

Chapter 49

The Undesired

That evening about seven o'clock, whilst Easton was down-town seeing the last of the election, Ruth's child was born.

After the doctor was gone, Mary Linden stayed with her during the hours that elapsed before Easton came home, and downstairs Elsie and Charley--who were allowed to stay up late to help their mother because Mrs Easton was ill--crept about very quietly, and conversed in hushed tones as they washed up the tea things and swept the floor and tidied the kitchen.

Easton did not return until after midnight, and all through the intervening hours, Ruth, weak and tired, but unable to sleep, was lying in bed with the child by her side. Her wide-open eyes appeared unnaturally large and brilliant, in contrast with the almost death-like paleness of her face, and there was a look of fear in them, as she waited and listened for the sound of Easton's footsteps.

Outside, the silence of the night was disturbed by many unusual noises: a far-off roar, as of the breaking of waves on a seashore, arose from the direction of the town, where the last scenes of the election were being enacted. Every few minutes motor cars rushed past the house at a furious rate, and the air was full of the sounds of distant shouts and

singing.

Ruth listened and started nervously at every passing footstep. Those who can imagine the kind of expression there would be upon the face of a hunted thief, who, finding himself encompassed and brought to bay by his pursuers, looks wildly around in a vain search for some way of escape, may be able to form some conception of the terror-stricken way in which she listened to every sound that penetrated into the stillness of the dimly lighted room. And ever and again, when her wandering glance reverted to the frail atom of humanity nestling by her side, her brows contracted and her eyes filled with bitter tears, as she weakly reached out her trembling hand to adjust its coverings, faintly murmuring, with quivering lips and a bursting heart, some words of endearment and pity. And then--alarmed by the footsteps of some chance passerby, or by the closing of the door of a neighbouring house, and fearing that it was the sound she had been waiting for and dreading through all those weary hours, she would turn in terror to Mary Linden, sitting in the chair at the bedside, sewing by the light of the shaded lamp, and take hold of her arm as if seeking protection from some impending danger.

It was after twelve o'clock when Easton came home. Ruth recognized his footsteps before he reached the house, and her heart seemed to stop beating when she heard the clang of the gate, as it closed after he had passed through.

It had been Mary's intention to withdraw before he came into the room,

but the sick woman clung to her in such evident fear, and entreated her so earnestly not to go away, that she remained.

It was with a feeling of keen disappointment that Easton noticed how Ruth shrank away from him, for he had expected and hoped, that after this, they would be good friends once more; but he tried to think that it was because she was ill, and when she would not let him touch the child lest he should awaken it, he agreed without question.

The next day, and for the greater part of the time during the next fortnight, Ruth was in a raging fever. There were intervals when although weak and exhausted, she was in her right mind, but most of the time she was quite unconscious of her surroundings and often delirious. Mrs Owen came every day to help to look after her, because Mary just then had a lot of needlework to do, and consequently could only give part of her time to Ruth, who, in her delirium, lived and told over and over again all the sorrow and suffering of the last few months. And so the two friends, watching by her bedside, learned her dreadful secret.

Sometimes--in her delirium--she seemed possessed of an intense and terrible loathing for the poor little creature she had brought into the world, and was with difficulty prevented from doing it violence. Once she seized it cruelly and threw it fiercely from her to the foot of the bed, as if it had been some poisonous or loathsome thing. And so it often became necessary to take the child away out of the room, so that she could not see or hear it, but when her senses came back to her, her first thought was for the child, and there must have been in her mind

some faint recollection of what she had said and done in her madness, for when she saw that the baby was not in its accustomed place her distress and alarm were painful to see, as she entreated them with tears to give it back to her. And then she would kiss and fondle it with all manner of endearing words, and cry bitterly.

Easton did not see or hear most of this; he only knew that she was very ill; for he went out every day on the almost hopeless quest for work. Rushton's had next to nothing to do, and most of the other shops were in a similar plight. Dauber and Botchit had one or two jobs going on, and Easton tried several times to get a start for them, but was always told they were full up. The sweating methods of this firm continued to form a favourite topic of conversation with the unemployed workmen, who railed at and cursed them horribly. It had leaked out that they were paying only sixpence an hour to most of the skilled workmen in their employment, and even then the conditions under which they worked were, if possible, worse than those obtaining at most other firms. The men were treated like so many convicts, and every job was a hell where driving and bullying reigned supreme, and obscene curses and blasphemy polluted the air from morning till night. The resentment of those who were out of work was directed, not only against the heads of the firm, but also against the miserable, half-starved drudges in their employment. These poor wretches were denounced as 'scabs' and 'wastrels' by the unemployed workmen but all the same, whenever Dauber and Botchit wanted some extra hands they never had any difficulty in obtaining them, and it often happened that those who had been loudest and bitterest in their denunciations were amongst the first to rush off

eagerly to apply there for a job whenever there was a chance of getting one.

Frequently the light was seen burning late at night in Rushton's office, where Nimrod and his master were figuring out prices and writing out estimates, cutting down the amounts to the lowest possible point in the hope of underbidding their rivals. Now and then they were successful but whether they secured the work or not, Nimrod always appeared equally miserable. If they got the 'job' it often showed such a small margin of profit that Rushton used to grumble at him and suggest mismanagement. If their estimates were too high and they lost the work, he used to demand of Nimrod why it was possible for Dauber and Botchit to do work so much more cheaply.

As the unemployed workmen stood in groups at the corners or walked aimlessly about the streets, they often saw Hunter pass by on his bicycle, looking worried and harassed. He was such a picture of misery, that it began to be rumoured amongst the men, that he had never been the same since the time he had that fall off the bike; and some of them declared, that they wouldn't mind betting that ole Misery would finish up by going off his bloody rocker.

At intervals--whenever a job came in--Owen, Crass, Slyme, Sawkins and one or two others, continued to be employed at Rushton's, but they seldom managed to make more than two or three days a week, even when there was anything to do.