

A photograph of a rugged, reddish-brown mountain landscape. The foreground is filled with dark, jagged rocks and sparse, dry vegetation, including several spiky green plants. The middle ground shows a steep, eroded slope of reddish-brown rock. In the background, more mountain peaks are visible under a blue sky with light clouds. The overall scene is arid and dramatic.

***MAYNE  
REID***

***THE DEATH  
SHOT***

***MAYNE  
REID***



***THE DEATH  
SHOT***

**Mayne Reid**

# **The Death Shot**

**A Story Retold**

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# **Preface.**

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Long time since this hand hath penned a preface. Now only to say, that this romance, as originally published, was written when the author was suffering severe affliction, both physically and mentally—the result of a gun-wound that brought him as near to death as Darke’s bullet did Clancy.

It may be asked, Why under such strain was the tale written at all? A good reason could be given; but this, private and personal, need not, and should not be intruded on the public. Suffice it to say, that, dissatisfied with the execution of the work, the author has remodelled—almost rewritten it.

It is the same story; but, as he hopes and believes, better told.

Great Malvern, September, 1874.

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# **Prologue.**

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Plain, treeless, shrubless, smooth as a sleeping sea. Grass upon it; this so short, that the smallest quadruped could not cross over without being seen. Even the crawling reptile would not be concealed among its tufts.

Objects are upon it—sufficiently visible to be distinguished at some distance. They are of a character scarce deserving a glance from the passing traveller. He



would deem it little worth while to turn his eyes towards a pack of prairie wolves, much less go in chase of them.

With vultures soaring above, he might be more disposed to hesitate, and reflect. The foul birds and filthy beasts seen consorting together, would be proof of prey—that some quarry had fallen upon the plain. Perhaps, a stricken stag, a prong-horn antelope, or a wild horse crippled by some mischance due to his headlong nature?

Believing it any of these, the traveller would re loosen his rein, and ride onward,—leaving the beasts and birds to their banquet.

There is no traveller passing over the prairie in question—no human being upon it. Nothing like life, save the coyotes grouped over the ground, and the buzzards swooping above.

They are not unseen by human eye. There is one sees—one who has reason to fear them.

Their eager excited movements tell them to be anticipating a repast; at the same time, that they have not yet commenced it.

Something appears in their midst. At intervals they approach it: the birds swoopingly from heaven, the beasts crouchingly along the earth. Both go close, almost to touching it; then suddenly withdraw, starting back as in affright!

Soon again to return; but only to be frayed as before. And so on, in a series of approaches, and recessions.

What can be the thing thus attracting, at the same time repelling them? Surely no common quarry, as the carcass of elk, antelope, or mustang? It seems not a thing that is dead.

Nor yet looks it like anything alive. Seen from a distance it resembles a human head. Nearer, the resemblance is stronger. Close up, it becomes complete. Certainly, it *is* a human head—*the head of a man!*

Not much in this to cause surprise—a man's head lying upon a Texan prairie! Nothing, whatever, if scalpless. It would only prove that some ill-starred individual—traveller, trapper, or hunter of wild horses—has been struck down by Comanches; afterwards beheaded, and scalped.

But this head—if head it be—is *not* scalped. It still carries its hair—a fine chevelure, waving and profuse. Nor is it lying upon the ground, as it naturally should, after being severed from the body, and abandoned. On the contrary, it stands erect, and square, as if still on the shoulders from which it has been separated; the neck underneath, the chin just touching the surface. With cheeks pallid, or blood spotted, and eyes closed or glassy, the attitude could not fail to cause surprise. And yet more to note, that there is neither pallor, nor stain on the cheeks; and the eyes are neither shut, nor glassed. On the contrary, they are glancing—glaring—rolling. *By Heavens the head is alive!*

No wonder the wolves start back in affright; no wonder the vultures, after stooping low, ply their wings in quick nervous stroke, and soar up again! The odd thing seems to puzzle both beasts and birds; baffles their instinct, and keeps them at bay.

Still know they, or seem to believe, 'tis flesh and blood. Sight and scent tell them so. By both they cannot be deceived.

And living flesh it must be? A Death's head could neither flash its eyes, nor cause them to revolve in their sockets. Besides, the predatory creatures have other evidence of its being alive. At intervals they see opened a mouth, disclosing two rows of white teeth; from which come cries that, startling, send them afar.

These are only put forth, when they approach too threateningly near—evidently intended to drive them to a distance. They have done so for the greater part of a day.

Strange spectacle! The head of a man, without any body; with eyes in it that scintillate and see; a mouth that opens, and shows teeth; a throat from which issue sounds of human intonation; around this object of weird supernatural aspect, a group of wolves, and over it a flock of vultures!

Twilight approaching, spreads a purple tint over the prairie. But it brings no change in the attitude of assailed, or assailants. There is still light enough for the latter to perceive the flash of those fiery eyes, whose glances of menace master their voracious instincts, warning them back.

On a Texan prairie twilight is short. There are no mountains, or high hills intervening, no obliquity in the sun's diurnal course, to lengthen out the day. When the golden orb sinks below the horizon, a brief crepuscular light succeeds; then darkness, sudden as though a curtain of crape were dropped over the earth.

Night descending causes some change in the tableau described. The buzzards, obedient to their customary habit—not nocturnal—take departure from the spot, and wing their way to their usual roosting place. Different do the

coyotes. These stay. Night is the time best suited to their ravaging instincts. The darkness may give them a better opportunity to assail that thing of spherical shape, which by shouts, and scowling glances, has so long kept them aloof.

To their discomfiture, the twilight is succeeded by a magnificent moon, whose silvery effulgence falling over the plain almost equals the light of day. They see the head still erect, the eyes angrily glancing; while in the nocturnal stillness that cry, proceeding from the parted lips, affrights them as ever.

And now, that night is on, more than ever does the tableau appear strange—more than ever unlike reality, and more nearly allied to the spectral. For, under the moonlight, shimmering through a film that has spread over the plain, the head seems magnified to the dimensions of the Sphinx; while the coyotes—mere jackals of terrier size—look large as Canadian stags!

In truth, a perplexing spectacle—full of wild, weird mystery.

Who can explain it?

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# Chapter One.

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### **Two sorts of Slave-Owners.**

In the old slave-owning times of the United States—happily now no more—there was much grievance to humanity; proud oppression upon the one side, with sad suffering on the other. It may be true, that the majority of the slave proprietors were humane men; that some of them were even philanthropic in their way, and inclined towards giving to the unholy institution a colour of *patriarchism*. This idea—delusive, as intended to delude—is old as slavery itself; at the same time, modern as Mormonism, where it has had its latest, and coarsest illustration.

Though it cannot be denied, that slavery in the States was, comparatively, of a mild type, neither can it be questioned, that among American masters occurred cases of lamentable harshness—even to inhumanity. There were slave-owners who were kind, and slave-owners who were cruel.

Not far from the town of Natchez, in the State of Mississippi, lived two planters, whose lives illustrated the extremes of these distinct moral types. Though their estates lay contiguous, their characters were as opposite, as could well be conceived in the scale of manhood and morality. Colonel Archibald Armstrong—a true Southerner of the old Virginian aristocracy, who had entered the Mississippi Valley before the Choctaw Indians evacuated it—was a model of the kind slave-master; while Ephraim Darke—a Massachusetts man, who had moved thither at a much later

period—was as fair a specimen of the cruel. Coming from New England, of the purest stock of the Puritans—a people whose descendants have made much sacrifice in the cause of negro emancipation—this about Darke may seem strange. It is, notwithstanding, a common tale; one which no traveller through the Southern States can help hearing. For the Southerner will not fail to tell him, that the hardest task-master to the slave is either one, who has been himself a slave, or descended from the Pilgrim Fathers, whose feet first touched American soil by the side of Plymouth Rock!

Having a respect for many traits in the character of these same Pilgrim Fathers, I would fain think the accusation exaggerated—if not altogether untrue—and that Ephraim Darke was an exceptional individual.

To accuse *him* of inhumanity was no exaggeration whatever. Throughout the Mississippi valley there could be nothing more heartless than his treatment of the sable helots, whose luckless lot it was to have him for a master. Around his courts, and in his cotton-fields, the crack of the whip was heard habitually—its thong sharply felt by the victims of his caprice, or malice. The “cowhide” was constantly carried by himself, and his overseer. He had a son, too, who could wield it wickedly as either. None of the three ever went abroad without that pliant, painted, switch—a very emblem of devilish cruelty—in their hands; never returned home, without having used it in the castigation of some unfortunate “darkey,” whose evil star had caused him to stray across their track, while riding the rounds of the plantation.

A far different discipline was that of Colonel Armstrong; whose slaves seldom went to bed without a prayer poured forth, concluding with: "God bress de good massr;" while the poor whipped bondsmen of his neighbour, their backs oft smarting from the lash, nightly lay down, not always to sleep, but nearly always with curses on their lips—the name of the Devil coupled with that of Ephraim Darke.

The old story, of like cause followed by like result, must, alas! be chronicled in this case. The man of the Devil prospered, while he of God came to grief. Armstrong, open-hearted, free-handed, indulging in a too profuse hospitality, lived widely outside the income accruing from the culture of his cotton-fields, and in time became the debtor of Darke, who lived as widely within his.

Notwithstanding the proximity of their estates, there was but little intimacy, and less friendship, between the two. The Virginian—scion of an old Scotch family, who had been gentry in the colonial times—felt something akin to contempt for his New England neighbour, whose ancestors had been steerage passengers in the famed "Mayflower." False pride, perhaps, but natural to a citizen of the Old Dominion—of late years brought low enough.

Still, not much of this influenced the conduct of Armstrong. For his dislike to Darke he had a better, and more honourable, reason—the bad behaviour of the latter. This, notorious throughout the community, made for the Massachusetts man many enemies; while in the noble mind of the Mississippian it produced positive aversion.

Under these circumstances, it may seem strange there should be any intercourse, or relationship, between the two

men. But there was—that of debtor and creditor—a lien not always conferring friendship. Notwithstanding his dislike, the proud Southerner had not been above accepting a loan from the despised Northern, which the latter was but too eager to extend. The Massachusetts man had long coveted the Mississippian's fine estate; not alone from its tempting contiguity, but also because it looked like a ripe pear that must soon fall from the tree. With secret satisfaction he had observed the wasteful extravagance of its owner; a satisfaction increased on discovering the latter's impecuniosity. It became joy, almost openly exhibited, on the day when Colonel Armstrong came to him requesting a loan of twenty thousand dollars; which he consented to give, with an alacrity that would have appeared suspicious to any but a borrower.

If he gave the money in great *glee*, still greater was that with which he contemplated the mortgage deed taken in exchange. For he knew it to be the first entering of a wedge, that in due time would ensure him possession of the *fee-simple*. All the surer, from a condition in that particular deed: *Foreclosure, without time*. Pressure from other quarters had forced planter Armstrong to accept these terrible terms.

As, Darke, before locking it up in his drawer, glanced the document over, his eyes scintillating with the glare of greed triumphant, he said to himself, "This day's work has doubled the area of my acres, and the number of my niggers. Armstrong's land, his slaves, his houses,—everything he has, will soon be mine!"

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# Chapter Two.

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### A flat refusal.

Two years have elapsed since Ephraim Darke became the creditor of Archibald Armstrong. Apparently, no great change has taken place in the relationship between the two men, though in reality much.

The twenty thousand dollars' loan has been long ago dissipated, and the borrower is once more in need.

It would be useless, idle, for him to seek a second mortgage in the same quarter; or in any other, since he can show no collateral. His property has been nearly all hypothecated in the deed to Darke; who perceives his long-cherished dream on the eve of becoming a reality. At any hour he may cause foreclosure, turn Colonel Armstrong out of his estate, and enter upon possession.

Why does he not take advantage of the power, with which the legal code of the United States, as that existing all over the world, provides him?

There is a reason for his not doing so, wide apart from any motive of mercy, or humanity. Or of friendship either, though something erroneously considered akin to it. Love hinders him from pouncing on the plantation of Archibald Armstrong, and appropriating it!

Not love in his own breast, long ago steeled against such a trifling affection. There only avarice has a home; cupidity keeping house, and looking carefully after the expenses.

But there is a spendthrift who has also a shelter in Ephraim Darke's heart—one who does much to thwart his

designs, oft-times defeating them. As already said, he has a son, by name Richard; better known throughout the settlement as "Dick"—abbreviations of nomenclature being almost universal in the South-Western States. An only son—only child as well—motherless too—she who bore him having been buried long before the Massachusetts man planted his roof-tree in the soil of Mississippi. A hopeful scion he, showing no improvement on the paternal stock. Rather the reverse; for the grasping avarice, supposed to be characteristic of the Yankee, is not improved by admixture with the reckless looseness alleged to be habitual in the Southerner.

Both these bad qualities have been developed in Dick Darke, each to its extreme. Never was New Englander more secretive and crafty; never Mississippian more loose, or licentious.

Mean in the matter of personal expenditure, he is at the same time of dissipated and disorderly habits; the associate of the poker-playing, and cock-fighting, fraternity of the neighbourhood; one of its wildest spirits, without any of those generous traits oft coupled with such a character.

As only son, he is heir-presumptive to all the father's property—slaves and plantation lands; and, being thoroughly in his father's confidence, he is aware of the probability of a proximate reversion to the slaves and plantation lands belonging to Colonel Armstrong.

But much as Dick Darke may like money, there is that he likes more, even to covetousness—Colonel Armstrong's daughter. There are two of them—Helen and Jessie—both

grown girls,—motherless too—for the colonel is himself a widower.

Jessie, the younger, is bright-haired, of blooming complexion, merry to madness; in spirit, the personification of a romping elf; in physique, a sort of Hebe. Helen, on the other hand, is dark as gipsy, or Jewess; stately as a queen, with the proud grandeur of Juno. Her features of regular classic type, form tall and magnificently moulded, amidst others she appears as a palm rising above the commoner trees of the forest. Ever since her coming out in society, she has been universally esteemed the beauty of the neighbourhood—as belle in the balls of Natchez. It is to her Richard Darke has extended his homage, and surrendered his heart.

He is in love with her, as much as his selfish nature will allow—perhaps the only unselfish passion ever felt by him.

His father sanctions, or at all events does not oppose it. For the wicked son holds a wonderful ascendancy over a parent, who has trained him to wickedness equalling his own.

With the power of creditor over debtor—a debt of which payment can be demanded at any moment, and not the slightest hope of the latter being able to pay it—the Darkes seem to have the vantage ground, and may dictate their own terms.

Helen Armstrong knows nought of the mortgage; no more, of herself being the cause which keeps it from foreclosure. Little does she dream, that her beauty is the sole shield imposed between her father and impending ruin. Possibly if she did, Richard Darke's attentions to her would

be received with less slighting indifference. For months he has been paying them, whenever, and wherever, an opportunity has offered—at balls, *barbecues*, and the like. Of late also at her father's house; where the power spoken of gives him not only admission, but polite reception, and hospitable entertainment, at the hands of its owner; while the consciousness of possessing it hinders him from observing, how coldly his assiduities are met by her to whom they are so warmly addressed.

He wonders why, too. He knows that Helen Armstrong has many admirers. It could not be otherwise with one so splendidly beautiful, so gracefully gifted. But among them there is none for whom she has shown partiality.

He has, himself, conceived a suspicion, that a young man, by name Charles Clancy—son of a decayed Irish gentleman, living near—has found favour in her eyes. Still, it is only a suspicion; and Clancy has gone to Texas the year before—sent, so said, by his father, to look out for a new home. The latter has since died, leaving his widow sole occupant of an humble tenement, with a small holding of land—a roadside tract, on the edge of the Armstrong estate.

Rumour runs, that young Clancy is about coming back—indeed, every day expected.

That can't matter. The proud planter, Armstrong, is not the man to permit of his daughter marrying a "poor white"—as Richard Darke scornfully styles his supposed rival—much less consent to the so bestowing of her hand. Therefore no danger need be dreaded from that quarter.

Whether there need, or not, the suitor of Helen Armstrong at length resolves on bringing the affair to an

issue. His love for her has become a strong passion, the stronger for being checked—restrained by her cold, almost scornful behaviour. This may be but coquetry. He hopes, and has a fancy it is. Not without reason. For he is far from being ill-favoured; only in a sense moral, not physical. But this has not prevented him from making many conquests among backwood's belles; even some city celebrities living in Natchez. All know he is rich; or will be, when his father fulfils the last conditions of his will—by dying.

So fortified, so flattered, Dick Darke cannot comprehend why Miss Armstrong has not at once surrendered to him. Is it because her haughty disposition hinders her from being too demonstrative? Does she really love him, without giving sign?

For months he has been cogitating in this uncertain way; and now determines upon knowing the truth.

One morning he mounts his horse; rides across the boundary line between the two plantations, and on to Colonel Armstrong's house. Entering, he requests an interview with the colonel's eldest daughter; obtains it; makes declaration of his love; asks her if she will have him for a husband; and in response receives a chilling negative.

As he rides back through the woods, the birds are trilling among the trees. It is their merry morning lay, but it gives him no gladness. There is still ringing in his ears that harsh monosyllable, "*no.*" The wild-wood songsters appear to echo it, as if mockingly; the blue jay, and red cardinal, seem scolding him for intrusion on their domain!

Having recrossed the boundary between the two plantations, he reins up and looks back. His brow is black

with chagrin; his lips white with rancorous rage. It is suppressed no longer. Curses come hissing through his teeth, along with them the words,—

“In less than six weeks these woods will be mine, and hang me, if I don’t shoot every bird that has roost in them! Then, Miss Helen Armstrong, you’ll not feel in such conceit with yourself. It will be different when you haven’t a roof over your head”. So good-bye, sweetheart! Good-bye to you.

“Now, dad!” he continues, in fancy apostrophising his father, “you can take your own way, as you’ve been long wanting. Yes, my respected parent; you shall be free to foreclose your mortgage; put in execution; sheriff’s officers—anything you like.”

Angrily grinding his teeth, he plunges the spur into his horse’s ribs, and rides on—the short, but bitter, speech still echoing in his ears.

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## **Chapter Three.**

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### **A Forest Post-Office.**

From the harsh treatment of slaves sprang a result, little thought of by the inhuman master; though greatly detrimental to his interests. It caused them occasionally to abscond; so making it necessary to insert an advertisement in the county newspaper, offering a reward for the runaway. Thus cruelty proved expensive.

In planter Darke's case, however, the cost was partially recouped by the cleverness of his son; who was a noted "nigger-catcher," and kept dogs for the especial purpose. He had a natural *penchant* for this kind of chase; and, having little else to do, passed a good deal of his time scouring the country in pursuit of his father's advertised runaways. Having caught them, he would claim the "bounty," just as if they belonged to a stranger. Darke, *père*, paid it without grudge or grumbling—perhaps the only disbursement he ever made in such mood. It was like taking out of one pocket to put into the other. Besides, he was rather proud of his son's acquitting himself so shrewdly.

Skirting the two plantations, with others in the same line of settlements, was a cypress swamp. It extended along the edge of the great river, covering an area of many square miles. Besides being a swamp, it was a network of creeksy bayous, and lagoons—often inundated, and only passable by means of skiff or canoe. In most places it was a slough of soft mud, where man might not tread, nor any kind of watercraft make way. Over it, at all times, hung the obscurity of twilight. The solar rays, however bright above, could not penetrate its close canopy of cypress tops, loaded with that strangest of parasitical plants—the *tillandsia usneoides*.

This tract of forest offered a safe place of concealment for runaway slaves; and, as such, was it noted throughout the neighbourhood. A "darkey" absconding from any of the contiguous plantations, was as sure to make for the marshy expanse, as would a chased rabbit to its warren.

Sombre and gloomy though it was, around its edge lay the favourite scouting-ground of Richard Darke. To him the

cypress swamp was a precious preserve—as a coppice to the pheasant shooter, or a scrub-wood to the hunter of foxes. With the difference, that his game was human, and therefore the pursuit more exciting.

There were places in its interior to which he had never penetrated—large tracts unexplored, and where exploration could not be made without great difficulty. But for him to reach them was not necessary. The runaways who sought asylum in the swamp, could not always remain within its gloomy recesses. Food must be obtained beyond its border, or starvation be their fate. For this reason the fugitive required some mode of communicating with the outside world. And usually obtained it, by means of a confederate—some old friend, and fellow-slave, on one of the adjacent plantations—privy to the secret of his hiding-place. On this necessity the negro-catcher most depended; often finding the stalk—or “still-hunt,” in backwoods phraseology—more profitable than a pursuit with trained hounds.

About a month after his rejection by Miss Armstrong, Richard Darke is out upon a chase; as usual along the edge of the cypress swamp, rather should it be called a search: since he has found no traces of the human game that has tempted him forth. This is a fugitive negro—one of the best field-hands belonging to his father’s plantation—who has absented himself, and cannot be recalled.

For several weeks “Jupiter”—as the runaway is named—has been missing; and his description, with the reward attached, has appeared in the county newspaper. The planter’s son, having a suspicion that he is secreted somewhere in the swamp, has made several excursions



thither, in the hope of lighting upon his tracks. But "Jupe" is an astute fellow, and has hitherto contrived to leave no sign, which can in any way contribute to his capture.

Dick Darke is returning home, after an unsuccessful day's search, in anything but a cheerful mood. Though not so much from having failed in finding traces of the missing slave. That is only a matter of money; and, as he has plenty, the disappointment can be borne. The thought embittering his spirit relates to another matter. He thinks of his scorned suit, and blighted love prospects.

The chagrin caused him by Helen Armstrong's refusal has terribly distressed, and driven him to more reckless courses. He drinks deeper than ever; while in his cups he has been silly enough to let his boon companions become acquainted with his reason for thus running riot, making not much secret, either, of the mean revenge he designs for her who has rejected him. She is to be punished through her father.

Colonel Armstrong's indebtedness to Ephraim Darke has become known throughout the settlement—all about the mortgage. Taking into consideration the respective characters of the mortgagor and mortgagee, men shake their heads, and say that Darke will soon own the Armstrong plantation. All the sooner, since the chief obstacle to the fulfilment of his long-cherished design has been his son, and this is now removed.

Notwithstanding the near prospect of having his spite gratified, Richard Darke keenly feels his humiliation. He has done so ever since the day of his receiving it; and as determinedly has he been nursing his wrath. He has been still further exasperated by a circumstance which has lately

occurred—the return of Charles Clancy from Texas. Someone has told him of Clancy having been seen in company with Helen Armstrong—the two walking the woods *alone*!

Such an interview could not have been with her father's consent, but *clandestine*. So much the more aggravating to him—Darke. The thought of it is tearing his heart, as he returns from his fruitless search after the fugitive.

He has left the swamp behind, and is continuing on through a tract of woodland, which separates his father's plantation from that of Colonel Armstrong, when he sees something that promises relief to his perturbed spirit. It is a woman, making her way through the woods, coming towards him, from the direction of Armstrong's house.

She is not the colonel's daughter—neither one. Nor does Dick Darke suppose it either. Though seen indistinctly under the shadow of the trees, he identifies the approaching form as that of Julia—a mulatto maiden, whose special duty it is to attend upon the young ladies of the Armstrong family, “Thank God for the devil's luck!” he mutters, on making her out. “It's Jupiter's sweetheart; his Juno or Leda, yellow-hided as himself. *No* doubt she's on her way to keep an appointment with him? No more, that I shall be present at the interview. Two hundred dollars reward for old Jupe, and the fun of giving the damned nigger a good ‘lamming,’ once I lay hand on him. Keep on, Jule, girl! You'll track him up for me, better than the sharpest scented hound in my kennel.”

While making this soliloquy, the speaker withdraws himself behind a bush; and, concealed by its dense foliage, keeps his eye on the mulatto wench, still wending her way through the thick standing tree trunks.

As there is no path, and the girl is evidently going by stealth, he has reason to believe she is on the errand conjectured.

Indeed he can have no doubt about her being on the way to an interview with Jupiter; and he is now good as certain of soon discovering, and securing, the runaway who has so long contrived to elude him.

After the girl has passed the place of his concealment—which she very soon does—he slips out from behind the bush, and follows her with stealthy tread, still taking care to keep cover between them.

Not long before she comes to a stop; under a grand magnolia, whose spreading branches, with their large laurel like leaves, shadow a vast circumference of ground.

Darke, who has again taken stand behind a fallen tree, where he has a full view of her movements, watches them with eager eyes. Two hundred dollars at stake—two hundred on his own account—fifteen hundred for his father—Jupe's market value—no wonder at his being all eyes, all ears, on the alert!

What is his astonishment, at seeing the girl take a letter from her pocket, and, standing on tiptoe, drop it into a knot-hole in the magnolia!

This done, she turns shoulder towards the tree; and, without staying longer under its shadow, glides back along the path by which she has come—evidently going home again!

The negro-catcher is not only surprised, but greatly chagrined. He has experienced a double disappointment—the anticipation of earning two hundred dollars, and giving

his old slave the lash: both pleasant if realised, but painful the thought in both to be foiled.

Still keeping in concealment, he permits Julia to depart, not only unmolested, but unchallenged. There may be some secret in the letter to concern, though it may not console him. In any case, it will soon be his.

And it soon is, without imparting consolation. Rather the reverse. Whatever the contents of that epistle, so curiously deposited, Richard Darke, on becoming acquainted with them, reels like a drunken man; and to save himself from falling, seeks support against the trunk of the tree!

After a time, recovering, he re-reads the letter, and gazes at a picture—a photograph—also found within the envelope.

Then from his lips come words, low-muttered—words of menace, made emphatic by an oath.

A man's name is heard among his mutterings, more than once repeated.

As Dick Darke, after thrusting letter and picture into his pocket, strides away from the spot, his clenched teeth, with the lurid light scintillating in his eyes, to this man foretell danger—maybe death.

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## **Chapter Four.**

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### **Two good girls.**

The dark cloud, long lowering over Colonel Armstrong and his fortunes, is about to fall. A dialogue with his eldest daughter occurring on the same day—indeed in the same

hour—when she refused Richard Darke, shows him to have been but too well aware of the prospect of impending ruin.

The disappointed suitor had not long left the presence of the lady, who so laconically denied him, when another appears by her side. A man, too; but no rival of Richard Darke—no lover of Helen Armstrong. The venerable white-haired gentleman, who has taken Darke's place, is her father, the old colonel himself. His air, on entering the room, betrays uneasiness about the errand of the planter's son—a suspicion there is something amiss. He is soon made certain of it, by his daughter unreservedly communicating the object of the interview. He says in rejoinder:—

“I supposed that to be his purpose; though, from his coming at this early hour, I feared something worse.”

These words bring a shadow over the countenance of her to whom they are addressed, simultaneous with a glance of inquiry from her grand, glistening eyes.

First exclaiming, then interrogating, she says:—

“Worse! Feared! Father, what should you be afraid of?”

“Never mind, my child; nothing that concerns you. Tell me: in what way did you give him answer?”

“In one little word. I simply said *no*.”

“That little word will, no doubt, be enough. O Heaven! what is to become of us?”

“Dear father!” demands the beautiful girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder, with a searching look into his eyes; “why do you speak thus? Are you angry with me for refusing him? Surely you would not wish to see me the wife of Richard Darke?”

“You do not love him, Helen?”

“Love him! Can you ask? Love that man!”

“You would not marry him?”

“Would not—could not. I’d prefer death.”

“Enough; I must submit to my fate.”

“Fate, father! What may be the meaning of this? There is some secret—a danger? Trust to me. Let me know all.”

“I may well do that, since it cannot remain much longer a secret. There *is* danger, Helen—*the danger of debt!* My estate is mortgaged to the father of this fellow—so much as to put me completely in his power. Everything I possess, land, houses, slaves, may become his at any hour; this day, if he so will it. He is sure to will it now. Your little word ‘no,’ will bring about a big change—the crisis I’ve been long apprehending. Never mind! Let it come! I must meet it like a man. It is for you, daughter—you and your sister—I grieve. My poor dear girls; what a change there will be in your lives, as your prospects! Poverty, coarse fare, coarse garments to wear, and a log-cabin to live in! Henceforth, this must be your lot. I can hold out hope of no other.”

“What of all that, father? I, for one, care not; and I’m sure sister will feel the same. But is there no way to—”

“Save me from bankruptcy, you’d say? You need not ask that. I have spent many a sleepless night thinking it there was. But no; there is only one—that one. It I have never contemplated, even for an instant, knowing it would not do. I was sure you did not love Richard Darke, and would not consent to marry him. You could not, my child?”

Helen Armstrong does not make immediate answer, though there is one ready to leap to her lips.