Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. “Daniel Prime.” *Tales and Sketches, Second Series* 1844, pp. 215-248.

DANIEL PRIME.

“Beware of Covetousness.”

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I remember, when a child, having my curiosity strongly excited by the fag end of a story which an old family servant was telling to my elders when I entered the room. “But are you sure,” asked a gentle lady, who could not give credit to such a demonstration of emotion, “are you sure his hair actually stood up?”

“As sure as that I see you now, ma’am; and an awful sight it was. He was a thickset, strong-built fellow, with a *tripy* skin—lips, cheeks, forehead, all one colour; his eyes were gray and large, and his eyebrows black as jet, and solid; but his hair was considerable gray, and cut shortish—stiff, ugly hair it was—and, altogether, he looked as cruel as a meat-axe. He stood all as one as where ma’am stands now. There were two cotton-wicked candles on the table, burning bright, for I had just snuffed them. The colonel sat in his armchair, looking terrible—he could look so on them that *desarved* it—and the clark had his pen in his hand. The colonel gave me a sign; I opened the door, and *he* came in, as it were into that door, right in Prime’s face. I kept

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my eye on Prime. His hair rose and stood on end, straight and stiff as bristles. Every one took notice of it, and often have I heard the colonel speak of it.”

"But what made his hair rise?" I naturally asked. "Do not tell her," interposed the aforesaid gentle lady; "it is too horrid a tale for a child's ears." Then followed the trite hint about "little pitchers," and the promise, usually broken to the hope, that the story should be told me "one of these days." That day did not, however, in this case, prove an illusion. The story was, in due time, told to me by that dear old servant and friend, who was one of the most acute observers I ever knew. On her veracious testimony I now repeat it.

Many more complicated and startling criminal cases may be found among "les causes celébres." This is chiefly interesting, as illustrating the tendency of the indulgence of any one passion of the human mind to destroy its balance, and produce the diseases termed fixidity and monomania. These are, doubtless, actual diseases. The great truth to be learned from them is, that they might, in most instances, be avoided by moral education. The mind cannot safely dwell long and intently on one subject. The effect is precisely analogous to that produced on the physical system by bearing on one muscle—the muscle is inevitably weakened, if not destroyed.
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John Dorset was a wealthy yeoman in the southwestern part of Massachusetts. His was the best farm under the shadow of the *Tahconnic,* there where its swelling and lofty summits bound the western horizon of the pretty village of Sheffield. Dorset was a hard-working, sagacious farmer, acute, or, in rustic phrase, *close* at a bargain, but liberal in his ordinary transactions. "He gave freely of his bread to the poor, and his bountiful eye was blessed." He was violent in his temper and self-willed, liable to sudden bursts of feeling, and governed by impulses. His heart was somewhat like iron, hard and resisting; but, if sufficient heat was applied, it glowed intensely, and might be worked at will. He had a fit helpmate; such as abounded in the good olden time of undisputed authority on the part of the husband and

unquestioning submission on that of the wife. Dame Dorset worked diligently with wool and flax, and looked well to the ways of her household; in short, she was a wife after the old Puritan pattern. One only child had this thriving pair, to whom her father gave the name he deemed indicative of the condition and virtues of her sex, *Submit,* and truly did it express the very essence of her character. She was a gentle, comely, well-nurtured lass. Her father was wont to boast her accomplishments in such phrases as these: "Submit need not turn her back upon any gal in the New-England States. She can spin on the great wheel and

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the little wheel"—alas! for the cheerful, domestic sounds that have passed away from the farmer's home—"she can make butter and cheese equal to her mother's, roast a pig without cracking the skin, and make an Indian pudding that you can slice like wax; read, write, and cipher as well as any *woman* need to, and, what is more than larning, she never disobeyed me in her life !" With such store of accomplishments, and sole apparent heir of John Dorset's wealth, no wonder that the fair Submit heard every day the preliminary question in the rustic treaty of marriage of that good olden time, "Will you *undervaly* yourself so much as to *overvaly* me so much as to keep company with me?" But none of the aspirants was she known to vouchsafe the propitious response, "No *undervalyment* at all, sir!"

Submit lost her mother, and her father, seeing his domestic affairs prosper in her hands, and loving her with all the strength of his undivided affection, was well pleased with her maidenly reserve.

"You are right, Submit," he would say, when he had seen her close the door after some suiter in holyday array; "when the right one comes will be time enough. I despise those gals that

are ready to say snip to every man's snap." Poor Dorset! who shall prophesy of human wisdom? The heaviest storms are sometimes brewing when not a cloud is to be seen.

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The proprietor of the farm adjoining Dorset's was a certain Rube Prime, a careless, rack-rent fellow, negligent of his own rights, and regardless of the rights of others; an unprofitable acquaintance, and a most inconvenient neighbour, annoying in every way to a man of Dorset's irritable temper and thrifty habits. Dorset's dislike of the father was extended to his brood of marauding boys, with the exception of one among them, Daniel. "He," Dorset said, "was different from the rest"—he did not mark the blush on Submit's cheek when he said so; and once, when he was anathematizing the whole Prime race, he made a notable and long-remembered exception in favour of Daniel. "There is not a mother's son of them worth a curse," said Dorset, in his fury. "Yes, yes," he added, "I will except Daniel." Daniel was indebted for the honour of this exception to being the pet of a maiden aunt, Marah Prime, who had carefully trained him in the way in which she thought he should go, and HE DID GO THEREIN. "A penny saved is a penny gained," was the first lore his infant lips learned. He was taught to exchange his share of pudding and cakes with his short-sighted brothers for something that could be kept or again bartered. His thriftless father was held up before him as a beacon; and modes of practising on the old man were suggested, similar to Jacob's upon the unwary Laban, and this, he learned, "was a way to

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thrive." Women of all ages, conditions, and tempers, will weave a thread of love into the web of a favourite's destiny. It was when Submit was receiving her name over the baptismal font that

Aunt Marah predestined her the wife of Daniel; and from that moment of sordid election, she shaped all device and action to this end.

"For once," boasted one of the young Primes, "I've made a bargain out of Dan; he's given me three fourpence ha'pennies for my string of birds' eggs!"

The birds' eggs might be seen the next day festooned round Submit's looking-glass.

"What has become of Bob?" asked all the little Primes, in a breath, and asked again without being answered. Bob was a pet squirrel, tamed by Aunt Marah, and, in due time, conveyed, by Daniel's hand, to Submit. Daniel was the only Prime permitted to enter Dorset's premises, and he was only suffered, not encouraged. He, however, in the reputed spirit of his countrymen, made *the most of his opportunity* by gaining the heart of the gentle heiress. We are compelled to pass in this etching style over the years that brought Daniel to man's estate. In the mean time his father died, his brothers scattered over the world, and he remained—"a rolling stone gathers no moss," said Aunt Marah—he remained rooted to the farm, toiling hard to redeem it from encumbering mortgages. Now he fancied himself

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securely floating into the harbour so long desired, and day after day did his eye feast on Dorset's fertile fields, and night after night did he reckon up the value of the lands, tenements, stock, goods, and chattels, that were to be conveyed to him by that sure and precious instrument, Submit. Aunt Marah felt his grasp so certain that she began to grumble at the liberality of Dorset's housekeeping. "But time," she trusted, "would change with masters!" Submit, and Submit alone, had secret forebodings that her father, though he tolerated Daniel, would not fancy him for a son-in-law; and, with all a woman's timid forebodings, she saw the evening approach on which, by her acquiescence, consent was to be asked. Her father had been out all day. He

came home with a ruffled countenance, and she saw they had fixed on an inauspicious moment. As he threw off his coat, he grumbled, “A pretty business! A chip of the old block! I knew the devil would out, in some shape or other!” And when Submit suppressed her ominous fears, and asked, in a low voice, “What has taken place, sir?” he narrated a transaction of Daniel Prime’s with a friend of his—whose simplicity Dorset had always sheltered under the wing of his superior sagacity—in which his friend had been overreached: a mode of cheating particularly odious to a man of Dorset’s frank temper. “I always told you, Submit,” he added, after finishing his narration, “you

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can’t ‘wash a checked apron white;’ ‘what’s bred in the bone’—but I’ll fix him, that I will.” At this moment Daniel entered. Dorset did not return his deferential greeting; but Dorset often had his surly moments, and when all seemed murky, the sun shot forth from the clouds. Submit in vain tried to give her lover a warning signal. Prime’s mind was intent on his purpose; and when she, hoping he might have understood her, and trusting, at any rate, that he was too discreet to unfold his purpose in her father’s present humour, left the room, Daniel spoke, or tried to speak; for no sooner did Dorset comprehend his meaning, than he broke out upon him, poured forth epithets as stinging as blows, and finished by opening the doors, and actually kicking him out of the house. Daniel slunk home, and calculated the cost of a lawsuit, and the probable amount of a verdict in a suit for assault and battery; but, after repeated consultations with Aunt Marah, he made a better estimate of the chances of profit and loss, and the next week, while Dorset was gone to Boston, he took a ride with Submit to the adjacent territory of New-York, where his marriage was effected without the previous publication of “intentions of marriage,” which the prudent Puritans prefixed to that rite.

We pass over the rage of the wronged father. We have no space to record his reiterated vows—too faithfully kept—that he would

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never again speak to his child, and that never a penny of his should pass into Daniel Prime's hands. He made a will at once, and published it, formally disinheriting his daughter, and devising his property to various public institutions. Dorset tried to appear as cheerful as was his wont, for he was a proud man, and loth, even tacitly, to confess his dependence on any human being or circumstance; but nature was too strong for him; and when he was alone, walking over those fine fruitful fields, whose transmission to his posterity he had so often contemplated as a sort of self-perpetuation, his disappointment would break forth in exclamations and audible groans; and when he returned to his home, and missed his gentle, patient child, who had anticipated his wants, and endured his impatience without a murmur, his parental tenderness would find its way in tears; but, after the first ebullition of passion, never a word of complaint or regret escaped him. He went on as if nothing had happened, enriching his farm, and dispensing liberally from storehouses always full.

In the mean time, Submit, born to be an unresisting thrall to whatever power might master her, faithfully kept her vow of allegiance to her new lord, though her heart pined in secret for the abundance and cheerfulness of her old home. Her father's temper was gusty, but the storms were short, and succeeded by sunshine and a healthy atmosphere. Her husband's

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disposition was of the brooding, anxious, forecasting sort, that hangs like a leaden sky and pestilential fog over the domestic scene. He was not severe or unkind to her. As the means of attaining the great end of his life, she was inestimable to him; but he was apprehensive and

restless till that was secured. He never, for a moment, believed that her fitful, impulsive father would persevere in his disinheritance of his only child; but there was no passion keener than avarice, and he was continually forcing her on active measures to recover her father's favour. This imbittered her life. She could endure and suffer to the end of the chapter; there was no limit to her passive virtue; but to execute what her husband planned—to confront her storming father—was an enterprise for Submit similar to a passage under the sheet of water at Niagara.

In obedience to her husband, she repeatedly wrote to her father. The letters were returned unopened. She even, like a trembling victim, went to his house again and again. The good-natured servants—they were slaves, for our story dates before the Revolution—gathered about her with their honest, hearty welcomes, but her father passed by her without one glance of recognition; and if she ventured, in a half-stifled voice, to address him, he gave no sign of hearing her. Thus matters went on for three years. Aunt Marah, whose whole life was devoted to that most teasing

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domestic alchymy by which one man's shilling can be made to go as far as another man's dollar, was a continual thorn in Submit's side.

At the end of three years the light broke in upon her weary existence. She had a child! that best of Heaven's blessings—that ray of celestial light which penetrates the intensest darkness that can encompass a mother's soul. A child! Who could be miserable with such a treasure? a gift that enriches every other possession: that is riches to poverty; meat and drink to the hungry and thirsty; rest to the wearied; health to the sick; an immeasurable present joy, and an infinite promise!

Our poor mother's soul was kindled with new life; her home was no longer a waste and desolate place. She turned her eye from the dark spirit brooding in her husband's face, and felt the smiles of her child warming her heart. She listened to the first sweet sounds from its lips, and was deaf to Aunt Marah's eternal chidings.

"You say your father likes babies," said her husband. "Sibyl begins to take notice"—the child had been warily named Sibyl Dorset, after its maternal grand-parents—"dress her up in her best, and take her to your father's; don't be scared away by the first frown—stay a while—he'll come to at last: an old dog don't turn for the first whistle."

Submit obeyed with alacrity, because with hope. She believed her child irresistible, and

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longed to see it her father's arms. The little girl had arrived at the prettiest stage of infancy; she was fat, and fair, and bright, and dressed in her prettiest, all-conquering in her mother's eye. No wonder she walked with a light step up the narrow lane that led to the only place her heart called home. She was humbly making her way towards the kitchen door, when the old house-dog sprang upon her, and licked the baby's hands. Dorset stood, unseen, at a window, stealthily watching the approach. The baby, instead of crying, clapped her little hands in reply to the dog's caress. An exclamation of pleasure escaped from Dorset. Submit, unconscious of the auspicious omen, proceeded. The door was opened by Juno, an old negro matron. She summoned her daughters, Minerva and Venus; and the three goddesses exhausted on the child every epithet of endearment and admiration in their vocabulary. The doors communicating with the "dwelling-room" were open, and there was the grandfather, all ear.

"My!" cried Juno, "what pretty black eyes; for all the world like master's!"

"That's well!" thought Dorset; "no black eyes among the Primes—gray, squint, or walleyed, every d—l of them."

"Dear! what a cunning little cherry mouth!" said Venus.

"Dan Prime's mouth is like a wolf's!" murmured Dorset.

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"This beats the Dutch—master's peaked ear!" exclaimed Minerva; "and on the left side, too."

"I saw, when I first looked at her, she favoured father," said Submit, tremulously; "I suppose it was thinking of him so much!"

Dorset longed to take mother and child to his heart, but the remembrance of his rash vow checked the impulse. A project by which he might, in part, evade its consequences, dawned upon him. He went into the kitchen. Juno—experience made her the boldest—Juno held the baby up to him: "Isn't she a beauty, master? as pretty as a London doll."

"Put out your hands, *Sibyl Dorset,*" said the trembling mother. The little girl, instinctively eloquent in her own cause, stretched out her hands, smiled, and jumped towards her grandfather. He caught her in his arms, looked steadily in her face for a moment, exclaimed, "All Dorset, by Jupiter!" and then returning her to the servant, his eyes blinded with tears, he made his way to his apartment, slamming the doors after him as a sort of expression or echo to his feelings. Poor Submit, after lingering in faint hope or fear till the day closed, was obliged to return to her disappointed, sullen husband.

Two years after this first meeting, as Dorset was returning home, he saw a little girl tottling along the roadside, picking dandelions. His old dog Cæsar sprang upon her and threw her

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down. She patted him, calling him “naughty Cæsar.” They were familiar friends. “It is she!” thought Dorset; and he quickened his steps, and gave her his hand to help her up. She grasped his, and retained it. The pressure of a child’s soft, chubby hand is an electric touch to the heart.

“Ain’t you my danfather?” said Sibyl.

“Yes.”

“Then do you come and live with us. Mother tells me every day I must love you, and how can I love you if I don’t see you?”

“I can’t go to live with you, child, but would you like to come and live with me?”

“With you and Cæsar! yes, if mother will come too.”

“And your father?”

The child started at his changed tone of voice. “No, no, not father; let father and Aunt Marah stay at home.”

Dorset conducted the little runaway to her own premises, went home, passed a sleepless night, and the next morning sent the following note to Prime’s:

“TO DANIEL PRIME AND WIFE.

“If you will send me your child, Sibyl Dorset, and sign a quitclaim to her, and you, Daniel Prime, promise, under oath, never intentionally to see, and never speak with her during my life, I, in return, will take her as my own child, and will endeavor so to bring her up,

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that, when come to woman’s estate, she’ll not quit me for any rascal on earth.

“Signed, JOHN DORSET.”

This proposition was rather more than Prime could at once submit to; but, after a little reflection on the precariousness of Dorset’s life—how very uncertain other men’s lives seem!—

his cupidity prevailed over his pride and every manly sentiment, as well as over his affections. "We must make hay while the sun shines," said Aunt Marah; and many a case did she recount of breaches healed by the intervention of grandchildren. So little Sibyl was to be sent to serve the purpose of patent cement, and make the broken parts adhere more firmly than ever.

The weakest, most timid animal will turn to defend her young, and Submit, for the first time in her life, when she heard her husband's decision, resisted. To give up Sibyl was to resign all that made existence tolerable to her.

"I *cannot* consent to this," she said, with unprecedented firmness; "all the land on the round earth would not tempt me; no, not all my father's money, ten thousand times told."

"You talk like a fool, wife."

"Oh, Daniel Prime, I think there is no folly like that of craving for more and more. You are always toiling, and selling, and gaining, and it all does no good to any one, and least of all

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to you. Are you happy? are you even content?"

"No, I am not; but I have been disappointed—balked. I shall be happy," he stretched his hand towards Dorset's, "when I get that farm."

"No, Prime, there is neither good nor happiness to those that forget the laws of God, and you are breaking his tenth commandment. But," she added, raising her voice, "you will never get it. I cannot part with Sibyl. I was taught never to give away the least trifle given to me, and can I give away God's gift? No, never!"

Prime would at once have enforced obedience, but he feared that his wife, driven to extremity, might fly to her father, and remonstrate; he therefore let her exhaust her courage, and then urged compliance as a duty to her father. At this point she was vulnerable. From her child's

birth, and the simultaneous burst of parental feeling in her own breast, she had—a very common case—experienced a new sense of filial duty; had lamented her infidelity to her father, and ventured to express her remorse in Prime's presence. She had now, as her husband urged, an opportunity to atone for her fault, and this foregone, would be lost forever. Her father was old; more children she might have, never another father. And when she ceased to answer, but still wept, he suggested that her father's terms might be

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softened; he might consent to her seeing the child; and, finally, and more than all, Sibyl must prove a successful mediator between them.

Submit at last yielded so far as to write to her father. The letter was modified by her husband, blotted with her tears, and sent. The following reply was immediately returned: "The mother and child may meet as often as is reasonable; but Daniel Prime must be to Sibyl as though he were not. Let no more be written or said about it. Send her—on these conditions, mind ye!—to-morrow."

Sibyl was sent, and her mother left to solitude and pining. She saw her child often. She found her always affectionate and kind, but there was little sympathy between them. Sibyl was a healthy, bright, stout-hearted girl, living and laughing in sunshine, and unable to sympathize with her weak, drooping mother, who had no pleasure in life but her meetings with her child, and those imbittered by Dorset's unrelaxing adherence to his vow.

Eight dreary years passed away. There was no change in Daniel Prime but a gradual deepening of the lines of his character; or, rather, the one line, the channel to which everything tended, wore deeper and deeper. Not one of all the passions of the human race is so insatiable as

avarice. The poet has well selected the wolf as its symbol, always hungry, never satiated—"E dopo 'l pasto ha piu fama

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che pria" (and, after eating, he is more hungry than before). And if to avarice is added hoarding—a passion without motive, without present contentment or future reward—the folly is complete, the spirit is extinct, the image of God effaced. Prime grew more and more acute at his bargains, and with every acquisition more greedy of gain. Like his prototype, so well described by the satirist, he was always pouring into his grand reservoir from other men's scanty cisterns, going hither and yon to add to his stores, and withering away for the want of one refreshing draught. So cautiously and securely did he keep within the bounds of legal honesty, that no one could have suspected the fatal trespass for which the inordinate growth of his ruling passion was preparing him. Every circumstance tended to sharpen this passion. The riches which had seemed to him within his grasp were before his eyes, whetting his appetite, like a plentiful table spread in the presence of the hungry man, who is always approaching, but never attains it. He knew the will alienating Dorset's property from his posterity had been burned—*Was there another made?* Prime believed not; for Dorset was proverbially open in all his affairs.

Eight years, as we have said, passed away, and Submit was again a mother. Prime, who till this time had been like a rock over which the billows are continually rolling, so that nothing

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that thrives by the kind processes of nature could take root in his sordid soul, now felt something like affection at his heart, and with it came a jealousy and dislike of his eldest child. He hoped the pride of transmitting a name might induce Dorset to transfer his favour, and the boy too was sent to the grandfather to seek his fortune, but in vain. Sibyl had her citadel in the old man's

heart, and no one could dispossess her. She loved her brother, and would gladly have divided all her possessions, even her dearest, her grandfather's affections, with him. But these were not a transferable treasure. He loved Sibyl better than he had ever loved his own daughter. Sibyl had a mind of her own, independent thought, and free action, and he liked her the better for it. He felt too late that there was no reliance on a machine worked by another's will.

He had some natural dreads when his favourite approached the marriageable age, and strong likings and dislikings were manifested towards the aspirants for her favour. Fortunately, hers—as if their affections were governed by the same spring—coincided with his; and, finally, when, with untold hopes and purposes, he brought home a distant relative whom he had known and liked as a boy, the full measure of his contentment was filled up by a sudden and mutual liking between the young people.

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All went on smoothly. Dorset was perfectly happy; his own child was like a dropped and forgotten link. Bountiful preparations were made for celebrating the marriage, and Sibyl was maturing a plot for effecting a reconciliation with her mother at this auspicious moment, when all these fair prospects were forever overcast by the sudden death of the old man from a fall from his horse.

While poor Sibyl, in a paroxysm of grief, was lamenting over his lifeless body, and her mother, in more subdued, but far more bitter sorrow, was weeping in silence, Daniel Prime was prowling over the house, searching desks and drawers for a will. None was forthcoming; and with an exulting heart and decent countenance he performed the offices of the occasion. The funeral over, the servants were disposed of, the house shut up, Sibyl removed to her father's, and he was proceeding to take out letters of administration, when a friend of Dorset returned from a

journey, and produced a will deposited with him. The entire of Dorset's property was bequeathed to his granddaughter. The will was simple and direct. There was no flaw, no pretext for a cavil.

Daniel Prime afterward confessed to a spiritual director and friend, that the thought which first occurred to him after the shock of the discovery of the will was over, was—but we will give it in his own words: "The devil put it into my head that, if Sibyl died a minor,

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and without issue of her body, I was her heir." "*Whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him."*

Long before this Aunt Marah had fretted herself into that resting-place which awaits even such harassed and harassing souls as hers, and Daniel Prime was left without even her counsel and sympathy in the final failure of the hopes and plans of years. He was always a man of few words; now he was more moody and brooding than ever. Sibyl had painful recollections of his influence on her childhood; she had since been taught to shun him; she perceived her mother's fear and dread of him; and now, whenever she met his evil eye, she felt a shiver pass over her as if a blight were upon her. Sad is it when nature's sweet fountains are turned to bitterness.

When the letters she wrote at this juncture to her absent lover, intimating secret unhappiness, were afterward exhibited, it was believed by the superstitious that she had received some warning of the impending future; but in our rational days we find the natural explanation in the shock she had received from her grandfather's violent death, and the sadness resulting from the transition from a cheerful home to a murky atmosphere. She loved her mother, but their natural relation was reversed; she was the sustainer, her mother the dependant; and now Sibyl was too weak and dejected to bear the burden. Her little brother

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seems to have been her sole comfort. She often alludes to him in her letters, recounts anecdotes of his manliness, his devotion to her, and always interweaves his destiny with the web of her future life.

The time appointed for her marriage drew near. She would not listen to her father's suggestion to delay it. The day for her lover's return arrived. She went out alone, at twilight, to await him at a secluded spot a mile distant from her father's dwelling, where the road, after winding along the declivity of a steep, wooded hill that descended to the Housatonic, crossed a rickety old bridge. The river, noisy and shallow above the bridge, was there made deep and still by a dam erected a short distance below.

For the first time since her grandfather's death, Sibyl went out with her natural light step, and her face bright and smiling, and looking, as she cast aside her mourning veil, like the sun beaming forth from a drapery of clouds.

In less than an hour she returned, her face muffled in her veil, her dress disordered, and the agitation of her whole frame betraying emotions that she vainly struggled to conceal. Her mother—whose whole life was an illustration of that axiom made for woman,

"'Tis meet and fit,
In all we feel, to make the heart submit"—

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William, her lover, might yet arrive to-night, or, if he did not, another was coming;" and concluded with that common comfort of the experienced, which passes by the young like idle wind, "we must all learn to bear disappointments!" Sibyl's mother knew little of the manifestations of feeling, or she would have guessed a different cause than the mere delay of a lover's return for the horror painted on her child's countenance. She seemed to have shrank to

half her usual size. In reply to her mother, she only said, “I *cannot* help it; I *am* disappointed;” and when she heard her father’s footstep, returning at his usual hour, she said, in a half-suffocated voice, “For mercy’s sake, mother, take no more notice of it!”

It was not observed at the time, but Sibyl’s mother afterward remembered, in recalling all the circumstances, that her husband was less reserved than usual; that he mentioned some particulars of business he had been transacting in the village; said he had brought a letter from the postoffice for Sibyl; asked where she was—she had left the room before he entered—and sent her brother with the letter to her, telling him to wait and ask “what news there was in it.”

The boy lingered till called by his father, and then he said, “Sibyl was crying because William was not coming for a week.”

“So much the better! so much the better!” said Prime. He ate heartily, sat for a long time

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looking intently at the embers, and then went to bed, muttering to himself, “Not coming for a week!”

His wife, after waiting till she had sure tokens her husband was sleeping, stole to Sibyl’s room. She was not there! Submit was returning, alarmed, by a back passage, through her boy’s little room, when she found Sibyl sitting by his bedside, her head on the pillow close to his, and her cheek as white as the linen it pressed. She signed to her mother to leave the room, and she obeyed, as she always obeyed the motions of others; but she subsequently confessed that she had vague apprehensions excited. Sibyl did not appear the next morning till her father had gone to his daily occupations. It was evident she had passed a sleepless night. She was all day nervous and restless. In the afternoon, having ascertained that her father was gone to the village, and would not return till late in the evening, she announced to her mother a sudden determination to go to a

friend's, five miles from them, and remain there till her lover's return. Her mother remonstrated. There was no way of going but on foot, and the rustic girls of those days were not better pedestrians than those of ours. But the walk seemed no obstacle to Sibyl; she only asked that her brother might accompany her through "that dismal bit of woods"—so she called it—and as far as the bridge. To this her mother

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consented; but when, at parting, Sibyl threw her arms round her, and sobbed hysterically on her bosom, she felt some sad presentiment, and wished she had resisted, and kept her children at home.

The time came for the boy's return. He did not appear. The mother grew anxious. Again and again she went to the window, but there was no sign of him; again and again she fancied she heard his footsteps, but it proved to be the dog tramping up the steps, or some other sound as unlike that of his light tread. At last, beginning to feel that, where happiness is at stake, we never "learn to bear disappointments," she went forth in quest of him. She traversed the "dismal bit of woods," crossed and recrossed the bridge—which never could she cross again—and then, calming her mind with the conclusion that Sibyl must have taken her brother to her place of destination, she returned home.

Her husband came from the village, where he had been, as was afterward proved, detained, settling some complicated accounts. On first entering the house, he inquired for Sibyl. His wife told him, in an apologetic tone, as if deprecating his displeasure, that "poor Sibyl seemed as if she could not content herself," and had gone to spend a week with her friend. He grumbled something about "it being a poor bringing up that made a girl uneasy in her own father's house," and,

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as his wife said, seemed to think no more of it, for he was eating his supper as usual, when suddenly he broke off, and asked "if Dorset were abed." His wife communicated the boy's absence, and the supposition by which she explained it. Prime was not satisfied, but started up, exclaiming, "He did *not* go with her!" and after standing for a moment in evident agitation, he added, "I'll go and look after him," and left the house, but soon returned, saying, "To-morrow will be time enough." He went to bed at his customary hour, but not to sleep, as his wife thought, excepting once, for a few moments, when he started up, exclaiming, "No, it is *not* a dream; it is all *mine."* Ah, that word mine!

He was up with the first ray of light, professedly anxious about his boy. There could be no doubt he was intensely so; but, notwithstanding this, one of his neighbours afterward deposed that he saw him, soon after daylight, walking over John Dorset's cornfield, and pulling up some weeds that, since the proprietor's death, had, for the first time, been permitted to grow unmolested in the rich soil. After breakfast, he announced his intention of going in quest of his boy. His wife wondered when she saw him set forth on the circuitous road that did not pass over the bridge. He had not long been gone, when some men arrived from the village. One dismounted, entered the house, and

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inquired for Prime; his wife said he was absent, and told the occasion of his absence. There was something that alarmed her in the inquirer's face. She watched his return to his companions, saw them confer together, and afterward a part of them rode off, while the rest remained lurking about the house.

We must leave her wondering at this procedure, and tormented with apprehensions for her boy, to follow Prime, who, having gone to Sibyl's friend's on the pretence of ascertaining if his son were there, and being told that neither he nor Sibyl had been seen there, turned his course, and went up the river to Barrington, where an uncle of his wife resided, who had been observed the preceding evening driving on the road Sibyl had taken, and with whom, as he professed to believe, his children might have gone. Returning from Barrington, he was met by the party in search of him, and, in virtue of a warrant issued by Colonel Ashley, he was taken into custody, and conveyed to that magistrate's house. He submitted at once, declaring, however, that he was not conscious of having offended against the laws of God or man.

And here we have arrived at that point in the story where the narrator, with whom I began it, became an eye-witness. She was then a slave, belonging to Colonel Ashley—I believe the sole, but certainly the most eminent magistrate in the western part of Massachusetts

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in those days, when either the magistracy made great men, or great men were appointed to the magistracy. I remember seeing him in his extreme old age, when his "youthful hose" was

"A world too wide for his shrunk shank;"

but even then I was impressed with traditionary respect for his magisterial attributes, and for the gentler qualities that tempered the pride of office. He might have sat for the picture of Allworthy, for his temper was ever of the cream of the milk of human kindness.

It was twilight when Prime arrived at his house. He was immediately conducted to the office, where preparations had been made to receive him. When he entered, Colonel Ashley, instead of manifesting the compassion that seemed his instinct, turned away his face, as if an evil spirit in mortal shape had come before him. "Prime was the first guilty person," said my

informer, “that I ever saw the colonel look upon without pity!” Prime was himself undaunted, and was the first to speak. He demanded why he was brought there. Colonel Ashley signed to him to advance, and stand beside the table, and bade his clerk be ready to take notes. Then, after a solemn admonition to Prime to deport himself as became the solemnity of the occasion, he said, “The body of your child, Sibyl Prime, has been found in the river, below Pine Hill bridge, with evident tokens of having been placed there by violent hands.”

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“Who dares say it was I that put her there?” demanded Prime, fiercely.

“It would better befit you to be both still and humble,” replied the magistrate.

“I will be neither till I know who dares accuse *me.*”

“Miserable man, forbear! you shall both know and see your accuser;” and, turning to the servant, “Call in the witness,” he said.

Prime fixed his eyes on the door through which the witness was to enter, and, for the first time, some fading of colour was evident through his dark, leathery skin. He did not speak. It did not seem to have occurred to him that nature demanded some expression of horror and surprise at hearing of the murder of his child. His heart had ossified under one indurating passion, and he had forgotten the ebb and flows of nature’s current. Yet now the possibility of what might ensue to himself and his *possessions* thrilled through his frame; and while his eye was fixed with intense eagerness on the door, he vainly tried to subdue the throbbings of his heart with repeating mentally, “*There was no witness!”* The door was reopened. A witness did appear—his own son! It was at this moment that Daniel Prime’s hair rose and stood like quills upon his head; so said my informant, and I believed her; for, though a woman, her observation and judgment were stronger than her imagination. The boy seemed inspired

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with supernatural strength and intrepidity. He bore, without flinching, the scowling brow and burning glance of his father. “One would have reckoned,” said my eye-witness, “that he had grown ten years older in twenty-four hours.” The usual preliminary forms over, Colonel Ashley asked,

“Did your sister request you to accompany her on the Canaan road yesterday?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did she give any reason for wishing your company?”

“No, sir. She always loved to have me go with her, and I always loved to go.”

“How far did you go?”

“To Pine Hill bridge, sir.”

The examination was for a moment interrupted by a convulsive cough from Prime.

“Did your sister say anything by the way?” proceeded the magistrate.

“Yes, sir. She asked me if I would not be afraid to go back through the woods alone. I told her, not a bit, and asked her if she was afraid; she said, not when I was with her. And then I told her I would go all the way; but she said she should not be afraid after she got over the bridge, and down to the mill, for the road beyond there was not so lonesome.”

“Did she say anything more?”

“Yes, sir. She said she never should come home again, and she cried, and I told her I did not want to live at home when she was

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gone; and then she said she hoped, one of these days, mother and I would come and live with her and William; she said she was not coming to live in grandfather's house, but as soon as she was married she should move off somewhere."

"Was anything more said?"

"No, sir; only when we came near the bridge, she squeezed my hand so tight that I told her she hurt me. When we got over the bridge, she told me I must make haste home, and she bid me good-by, and said I must always be *very* kind to mother—and these were the last words she spoke."

"Go on, my child. What happened then?"

"I knew there was a sassafras tree that grew on the bank just above, and I wanted some sassafras, so I got over the fence; and when I got up the hill, I thought I'd just go on to Deacon Sam's Rock, as they call it, and watch Sibyl till she got past the mill, and the minute I stepped on to it I saw *him.*"

"Saw whom?"

"*Father."*

At this point of the testimony Prime's knees shook together, and he was obliged to support himself by leaning on the colonel's desk, against which he stood.

"Go on, my poor child," said the good magistrate.

"He had a club," continued the boy; "Sibyl had just come to the corner—she heard him,

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and looked back—he struck the club across her face." The boy paused, and became intensely pale. Colonel Ashley passed his arm around him, and supported him.

"And what then?" he asked.

"Then," replied the boy, with a burst of tears and sobs, "then Sibyl fell back and—died—sir."

"He lies! he lies!" cried Prime, vehemently. Colonel Ashley commanded silence, soothed the boy, and bade him proceed.

"Then, sir, he dragged her down the bank, and through that miry place where the trees are so thick, and he put her in the river, and put a stone on her head, and another on her feet."

"Did he then come away?"

"Yes, sir, a few steps; but he went back again, and got her purse out of her pocket, and put it inside his leather pocket-book."

"Lord have mercy on us!" murmured Colonel Ashley. After a moment's pause of horror at this proof of the man's cupidity, he asked the boy "if he knew whether his sister had any money in her purse?"

"Yes, sir, she had five gold pieces that grandfather gave her. She was showing them to mother only two days ago; and *he* took them, and chinked them in his hand."

"Did your father then leave the spot?"

"Yes, sir; he got over the fence, and went across the lots very fast."

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"Why did you not scream when first you saw him?"

"It was not half a minute, sir, before he struck, and I never thought of any harm till it was all done."

"Why did you not then scream?"

"I don't know, sir; I suppose I could not."

"If you were so frightened, why did you not run away?"

"I don't know, sir. After Sibyl fell dead, I can't remember about feeling afraid, or feeling anything. I only stood there and looked. After *he* was gone, I began to think. I felt as if I could not go home and tell mother; then I thought I would stay in the woods till I died, and nobody would ever know *he* did it; and the night came—oh! such a long night! I did not sleep—I think I shall never sleep again. When daylight came, I felt as if I should burst if I did not tell somebody. I thought of you, sir. I remembered mother telling me you never punished anybody more than you could help, and so I came here, sir."

Here ended the poor boy's story, which hardly seemed to require the corroborating proof afterward derived, from finding Sibyl's purse within her father's pocket-book, and from ascertaining that he had informed himself of her intention of leaving home on that fatal afternoon.

It is hardly necessary to add, that Prime was committed for trial. After his trial and

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condemnation to death, he confessed he had made an attempt on his child's life on the day preceding the murder, and near the same place. He had been baffled by the sudden appearance of a horseman on the road.

It appears that the boy's grief at the fatal result of his accusation of his father so moved Colonel Ashley's kind heart, that he accompanied the child to Boston, and seconded his affecting appeal to the governor in behalf of his parent. It was alleged that the man's mind was so clouded and diseased by the predominance of his ruling passion, that he might be regarded as insane. This consideration, combining with compassion for his unfortunate and respectable family, induced the governor to commute the sentence of death to banishment.