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The Captive

by Fran Duffield

I've been about too long—people are getting tired of me. I'm tired, so tired I can hardly raise my head from my pillow. Even the little bird who is my constant companion is a captive, who is obliged to sing for his supper. His shining black eye regards me quizzically, as if he too asks why I am still here.

"No-one will have me, my pretty one," I whisper to him, but he only hops from perch to perch behind his prison bars. "I cannot be set free any more than you can, the wicked wild birds would tear your wings and bring you down swifter than a slingshot." He sings a sweet trill, stretching his yellow neck heavenwards, as if praying.

I can reach the window by pulling myself along the crowded furniture, and sit in the window-seat behind the brocade curtains where I watch the rooks fly out like notes of erratic music in the early light, go on their mysterious errands all the endless day, and their swirling black cloud as they gather in the elm at sunset to pass the long dark hours.

Their harsh cries seem to mock me, like the ragged children who followed us down the street when I used to try to take a few steps in the air. They all knew my history, and tapped their foreheads and imitated my limping steps. Even though the attendant was sharp with them, and threatened to call the menservants, they only backed away slowly, before running away laughing in their coarse voices.

I had failed in my attempt to end my melancholy, for which there seemed no cure, and only succeeded in making myself an invalid. God is justly angry with those who offend against his laws, and I accept my punishment, yet I cannot understand why he cursed me with madness.

If I was merely crippled, the world would at least pity me, although still no sane man would ever release my family from the burden of my care. But my madness is an imprisonment for life.

My parents are ashamed, and no longer speak of me in society: they feel a Christian duty to care for me, but I think my brother believes I am making excuses because I do not want to become a woman and marry. Perhaps he sees something in my eyes, for I am full of fear, fear of life, fear of trying again to die and spending eternity in hell. Despite my love for him, I fear him too. When my parents are dead, will he send me to the madhouse? Why would he not? I am a weight that no one will want to carry.

There are quick steps on the stair, and he is here. I did not expect a visit. I sit very still, and look down at my hands twisted together in my lap.

“Well, Aurelia, how are you today?” his strong voice booms in the silence of my room, but he seems to be looking kindly on me.

“I... am tolerably well today, thank you... I am only so very tired,” I stumble over my words, I am so unused to conversation. He smells of leather and tobacco, and his thick hair is windblown from his riding in the outside world. Flicking his coat-tails briskly out of the way, he sits quickly down on a delicate ladies chair, which I fear will crack under his weight. I flinch instinctively as he reaches out a hand, and takes my chin in a not ungentle grip, raising my head so he can see my eyes. I meet his gaze, and am surprised to see what I remember as love from our innocent childhood together.

“My dear, I bring a message of hope,” he says, watching my face. “I have found a new doctor.” I tremble, remembering the torments the doctors have inflicted on me. “Do not be afraid, this doctor is a man of the modern world, whose treatments are kind and practical. I have seen and heard testimonies of his patients who have been cured.” I stare at him in disbelief.

“Yes, cured of their melancholia, Aurelia. And he believes there are other doctors who have treatments for your injuries which could help you to walk unsupported.”

For the first time since I awoke in despair after the fall, I feel some tiny flame of hope, a stealing lightness, as if the tiredness is lifting like a stone from my heart.