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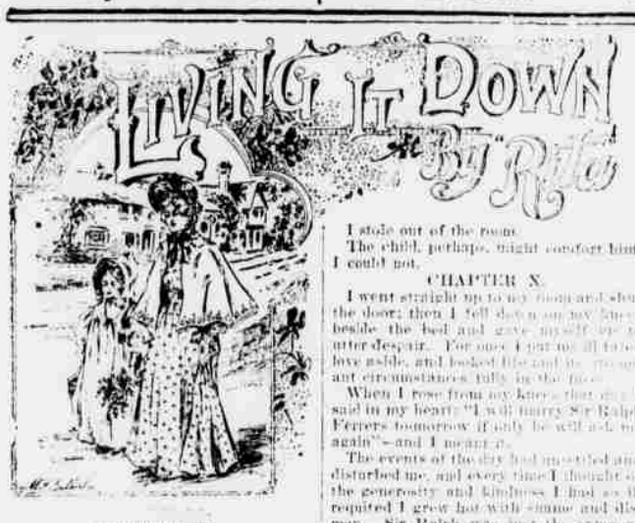

I stole out of the room.

The child, perhaps, might comfort him. I could not.

CHAPTER X.

I went straight up to my room and shut the door; then I fell down on my knees beside the bed and gave myself up to utter despair. For once I put my ill-fated love aside, and looked life and its present circumstances fully in the face.

When I rose from my knees that day I said in my heart: "I will marry Sir Ralph Ferrers tomorrow if only he will ask me again"—and I meant it.

The events of the day had unsettled and disturbed me, and every time I thought of the generosity and kindness I had so ill requited I grew hot with shame and dismay. Sir Ralph was just the same as ever, to all appearance—courteous, frank, genial—so true a gentleman, so kind a friend. I said this to myself again and again as the meal went on, as I watched the looks, or heard the tones I knew so well, and had valued so little. Some stupid constraint had fallen upon me, and I was very taciturn; but Sir Ralph and father did not appear to notice it.

When dinner was over I left them, and went out into the grounds. The night was dark with shadows here in the quiet walks I paced; the stars glittered in myriads over the violet waters, and everywhere came the scents of roses and orange blossoms, steeping the air with languid, dreamy odors.

It seemed to me as if I had never been so keenly conscious of the beauty of the scene before. The very breath of the wind, the sway of the leaves, and murmur of the sea, touched me in a way I could have now and strange. I felt as if they were parts of a dream, not actual realities. Presently a figure stole out from among the shadows, paused, then came on until it reached me.

"Is the child asleep?" he said abruptly.

"I wished to bid her good-bye, as I must be off early in the morning."

I turned my face to him. I was desperate he was, and what I answered, but the kind eyes were bent on mine as I spoke.

"You are going to-morrow?" he said stupidly. "Why?"

"It is better I should be," he answered slowly. "Your father's affairs I must see to them. They—they can't keep me, as he says, and he must not be allowed to sell Monkhouse—he must not."

My lips began to quiver. I looked up at him.

"Oh, Sir Ralph!" I cried, "how good you have been! How much you have done for us! Father only told me to-day about Darby."

"I did nothing—positively nothing," he answered quietly. "What is the use of money if one can't help a friend who is in trouble? And what's the use of my money to me? It can't buy me the affection of a human creature—it can't give me a home. His voice ceased abruptly, then went on softly. "Forgive me, Joan; I—I did not mean to reproach you."

"But I am fond of you," I cried, with sudden courage—"and grateful. Oh, you don't know how grateful I am!" My generosity shames me. I seem to have been so selfish, so ungrateful."

"Hush!" he said. "If I have been of use to you, that is all I want. I am a lonely man. I wanted something to occupy my thoughts and my fortune. I found it. If there is a little pain behind, that is only my fault; you are not to blame—or the child."

"The child!" I echoed. "Yes I know it was for her sake. And she loves you so. Don't you think so?" he asked gently. "It was wrong and ungrateful, was it not? Perhaps I should have said—"

"No, do not say it," I cried vehemently. "I know what you mean. Oh, if I had only known it before!"

"Do you think I wanted to buy your love?" he said sternly. "Oh, Joan, how little you know me! You would make any sacrifice for their sakes. I am sure of it, child; but I don't want a sacrifice. Since you have learnt the truth, I must leave you; for—for my own sake, perhaps, as well as yours. I know it is hopeless to expect you to love me—even a little—and I am foolish enough to care only for your love."

"But I don't know that it is hopeless," I cried suddenly, with a rearguard burst of desperation. I fear, for I could not bear the idea of losing him out of my life now.

He seized my hands and drew me out of the shadows into the pale, sweet gloom of moonlight, and looked down at me with earnest, searching eyes.

"Child," he said, "if I knew you or if I knew you would not trifle with an honest man's honest love. Do you know what your words imply? It is a great deal to you, is it—answer me, child?"

"Yes," I said, gazing up at him, and noble gift of which I am not worthy."

"But which you will accept, in time to learn?"

"Yes," I answered, giving myself up to life, and conducting me a little on the future and the joy that in the days to come sweet must every hour of it be to the uncle of happiness I could value it. I have never valued anything in my life before."

"May heaven bless you for those words," he said, and bent and kissed me with sudden reverence and great gentleness. Oh, you don't know how grateful I am!" You generously