Anne

Rebecca Harding Davis

Table of Contents

Anne

Rebecca Harding Davis

IT was a strange thing, the like of which had never before happened to Anne. In her matter−of−fact, orderly life mysterious impressions were rare. She tried to account for it afterward by remembering that she had fallen asleep out−of−doors. And out−of−doors, where there is the hot sun and the sea and the teeming earth and tireless winds, there are perhaps great forces at work, both good and evil, mighty creatures of God going to and fro, who do not enter into the strong little boxes in which we cage ourselves. One of these, it may be, had made her its sport for the time.

Anne when she fell asleep was sitting on a veranda of the house nearest to the water. The wet bright sea−air blew about her. She had some red roses in her hands, and she crushed them up under her cheek to catch the perfume, thinking drowsily that the colors of the roses and cheek were the same. For she had had great beauty ever since she was a baby, and felt it as she did her blood from her feet to her head, and triumphed and was happy in it. She had a wonderful voice too. She was silent now, being nearly asleep. But the air was so cold and pure, and the scent of the roses so strong in the sunshine, and she was so alive and throbbing with youth and beauty, that it seemed to her that she was singing so that all the world could hear, and that her voice rose — rose up and up into the very sky.

Was that George whom she saw through her half−shut eyes coming across the lawn? And Theresa with him? She started, with a sharp wrench at her heart.

But what was Theresa to George? Ugly, stupid, and older than he, a woman who had nothing to win him — but money. She had not cheeks like rose leaves, nor youth, nor a voice that could sing at heaven's gate. Anne curled herself, smiling, down to sleep again. A soft warm touch fell on her lips.

"George!"

The blood stopped in her veins; she trembled even in her sleep. A hand was laid on her arm.

"Bless grashus, Mrs. Palmer! hyah's dat coal man wants he's money. I's bin huntin' you low an' high, an' you's a−sleepin' out'n dohs!"

Anne staggered to her feet.

"Mother," called a stout young man from the tan−bark path below, "I must catch this train. Jenny will bring baby over for tea. I wish you would explain the dampers in that kitchen range to her."

The wet air still blew in straight from the hazy sea horizon; the crushed red roses lay on the floor.

But she —

There was a pier−glass in the room beside her. Going up to it, she saw a stout woman of fifty with grizzled hair and a big nose. Her cheeks were yellow.

She began to sing. Nothing came from her mouth but a discordant yawp. She remembered that her voice left her at eighteen, after she had that trouble with her larynx. She put her trembling hand up to her lips.

George had never kissed them. He had married Theresa more than thirty years ago. George Forbes was now a famous author.

Her fingers still lay upon her lips. "I thought that he — " she whispered, with a shudder of shame through all of her stout old body. But below, underneath that, her soul flamed with rapture. Something within her cried out, "I am here — Anne! I am beautiful and young. If this old throat were different, my voice would ring through earth and heaven."

"Mrs. Palmer, de coal man — "

"Yes, I am coming, Jane." She took her account−book from her orderly work−basket and went down to the kitchen.

When she came back she found her daughter Susan at work at the sewing−machine. Mrs. Palmer stopped beside her, a wistful smile on her face. Susan was so young; she would certainly take an interest in this thing which had moved her so deeply. Surely some force outside of nature had been thrust into her life just now, and turned it back to its beginnings!

"I fell asleep out on the porch awhile ago, Susy," she said, "and I dreamed that I was sixteen again. It was very vivid. I cannot even now shake off the impression that I am young and beautiful and in love."

"Ah, yes! poor dear papa!" Susy said, with a sigh, snipping her thread. She wished to say something more, something appropriate and sympathetic, about this ancient love of her parents; but it really seemed a little ridiculous, and besides she was in a hurry to finish the ruffle. Jasper was coming up for tea.

Mrs. Palmer hesitated, and then went on into her own room. She felt chilled and defeated. She had thought Susy would take an interest, but — Of course she could not explain to her that it was not of her poor dear papa that she had dreamed. After all, was it quite decent in a middle−aged respectable woman to have such a dream? Her sallow jaws reddened as she shut herself in. She had been very foolish to tell Susy about it at all.

Mrs. Nancy Palmer was always uncomfortably in awe of the hard common−sense of her children. They were both Palmers. When James was a baby, he had looked up one day from her breast, with his calm attentive eyes, and she had quailed before them. "I never shall be as old as he is already," she had thought. But as they grew up they loved their mother dearly. Her passionate devotion to them would have touched hearts of stone, and the Palmers were not at all stony−hearted, but kindly, good−humored folk, like their father.

The neighborhood respected Mrs. Palmer as a woman of masculine intellect because, after her husband's death, she had managed the plantation with remarkable energy and success. She had followed his exact, methodical habits in peach−growing and in the house, had cleared the property of debt, and then had invested in Western lands so shrewdly as to make herself and the children rich.

But James and Susan were always secretly amused at the deference paid to their mother by the good Delaware farmers. She was the dearest woman in the world, but as to a business head —

All her peach crops, her Dakota speculations, and the bank stock which was the solid fruit thereof went for nothing as proofs to them of adult good sense. They were only dear mamma's lucky hits. How could a woman have a practical head who grew so bored with the pleasant church sociables, and refused absolutely to go to the delightful Literary Circle? who would listen to a hand−organ with tears in her eyes, and who had once actually

gone all the way up to Philadelphia to hear an Italian stroller named Salvini?

Neither of them could understand such childish outbreaks. Give a Palmer a good peach farm, a comfortable house, and half a dozen servants to worry him, and his lines of life were full. Why should their mother be uneasy inside of these lines?

That she was uneasy to−day, Susy soon perceived. A letter came from Pierce and Wall, her consignees in Philadelphia; but Mrs. Palmer threw it down unopened, though she had shipped three hundred crates of Morris Whites last Monday.

She was usually a most careful house−keeper, keeping a sharp eye on the careless negroes, but she disappeared for hours this afternoon, although Jasper Tyrrell was coming for tea, and Jane was sure to make a greasy mess of the terrapin if left to herself.

Jasper certainly had paid marked attention to Susy lately, but she knew that he was a cool, prudent young fellow, who would look at the matter on every side before he committed himself. The Tyrrells were an old, exclusive family, who would exact perfection from a bride coming among them, from her theology to her tea biscuit.

"A trifle less than messy terrapin has often disgusted a man," thought Susy, her blue eyes dim with impatience.

Just before sunset Mrs. Palmer came up the road, her hands full of brilliant maple leaves. Susy hurried to meet and kiss her — for the Palmers were a demonstrative family, who expressed their affection by a perpetual petting and buzzing about each other. The entire household would shudder with anxiety if a draught blew on mamma's neck, and fall into an agony of apprehension if the baby had a cold in its head. Mrs. Palmer, for some reason, found that this habit of incessant watchfulness bored her just now.

"No, my shoes are not damp, Susy. No, I did not need a shawl. I am not in my dotage, child, that I cannot walk out without being wrapped up like an Esquimau. One would think I was on the verge of the grave."

"Oh no, but you are not young, darling mamma. You are just at the age when rheumatisms and lumbagoes and such things set in if one is not careful. Where have you been?"

"I took a walk in the woods."

"Woods! No wonder your shoulders are damp. Come in directly, dear. Four grains of quinine and a hot lemonade going to bed. Walking in the woods! Really now that is something I cannot understand" — smiling at her mother as though she were a very small child indeed. "Now I can walk any distance to church, or to shop, or for any reasonable motive, but to go wandering about in the swampy woods for no earthly purpose — I'll press those leaves for you," checking herself.

"No; I do not like to see pressed leaves and grasses about in vases. It is like making ornaments of hair cut from a dead body. When summer is dead, let it die." She threw down the leaves impatiently, and the wind whirled them away.

"How queer mamma and the people of that generation are — so little self−control!" thought Susy. "It is nearly time for Mr. Tyrrell to be here," she said aloud. "Can Jane season the terrapin?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Mrs. Palmer, indifferently, taking up a book.

She was indifferent and abstracted all evening. Peter clattered the dishes as he waited at the supper−table, and the tea was lukewarm. Jasper was lukewarm too, silent and critical.

James's wife, Jenny, had come over for supper, and finding her mother−in−law so absent and inattentive, poured forth her anecdotes of baby to Mr. Tyrrell. Jenny, like most young mothers, gave forth inexhaustibly theories concerning the sleep, diet, and digestion of infants. Jasper, bored and uneasy, shuffled in his chair. He had always thought Mrs. Palmer was charming as a hostess, full of tact, in fine touch with every one. Couldn't she see how this woman was bedeviling him with her croup and her flannels? She was apparently blind and deaf to it all.

Mrs. Palmer's vacant eyes were turned out of the window. Susy glanced at her with indignation. Was mamma deranged?

How petty the pursuits of these children were! thought the older woman, regarding them. How cautious and finical Tyrrell was from a height in his love−making! Susy too — six months ago she had carefully inquired into Jasper's income.

Tea biscuit and flannels and condensed milk! At seventeen her horizon had not been so cramped and shut in. How wide and beautiful the world had been! Nature had known her and talked to her, and in all music there had been a word for her, alone and apart. How true she had been to her friends! how she had hated her enemies! how, when love came to her — Mrs. Palmer felt a sudden chill shiver through her limbs. She sat silent until they rose from table. Then she hurried to her own room. She did not make a light. She told herself that she was absurdly nervous, and bathed her face and wrists in cold water. But she could not strike a light. This creature within her, this Anne, vivid and beautiful and loving, was she to face the glass and see the old yellow− skinned woman?

She ought to think of that old long−ago self as dead.

But it was not dead.

"If I had married the man I loved," this something within her cried, "I should have had my true life. He would have understood me."

How ridiculous and wicked it all was!

"I was a loyal, loving wife to Job Palmer," she told herself, resolutely lighting the lamp and facing the stout figure in the glass with its puffy black silk gown. "My life went down with his into the grave."

But there was a flash in the gray pleading eyes which met her in the glass that gave her the lie.

They were Anne's eyes, and Anne had never been Job Palmer's wife.

Mrs. Palmer did not go down again that night. A wood fire blazed on her hearth, and she put on her wrapper and drew her easy− chair in front of it, with the little table beside her on which lay her Bible and prayer−book and a Kempis. This quiet hour was usually the happiest of the day. James and Jenny always came in to kiss her good−by, and Susy regularly crept in in her wrapper to read a chapter with her mother and to tuck her snugly into bed.

But to−night she locked her door. She wanted to be alone. She tried to read, but pushed the books away, and turning out the light, threw herself upon the bed. Not a Kempis nor any holy saint could follow her into the solitudes into which her soul had gone. Could God Himself understand how intolerable this old clumsy body had grown to her?

She remembered that when she had been ill with nervous prostration two years ago she had in an hour suddenly grown eighty years old. Now the blood of sixteen was in her veins. Why should this soul within her thus dash her poor brain from verge to verge of its narrow range of life?

The morbid fancies of the night brought her by morning to an odd resolution. She would go away. Why should she not go away? She had done her full duty to husband, children, and property. Why should she not begin somewhere else, live out her own life? Why should she not have her chance for the few years left? Music and art and the companionship of thinkers and scholars. Mrs. Palmer's face grew pale as she named these things so long forbidden to her.

It was now dawn. She hastily put on a travelling dress, and placed a few necessary articles and her check−book in a satchel.

"Carry this to the station," she said to Peter, who, half asleep, was making up the fires.

"Gwine to Philadelphy, Mis' Palmer? Does Miss Susy know?"

"No. Tell her I have been suddenly called away."

As she walked to the station she smiled to think how Susy would explain her sudden journey by the letter from Pierce and Wall, and would look to find whether she had taken her overshoes and chamois jacket. "I hate overshoes, and I would like to tear that jacket into bits!" she thought as she took her seat in the car. She was going to escape it all. She would no longer be happed and dosed and watched like a decrepit old crone. She was an affectionate mother, but it actually did not occur to her that she was leaving Susy and James and the baby. She was possessed with a frenzy of delight in escaping. The train moved. She was free! She could be herself now at last!

It could be easily arranged. She would withdraw her certificates and government bonds from the vaults of the trust company in Philadelphia. The children had their own property secure.

Where should she go? To Rome? Venice? No. There were so many Americans trotting about Europe. She must be rid of them all. Now there was Egypt and the Nile. Or if another expedition were going to Iceland? Up there in the awful North among the glaciers and geysers, and sagas and Runic relics, one would be in another world, and forget Morris Whites and church sociables and the wiggling village gossip.

"There are people in this country who live in a high pure atmosphere of thought, who never descend to gossip or money− making," she thought, remembering the lofty strains of George Forbes's last poem: "If I had been his wife I too might have thought great thoughts and lived a noble life."

She tried angrily to thrust away this idea. She did not mean to be a traitor to her husband, whom she had loved well and long.

But the passion of her youth maddened her. Job had been a good commonplace man. But this other was a Seer, a Dictator of thought to the world.

The train rolled into Broad Street station. Mrs. Palmer went to the trust company and withdrew her bonds. She never before had come up to the city alone. Susy always accompanied her to "take care of dear mamma." Susy, who had provincial ideas as to "what people in our position should do," always took her to the most fashionable hotel, and ordered a dinner the cost of which weighed upon her conscience for months afterward. Mrs. Palmer now went to a cheap little cafe in a back street, and ate a chop with the keen delight of a runaway dog gnawing a stolen bone. A cold rain began to fall, and she was damp and chilled when she returned to the station.

Where should she go? Italy — the Nile — Heavens! there were the Crotons from Dover getting out of the elevator! She must go somewhere at once to hide herself; afterward she could decide on her course. A queue of people were at the ticket window. She placed herself in line.

"Boston?" said the agent.

She nodded. In five minutes she was seated in a parlor car, and thundering across the bridge above the great abattoir. She looked down on the cattle in their sheds. "I do wonder if Peter will give Rosy her warm mash to−night?" she thought, uneasily.

There were but three seats occupied in the car. Two men and a lady entered together and sat near to Mrs. Palmer, so that she could not but hear their talk, which at first ran upon draughts.

"You might open your window, Corvill," said one of the men, "if Mrs. Ames is not afraid of neuralgia."

Corvill? Ames? Mrs. Palmer half rose from her seat. Why, Corvill was the name of the great figure−painter! She had an etching of his "Hagar." She never looked into that woman's face without a wrench at her heart. All human pain and longing spoke in it as they did in George Forbes's poems. Mrs. Ames, she had heard, was chairman of the Woman's National Society for the Examination of Prisons. Mrs. Palmer had read her expose of the abominations of the lessee system — words burning with a fiery zeal for humanity. There had been a symposium in Philadelphia of noted authors and artists this week.

No doubt these were two of those famous folk. Mrs. Palmer drew nearer, feeling as if she were creeping up to the base of Mount Olympus. This was what happened when one cut loose from Morris Whites and terrapin and that weary Jane and Peter! The Immortals were outside, and she had come into their company.

"Oh, open the window!" said Mrs. Ames, who had a hoarse voice which came in bass gusts and snorts out of a mouth mustached like a man's. "Let's have some air! The sight of those emigrants huddled in the station nauseated me. Women and babies all skin and bone and rags."

Now Mrs. Palmer had just emptied her purse and almost cried over that wretched group. That sick baby's cry would wring any woman's heart, she thought. Could it be that this great philanthropist had pity only for the misery of the masses? But the man who painted "Hagar" surely would be pitiful and tender?

"Sorry they annoyed you," he was saying. "Some very good subjects among them. I made two sketches," pulling out a note− book. "That half−starved woman near the door — see? — eh? Fine slope in the chin and jaw. I wanted a dying baby for my 'Exiles,' too. I caught the very effect I wanted. Sick child."

Mrs. Palmer turned her revolving chair away. It was a trifling disappointment, but it hurt her. She was in that strained, feverish mood when trifles hurt sharply. These were mere hucksters of art and humanity. They did not belong to the high pure level on which stood great interpreters of the truth — such, for instance, as George Forbes. The little quake which always passed through her at this man's name was increased by a shiver from the damp wind blowing upon her. She sneezed twice.

Mrs. Ames stared at her insolently, and turned her back, fearing that she might be asked to put down the window.

Mr. Corvill was talking about the decoration of the car. "Not bad at all," he said. "There is a great tenderness in the color of that ceiling, and just look at the lines of the chairs! They are full of feeling."

Mrs. Palmer listened, bewildered. But now they were looking at the landscape. If he found feeling in the legs of a chair, what new meanings would he not discover in that vast stretch of lonely marsh with the narrow black lagoons creeping across it?

"Nice effect," said Mr. Corvill — "the gamboge on that barn against the green. I find little worth using in the fall this year, however. Too much umber in the coloring."

Could it be, she thought, that these people had made a trade of art and humanity until they had lost the perception of their highest meanings? But it could not be so with authors.

"I should think," continued Corvill, turning to the other man, "you could find materiel for some verses in these flats. Ulalume, or The Land of Dolor. Something in that line. Eh, Forbes?"

Forbes! Her breath stopped. That fat hunched man with the greasy black whiskers and gaudy chain! Yes, that was his voice; but had it always that tone of vulgar swagger?

"I've stopped verse−writing," he said. "Poetry's a drug in the market. My infernal publishers shut down on it five years ago."

He turned, and she then saw his face — the thin hard lips, the calculating eye.

Was this man "George"? Or had that George ever lived except in her fancy?

"Mr. Forbes." She rose. The very life in her seemed to stop; her knees shook. But habit is strong. She bowed as she named him, and stood there, smiling, the courteous, thorough−bred old lady whose charm young Tyrrell had recognized. Some power in the pathetic gray eyes brought Forbes to his feet.

"I think I knew you long ago," she said. "If it is you — ?"

"Forbes is my name, ma'am. Lord bless me! you can't be — Something familiar in your eyes. You remind me of Judge Sinclair's daughter Fanny."

"Anne was my name."

"Anne. To be sure. I knew it was Nanny or Fanny. I ought to remember, for I was spoons on you myself for a week or two. You know you were reckoned the best catch in the county, eh? Sit down, ma'am, sit down; people of our weight aren't built for standing."

"Is — your wife with you?"

"You refer to the first Mrs. Forbes — Theresa Stone? I have been married twice since her decease. I am now a widower." He had put his hand to his mouth and coughed, glancing at the crape on his hat. His breath crossed her face. It reeked of heavy feeding and night orgies; for Forbes, though avaricious, had gross appetites.

Suddenly Job Palmer stood before her, with his fine clear−cut face and reasonable eyes. He knew little outside of his farm perhaps; but how clean was his soul! How he had loved her!

The car swayed violently from side to side; the lamps went out. "Hello!" shouted Forbes. "Something wrong! I'll get out of this!" rushing to the door. She braced herself against her chair.

In the outside darkness the rushing of steam was heard, and shrieks of women in mortal agony. A huge weight fell on the car, crushing in the roof. Mrs. Palmer was jammed between two beams, but unhurt. A heavy rain was falling.

"I shall not be burned to death, at any rate," she thought, and then fortunately became insensible.

In half an hour she was cut out and laid on the bank, wet and half frozen, but with whole bones. She tried to rise, but could not; every joint ached with rheumatism; her gown was in tatters, the mud was deep under her, and the

rain pelted down. She saw the fire burning on her hearth at home, and the easy−chair in front of it, and the Bibles and a Kempis.

Some men with lanterns came up and bent over her.

"Great God, mother!" one of them cried. It was James, who had been on the same train, going to New York.

The next day she was safely laid in her own bed. The fire was burning brightly, and Susy was keeping guard that she might sleep. Jenny had just brought a delicious bowl of soup and fed it to her, and baby had climbed up on the bed to hug her, and fallen asleep there. She held him in her arm. James came in on tiptoe, and bent anxiously over her. She saw them all through her half−shut eyes.

"My own — flesh of my flesh!" she thought, and thanked God from her soul for the love that held her warm and safe.

As she dozed, Susy and James bent over her. "Where could she have been going?" said Susy.

"To New York; no doubt to make a better contract than the one she has with Pierce and Wall — to make a few more dollars for us. Poor dear unselfish soul. Don't worry her with questions, Susy — don't speak of it."

"No, I will not, Jim," said Susy, wiping her eyes. "But if she only had taken her chamois jacket!"

James himself, when his mother was quite well, remarked one day, "We had a famous fellow−traveller in that train to New York — Forbes, the author."

"A most disagreeable, underbred person!" said Mrs. Palmer, vehemently. "I would not have you notice such people, James — a mere shopman of literature!"

Susy married Jasper Tyrrell that winter. They live in the homestead, and Mrs. Palmer has four or five grandchildren about her now, whom she spoils to her heart's content. She still dabbles a little in mining speculations; but since her accident on the cars she is troubled with rheumatism, and leaves the management of the farm and house to Jasper and Susy. She has a quiet, luxurious, happy life, being petted like a baby by all of the Palmers. Yet sometimes in the midst of all this comfort and sunshine a chance note of music or the sound of the restless wind will bring an expression into her eyes which her children do not understand, as if some creature unknown to them looked out of them.

At such times Mrs. Palmer will think to herself, "Poor Anne!" as of somebody whom she once knew that is dead.

Is she dead? she feebly wonders; and if she is dead here, will she ever live again?