

"And I am more curious to see the uninhabited rooms at Portogense than to see the... Mrs. Joseph abruptly turned away, and asked more questions. She retired to a corner of the room near the door, where the chair bedstead stood which the Doctor had pointed out to her—occupied herself for a few minutes in making it up for the night—then left it as a sudden, she approached him, and began to walk up and down, once more. This unaccountable restlessness, which had already surprised Rosamond, now made her feel rather uneasy—especially when she once or twice overheard Mrs. Joseph talking to herself. Judging by words and fragments of sentences that were audible now and then, her mind was still running, with the most insupportable persistency, on the subject of Portogense. As the minutes wore on, and she continued to walk up and down, and still saying nothing, Rosamond's uneasiness began to strengthen to something like alarm. She resolved to awaken Mrs. Joseph in the least offensive manner, to a sense of the strangeness of her own conduct, by noticing that she was talking to herself.

"What did you say?" asked Rosamond—putting the question at a moment when the nurse's voice was most distinctly betraying her in the act of thinking aloud. Mrs. Joseph stopped, and raised her head, as if she had been awakened out of a heavy sleep. "I thought you were saying something more about our old house," continued Rosamond. "I thought I heard you say that I ought not to go to Portogense, or that you would not go there in my place, or something of that sort."

Mrs. Joseph blushed like a young girl. "I think you must have been mistaken, ma'am," she said, with a look of embarrassment. "I was watching her anxiously, Rosamond said that, while she was affecting to arrange the bedstead, she was doing nothing whatever to prepare it for being slept in. What did that mean? What did her whole conduct mean for the last half hour? As Mrs. Frankland asked herself those questions, the thrill of a terrible suspicion turned her cold to the very roots of her hair. It had never occurred to her before, but it suddenly struck her now with the force of positive conviction that the new nurse was not in her right senses.

All that was unaccountable in her behavior—her odd disappearances behind the curtains, at the foot of the bed; her lingering, stealthy, or familiar way of using the hair-brush; her silence at one time, her talkativeness at another, her restlessness, her whispering to herself, her affection of being deeply engaged in doing something which she was not doing at all—every one of her strange actions (otherwise incomprehensible as became intelligible) in a moment on that point. "I am sure," Rosamond kept her presence of mind. One of her arms stole instinctively round the child; and she had half raised the other to catch at the bell-rope hanging above her pillow, when she saw Mrs. Joseph turn and look at her.

A woman possessed only of ordinary nerve would, probably, at that instant, have pulled at the bell-rope in the uttermost desperation, or at least have rung the bell, or done enough to calculate consequences, and to remember that Mrs. Joseph would have time to lock the door before assistance could arrive, if she betrayed her suspicions by ringing without first assigning some plausible reason for doing so. She slowly closed her eyes as the nurse looked at her, partly to convey the notion that she was composing herself to sleep—partly to gain time to think of some safe excuse for summoning her maid. The flurry of her spirits, however, interfered. Her exercise of her ingenuity, and her first minute dragged on heavily, and still she could think of no plausible excuse for ringing the bell.

She was just doubting whether it would be safe to send Mrs. Joseph out of the room, on some message to her husband, to lock the door the moment she was alone, and then to ring—she was just doubting whether she would boldly adopt this course of proceeding, or not, when she heard the rustle of the nurse's silk dress approaching the bedside. Her first impulse was to stretch at the bell-rope; but her hand had passed her head; she could not raise it from the pillow. The rustling of the silk dress ceased. She half unclosed her eyes and saw that the nurse was stooping midway between the part of the room from which she had advanced, and the bedside. There was nothing wild or angry in her look. The agitation which her face expressed was the agitation of perplexity and alarm. She stood rapidly clasping and unclasping her hands, the image of bewilderment and distress—stood so for a rapidly a minute—then came forward a few steps more, and said, inquiringly, in a whisper, "Not asleep? Not quite asleep, yet?" Rosamond tried to speak in answer, but the quick beating of her heart seemed to rise up to her very lips, and to stifle the words on them.

The nurse came on, still with the same perplexity and distress in her face, to within a foot of the bedside—knelt down by the pillow, and looked earnestly at Rosamond—shuddered a little, and planned all her words, and yet withal that the room was empty—then, with a half-heated, half-alarmed, and whispered into her ear these words: "When you go to Portogense, keep out of the Myrtle Room." The hot breath of the woman, as she spoke, beat on Rosamond's cheek, and seemed to fly in one fever through every vein in her body. The nervous shock of that unutterable sensation burst the bonds of the terror that had hitherto held her motions and speech. She started up in bed with a scream, caught hold of the bell-rope, and pulled it violently. "Oh, hush! hush!" cried Mrs. Joseph, sinking back on her knees, and beating her hands together despairingly with the helpless gesture of a child. Rosamond ran again and again. Hurrying footsteps and eager voices were heard outside on the stairs. It was not ten o'clock yet—nobody had retired for the night—and the violent ringing had already alarmed the household.

The nurse rose to her feet, staggered back from the bedside, and supported herself against the wall of the room, as the footsteps and the voices reached the door. She said not another word. The hands that she had been beating together so violently but an instant before hung down nerveless at her side. The blank of a great agony spread over all her face, and stilled it awfully. The first person who entered the room was Mrs. Frankland's maid, and the lady followed her. "What Mr. Frankland!" said Rosamond, faintly, addressing the landlady. "I want to speak to him directly. You," she continued, beckoning to the maid, "sit by me here till your master comes. I have been dreadfully frightened. Don't ask me questions; but stop here." The maid stared at her mistress in amazement, then looked round with a disparaging frown at the nurse. When the landlady left the room to fetch Mr. Frankland, she had moved a little away from the bed. Her face had assumed a full view of the bed. Her eyes fixed with a look of healthless suspense, of devouring anxiety, on Rosamond's face. From all other objects of the expression seemed to be gone. She did not speak, she noticed nothing. She did not start, she did not move since an inch, when the landlady returned, and led Mr. Frankland to his wife. "Leony! don't let the new nurse stop here to-night! pray, don't!" whispered Rosamond, eagerly catching her husband by the arm. "Frankland had his finger lightly on her temple as he spoke. Only her eyes were open, and she said nothing more."

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