time,” he said, bustling and packing away his tools. “You may go to my room to brush up and rest yourself. Mariequita will show you.”“Thank you”, said Edna. “But, do you know, I have a notion to go down to the beach and take a good wash and even a little swim, before dinner?”“The water is too cold!” they both exclaimed. “Don’t think of it.”“Well, I might go down and try—dip my toes in. Why, it seems to me the sun is hot enough to have warmed the very depths of the ocean. Could you get me a couple of towels? I’d better go right away, so as to be back in time. It would be a little too chilly if I waited till this afternoon.”Mariequita ran over to Victor’s room, and returned with some towels, which she gave to Edna.“I hope you have fish for dinner,” said Edna, as she started to walk away; “but don’t do anything extra if you haven’t.”“Run and find Philomel’s mother,” Victor instructed the girl. “I’ll go to the kitchen and see what I can do. By Gimminy! Women have no consideration! She might have sent me word.”Edna walked on down to the beach rather mechanically, not noticing anything special except that the sun was hot. She was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning.She had said over and over to herself: “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow itwill be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter aboutLeonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!” She understood now clearlywhat she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that shewould give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for herchildren.Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and hadnever lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. Therewas no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and sheeven realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg. She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpentsabout her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on.The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with along, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding thebody in its soft, close embrace.She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, andrecalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.Her arms and legs were growing tired. She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! “And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.”Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.“Good-by—because I love you.” He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. | Mulastress: a woman who has white and black ancestrySubterfuge = an excuse Sycamore = sick amorSycamore is the sacred tree of the goddess of love, Aphrodite. Bees buzzing and musky flowers = sensory overload = synesthesia   |