

An Ignoble Martyr

Rebecca Harding Davis

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OLD Aaron Pettit, who had tried to live for ten years with half of his body dead from paralysis, had given up at last. He was altogether dead now, and laid away out of sight in the three-cornered lot where the Pettits had been buried since colonial days. The graveyard was a triangle cut out of the wheat field by a certain Osee Pettit in 1695. Many a time had Aaron, while ploughing, stopped to lean over the fence and calculate how many bushels of grain the land thus given up to the dead men would have yielded.

"They can keep it. I'll not plough it up," he would mumble to himself with conscious virtue. "But land was to be hed for the fencin' then, evidently, or no Pettit would have put corpses in it that might as well have lain in the churchyard."

Now Aaron himself was in the wasted triangle, and as his daughter Jane saw his coffin lowered into it she felt a wrench of pity for him, because he never again could see the wheat grow in the lot around him, nor count how many dollars profit it would yield that year to pay the interest on the mortgage. It was natural that she should feel that he was really dead in just that way, for the wheat lot was the only field owned by the Pettits, and that mortgage their only active interest in life.

When the funeral was over, the neighbors, as is the custom in South Leedom, came back to the house, and sat in silence for half an hour in the little parlor. The undertaker had given the silver plate from the coffin lid to Jane, as the oldest child, and she hung it up now with a sad pride over the mantel-shelf. There were six other coffin plates there, the only decorations on the parlor wall.

Her younger brother, who had left "the mourners" and was in the kitchen, called her out impatiently. "Are you going to leave that horrible thing up there, Jenny?" he said.

"Horrible!" said Jane, aghast. "It is very handsome, Bowles. It cost three dollars and sixty-three cents. And why should I show disrespect to father?"

"Oh, if it is counted disrespect! — Jane, can't we give these people a cup of tea? There are the Waces, they have come ten miles, and they have to go back without any dinner. And the Fords. Some tea and dough-nuts." He looked anxiously into her face.

The heat rose into Jane's cheeks, and her eyes shone. There was something delightful to her in this bold proposal, for she had, unknown to herself, a hospitable soul. She had never seen a stranger break bread under their roof. But on such an occasion as this —

"What would mother say?" she whispered. "Oh, no, no, Bowles! I can't do it. There are ten of them" — peering into the parlor — "ten. It would take a quarter of a pound of tea; and then the sugar. Oh no, we couldn't afford it!" and she went back and sat down again with the mourners, comforting herself that nobody would expect to be fed. In North Leedom the folks did not eat in each others' houses. It would have been thought a wicked waste to "treat to victuals," as, it was reported, was the common custom in larger towns.

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This was no time, Jane felt, for her to appear eccentric or extravagant; and it would have been extravagant. Tea and cakes for ten would have made a big break in the money to be saved for the fall payment on the mortgage.

The Pettits during the next week took up the thread of their daily life unbroken. The little four-roomed house had, of course, a thorough cleaning. Undertakers and neighbors had left dust behind them. Mrs. Pettit had prayed for grace to help her bear the pains which death had left; but dirt she would not put up with. The furniture was all taken out in the yard to be sunned; the stair carpet, with its hundred neat patches was washed, dried, and tacked down again. The furniture in the house was of the cheapest kind, but it had belonged to Mrs. Pettit's grandmother, and had always been cared for with a tender reverence, not because of its associations, but for its money value. Indeed, so much of the lives of the Pettit women for generations had gone into the care of these speckless chairs and tables that one might suspect a likeness between the condition of their souls and that of the filthy Feejeean who worships the string of bones which he polishes incessantly.

Bowles despised the tables and chairs. But the mortgage! That was another thing — a thing so serious that it seemed to overshadow, to choke his whole life. John Pettit, his grandfather, in some great emergency, had put the house under a mortgage, had worked for thirty years to clear it off, and died, leaving the task to Aaron. Aaron had accepted it as a sacred trust; every penny he could save had gone to it. Now he was dead, and there was still a thousand dollars due on it.

Mrs. Pettit was too nearly blind to work. Jane sewed on men's seersucker coats for a factory in Boston. She was paid sixty cents a dozen for them. This paid the taxes and bought their clothes.

Bowles knew that his mother and sister and all of the village expected him to take up the payment of this mortgage as the work of his life.

The minister, old Mr. Himms, had said as much to him after the funeral.

"It is a noble ambition, my boy," he said, "for a man to own the home of his fathers free of debt. In our New England towns there are thousands of men and women struggling in dire poverty all their lives with this aim before them."

"This aim!" What aim?

Bowles, sitting one Sunday evening under the old elm-tree as the sun was going down, looked at the ugly, bare little house and hated it. Had life nothing more for him than that?

He looked about him. North Leedom was made up of just such ugly, clean, bare houses. There were no trees on the sidewalks, no flowers in the yards. The people were poor, and they had reduced economy to an art so hard and cruel that it dominated them now in body and soul. To save was no longer a disagreeable necessity for them; it had become the highest of duties.

The Pettits had always crept along in the same rut with their neighbors. They would not buy food sufficient to satisfy their craving stomachs. With each generation they grew leaner and weaker; the sallow skin clung more tightly to their bones; the men became victims of dyspepsia, the women of nervous prostration.

Each generation, too, carried the niggard economy a little farther. They "could not afford time" for flowers nor for music; they could not afford to buy books nor newspapers. They came at last in their fierce zeal for saving to begrudge smiles and welcomes to each other or kisses and hugs to their children. They stripped their lives of all the little kindly amenities, the generousities of feeling and word which make life elsewhere cheerful and tender.

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Bowles Pettit, thinking over the lives of his neighbors and family, tried to judge fairly of his own. But he was ashamed to find that he could scarcely think at all, he was so hungry. He was a big, raw-boned, growing boy; the nervous strain of the last week had been severe on him. He needed food, and he knew he would not have enough to-day. He could not remember the day when he had had enough. He knew how it would be. Presently the cracked tea bell would ring, and he would go in to eat a small slice of cold, soggy pie, washed down with a glass of cold water. To-morrow morning for breakfast more cold pie and a dough-nut. For dinner, potatoes and cold milk only. On Mondays, when Jane had to make a fire for the washing, a pound of cheap meat was boiled, which furnished dinner for three days.

Bowles had no trade. He was what was called in North Leedom "a helper." He could do a bit of carpenter or mason work, or paint a door, or plough a field when called upon, for which he received a few pennies. There was no opening in the dead village for any regular business. It was out of these occasional few pennies that he must support the family and save the thousand dollars for the mortgage.

There was a slight quiver on the boy's cleft chin as he sat staring at the mortgaged house. He had the eager brain and fine instincts of the New-Englander. It was not a dull beast of burden on whom this yoke for life was to be laid, but a nervous, high-bred animal, fit for the race-course.

"Ah-ha, Bowles, my son!" a subdued voice whispered over the fence.

He started up. It was Mr. Rameaux, an agent for some orange planters in Louisiana, who had found boarding for his little daughter in North Leedom that summer, while he travelled about the country. He was so short and stout that his fat smiling face barely reached to the top of the fence. He thrust his chubby ringed fingers through the rails and wrung the lad's hands.

"My dear boy, I came down from Boston this afternoon, and Lola met me with this terrible news. What can I say? Your worthy father! Il est chez le bon Dieu! But you — poor child! It is thirty years since my own father left me, and still — I — " He choked, and real tears stood in the twinkling black eyes.

Bowles pulled him through the gate. The boy said nothing. He had not shed a tear when his father died. He had never learned how to talk or to shed tears. But this little man's volubility, his gestures, his juicy rich voice, with its kindly and sweet inflections, affected Bowles as the sudden sight of tropical plants might a half-frozen Laplander. He had hung about Rameaux all summer whenever he was in the village.

"I came to make my condolences to madame votre mere . And Lola — she also" — dragging after him a child in a white gown and huge red sash, of the age when girls are principally made up of eyes, legs, and curiosity.

Together they entered the kitchen, where Mrs. Pettit and Jane sat knitting, one on either side of the cold black stove. The little man poured forth his "condolences" to the widow. Aaron's virtues, her own grief, the joys of heaven, the love of le bon Dieu, were all jumbled en masse , and hurled at her with affectionate zeal. Jane dropped her knitting in her lap; a red head rose in her thin cheeks as she listened. But Mrs. Pettit's large gray eyes scanned the puffy little agent with cold disapproval. What did the man mean? None of Aaron's neighbors, not she herself, had wept for him, or talked much of his virtues, or his entrance into heaven. Why should this play-acting fellow be sorry for her? She resented his affectionate tone, his fat body, his red necktie, the unnecessary width of brim of his felt hat. It was all unnecessary, redundant — a waste.

She waited until he stopped for breath, then nodded without a word, and taking up her knitting, began to count the stitches. Rameaux, shocked and discomfited, stood pulling at his mustache and shuffling uneasily from one foot to the other. Lola, in the mean time, had crept to Jane's side, and put her arm around her waist.

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The Rameaux were not of good caste in Louisiana; they were not well-bred people. The agent's oaths and jokes, when alone with men, were not always of the cleanest. But they came from a community where men carried the kindness and pity of their hearts ready for constant use in their eyes and lips. Even the ungainly child now was giving to Jane eager caresses such as she had never in her life received from father or mother.

"Your father is dead," Lola whispered. "My mamma died two — two years — " and then she burst into sobs, and dropped her head on the woman's lap. Jane, with a scared glance at her mother, patted her gently.

"Poor lonely little thing!" she thought. Then she noticed that the child's gaudy sash was spotted with grease, and that the holes in her black stockings were drawn up with white thread. "Tut! tut! poor dear child!" she whispered, a motherly throb rising in her own flat breast.

Mr. Rameaux, bewildered at his rebuff, was turning to the door, but Bowles stopped him.

"You promised to speak to her," he whispered excitedly.

"Not now, my boy."

"Yes, now! Now!"

The little man dropped into a chair, fanning himself with his ridiculous hat. He too was excited. He spoke to Mrs. Pettit, but his eyes wandered to Jane. "Madam, there is a subject — Your son, Mr. Bowles here, and I have talked of it. If I may intrude upon your grief — But I must first tell you something of my home."

"Indeed? Your home, Mr. Rammy," said Mrs. Pettit, in her dry, shrill tone, "is the least of my concerns." Then she turned her back on him. "Light the candle, Jane."

Rameaux rose, red and angry.

"Mother," said Bowles, sharply, "I wish you to listen to this man."

There was a meaning in his voice new to her. She stared at him, and at the agent, who, after a moment's hesitation, went on, growing fluent as an auctioneer as he proceeded.

"There was a reason for speaking of Lamonte to you, madam. It is a village near the gulf. That is a rich country — the ground, fat, black; the trees, giants; the woods full of birds, and the waters of fish. A man has but to set his traps and drop his lines and lie down to sleep, and nature feeds him. And the air — so warm and sweet!" He took a step nearer to Jane, who was listening. His eyes were on hers. They were kind eyes, he thought — mother's eyes. Miss Jane had a soft voice too. Her cheeks were lean, but there was a pretty color coming and going in them, and the lips were red and kissable. He and Lola had a lonely life of it. "The air," he repeated, awkward and bewildered, "is sweet with flowers. You would like my house, Miss Jane, on the beach. At night the wind in the magnolias and the waves plashing on the shore make a very pleasant sound — a — very pleasant sound." He quite broke down here, but his little black eyes held hers, and it seemed to her that he was still talking rapidly, passionately saying something that she never had listened to before.

"You told me about the place before, Mr. Rammy," she stammered. "You said that the flowers — "

"Hola! chut! I had forgotten!" he exclaimed, tugging at his pocket. "I sent for these. They came to-day. You said you never had seen any." He pulled out a small paper box. When she opened it, a strange and wonderful fragrance startled the chill New England air.

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"Orange blossoms!" explained Rameaux, with a significant chuckle.

Jane said nothing. She took her box to the window. The blood grew cold in all of her gaunt body. What did it mean?

She had scarcely ever thought of love. She had known but two women of her age in the village who had been courted and married. The others had all grown into old maids like herself. She never had thought that she — He had paid thirty cents postage on that box! And for her!

That wonderful life down there — little work, and plenty to eat! — the warm, sweet air! the plashing waves! In the mean time, the strange, creamy flowers, with their heavy fragrance, seemed actually to talk to her of this life and this man.

What was that he was saying? Urging her mother to sell the house and go to Lamonte, where there was a fine chance for Bowles!

"There is no opening for the boy here, madam," he persisted. "I speak as a business man. Lamonte is a live place. I go to start a cypress-wood mill, a cotton-seed-oil factory. It is a boom. A young man with Northern energy shall make money fast. Or, if she would not sell the homestead, why not rent it? Bowles, once settled in Lamonte, in two years — in two months perhaps, if this boom lasted — could clear off the mortgage." Rameaux spoke as he did when driving a bargain — clearly, and to the point. "I will give you this to consider," he said. "I will state the matter now to Miss Jane from another point of the view." He strode quickly across to her, and led her authoritatively out of the kitchen.

"Mother, do you understand?" said Bowles, in a high, sharp tone. "I can make money there hand over hand. I will clear off the mortgage dretful fast. I won't have to drudge here like a nigger slave till I'm as old as father."

The face which Mrs. Pettit turned on him was set and strained as it had not been when she looked at her husband dead.

"You want to — go?" she said.

"Yes, I want to go. I must get out of here. I want enough to do; I want enough to eat!"

She looked at the hunger-bitten face and starving eyes of the boy, a tragic sight enough if she had understood it. But she was simply bewildered. Most of the people in North Leedom had that clayey color and the restless look which result from ill-fed body and strong brain condemned for life to work upon trifles. But they did not know what ailed them. Nor did Mrs. Pettit.

"Want to leave North Leedom?" she repeated, with a contemptuous laugh. "Sech fancies! You always was ridickelous, Bowles, but I didn't think you was quite sech a fool. Draw some water, child. It's high time we was lockin' up an' makin' ready for bed," looking at Lola, who was coiled up on a chair, her big black eyes curiously turning from one to the other.

The door into the yard opened, and Jane came hurrying in. Her mother stared at her. She had never seen her face burn nor her eyes shine in that way, except when she had the typhoid fever twelve years ago.

"Lola," she said, going up to the girl and catching her by the shoulders — "Lola!"

"Yes," said Lola, standing up.

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Miss Jane pulled the child toward her as if to kiss her. Her thin face worked; she panted for breath. She caught sight of her mother's amazed face, and pushed Lola away.

"Your — your papa wants you, dear," she said, in a low whisper, every tone of which was a caress. "I'll take you to him."

"You stop right here, Jane. Bowles can take his daater to the play-actor," snapped Mrs. Pettit.

Miss Jane dared not disobey. She was thirty, but she was as submissive and timid as when she was six. But she did follow Lola out on to the porch. The girl stopped her there preemptorily, and stretching up on her tiptoes, threw her arms around her neck.

"You're coming home with us? Papa said so. Yes? Oh, goody! You'll come?"

"Hush-h!"

Miss Jane dropped on her knees in the dark, and strained the child tight to her breast. The blood burned hotly through her whole body as she pressed a light shamed kiss upon her lips, and then springing up, ran back into the kitchen.

Bowles walked sulkily with Lola down to the road where her father was waiting. She thrust her arm in his and hung on it; she rolled her beautiful eyes coquettishly; she spoke to him with profound awe and timidity. Lola, like many Southern girls of her class, had given much of her short life to thoughts of "the boys," and of how to manage them. She managed Bowles now completely. Her homage thrilled him with triumph and self-conceit, which her father's eager talk increased. His mother treated him as a child. These people appreciated him, recognized him as the shrewd Northern man who would make money hand over hand in the South. He laughed loudly with Rameaux, even tried to joke a little.

His sister, through the kitchen window, saw them standing by the gate. The moon had risen. Lola leaned sleepily against the fence. Rameaux's sultry black eyes, while he talked to Bowles, searched every window in the house.

"For me?"

Miss Jane's knees shook under her. She hurried to her mother, who was beginning to grope her way up the stairs, and took the candle from her, trembling so that she could scarcely speak. It seemed as if she must cry and laugh out loud.

"Mr. Rameaux tells me that his house is all on one floor. You will have no stairs to climb if you go there, mother," she said.

Mrs. Pettit stared at her. "I go? Bowles's brain is addled enough, but he's not so mad as that."

She had reached her room by this time. Jane hurried in after her.

"Mother, it's not Bowles; it's me. If there was a chance for me to go down yonder and give you a comfortable providin', would you go?"

Mrs. Pettit paid no attention to her. She was unbuttoning her shoes, and had found a thin place in one of them. She rubbed it with alarm, held it close to her purblind eyes, set it down with a groan. "It ought to hev lasted two year more," she muttered.

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"Would you go?" said Jane, speaking with a breathless gasp. "You should have as many shoes as you chose, and the hot air even in winter, and full and plenty to eat and wear."

Mrs. Pettit turned her dull calm face on her. "Why, Jane Pettit! You've been listenin' to that Rammy's crazy talk too! For a fool, give me an old maid!" She took up the worn shoe anxiously again. "Think of me goin' outside of North Leedom!" she said, with a hoarse, rasping laugh.

Miss Jane, as she looked at her, could not think of it. It was an impossibility; as impossible as to make the dead alive.

"Tut! tut! It's worn near through to the counter."

"Give it to me. I'll mend it," said Miss Jane.

"Your hands are like ice," said her mother, as she took the shoe. "You'd better get to bed. There's that lot of coats to begin on in the morning. You'll have to be up by four."

"Yes," said Jane. She carried the shoe down stairs. The coats lay in heaps in the corner, tied together by twine. Their raw edges stuck out. Jane thought they would not have been so hateful if it had not been for those raw edges.

Bowles was waiting for her. His eyes shone; he looked bigger and stouter than before; the very down on his lip seemed coarser and browner.

"You are going too," he said. "Rameaux told me. Lord! such luck to come to us!"

"Mother will never go, Bowles."

"Then leave her. Other sons and daughters marry and go away. Cousin Sarah can take care of her. We'll pay the mortgage, and pay Sarah for tendin' her. Mother's rugged. She may live twenty year yet. 'Tisn't fair you should slave forever."

He said much more, but Jane scarcely heard him. She sat in the kitchen without moving long after he had gone to bed. Somehow the raw-edged seersucker coats seemed to fill up her mind, and to bulk down, down, through her whole life. Rameaux had pointed to them angrily last night, and said, "Send that trash back to-morrow."

He wanted her to marry him to-morrow; to pack up their things, and start for Louisiana next Monday. He would stop in New York to buy her some gowns to please his own taste. "A red silk gown and a black-plumed hat."

"Think of me in red silk and plumes!" thought Miss Jane, tears of sheer delight standing in her eyes.

Her mother coughed hard, and called to her several times, while she sat there, to bring her medicine. She always needed care in the night. Cousin Sarah was a high-tempered woman and slept heavily.

When Bowles came down in the morning, he found his slice of leaden pie and greasy dough-nut, as usual, on a plate on the bare table. Jane was at the machine, a heap of finished seersucker coats beside her.

"I guess you were at work all night?" he said.

"I couldn't sleep," she answered.

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"Are you goin' to finish all them things?"

She nodded, turning her wheel faster.

He looked at her face for a minute or two, and then, for some reason, walked behind her, where he could not see it. "Jane," he said, "are you always goin' on makin' coats?"

The wheel stopped, the thread broke. Bowles waited, silent.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice. Then she threaded her needle again.

"What else should she do?" said Mrs. Pettit, coming into the kitchen.

Neither of her children answered her; but presently Jane got up suddenly, and going to her, gave her a fond hug and kiss.

Mrs. Pettit started, amazed. It was a new thing in her life; but, on the whole, she liked it.

Ten days later Bowles left North Leedom for Louisiana. His hopes were more than answered there. Lamonte did have the promised boom, and he made money fast. In a few years he married Lola. But long before that time he paid off the mortgage. He did it for Jane's sake. Had not his life been successful, while her's* was a miserable failure? His heart ached with pity for her.

But we are not sure that her life was at all miserable. From that night in which she made her choice, a singular change came over her. For thirty years she had done her dull duty faithfully, because, in fact, there was nothing else to do.

Then, as it seemed to her, the gates were opened, the kingdoms of the world were laid at her feet.

Of her own will she had given them up.

God only knew what the sacrifice cost her, but after it she was a different and a live creature. She was like a woman who has given birth to a child. She had struck her note in life, and it was not a mean one. She now looked out on the world with authoritative, understanding eyes; even her step became firm and decided.

When one climbs a height, the pure air expands the lungs ever after. We always carry with us down in the valley the wide outlook which we have seen but once.

Jane had now a life quite outside of North Leedom and the raw-edged coats. When the pain and soreness had passed, her struggle began to exert pleasant and tender influences on her. Stout, jolly Rameaux, with his twinkling black eyes and black mustache, began to take on the graces and charms of all the heroes of romance. When she read in the magazines a poem or love story, her eyes would fill with a tender light, and she would whisper, "I, too; I, too!" When she saw mothers caress their children, she fancied she felt Lola's head again on her breast, and her heart throbbed with happiness.

After her mother died, she tried to bring into her life some of the things of which Bowles had told her of his home in Lamonte. She planted roses in the yard; she covered her table with a white cloth; and sometimes a bit of savory meat found its way there. She visited her neighbors; she read novels; she joked in a scared way.

On the occasion of her one visit to New Bedford she went alone to a retail shop, and, blushing, asked to be shown some crimson silk and black-plumed hats. She fingered them wistfully.

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"Are they for a young lady?" asked the shop-woman.

"Yes — for a young lady," said Jane, in a low voice. She held them a moment longer, and then, with a sigh, went out.

Soon after this, Bowles, who was a bad correspondent, suddenly appeared one day, bringing one of his girls, Jenny, with him. "Yes, she looks peaked," he said that night as they sat on the porch, after Jane had lovingly put the child to sleep in her own bed. "The doctor said she ought to have bracing air for a year or two. I told him I'd bring her to you. We've got four, and she's your name-sake. She does not look like the Pettits, though."

"Her eyes are like Lola's father's," said Jane, hesitating. "Is Mr. Rameaux well?"

"God bless me! Didn't I tell you the old gentleman was gone? Died in Cuba last spring."

"Died — last spring?"

Bowles, who was about to add that too much bad whiskey had hastened his end, caught sight of her face, and with a sudden remembrance stopped short, and softly whistled to himself.

"Yes, in Cuba," he said, awkwardly. "Well, Jane, I was all right in bringing Jenny to you? You'll take care of the chick?"

"As if she were my own," she said. "I thank you, Bowles."

Soon afterward she went to her own room, and kneeling by the bed, kissed the child's face and hands passionately.

"She is very like him," she thought, opening, as she did every night, a little box in which were some yellow flowers. She fancied there was still a faint fragrance breathing from them. "We will know each other in heaven," she said, with a sigh, as she closed the box.

But it may be as well, perhaps, that in this too she will be disappointed.