

The Nemesis of Motherhood

Harriet Prescott Spofford

Table of Contents

<u>The Nemesis of Motherhood</u>	1
<u>Harriet Prescott Spofford</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	5
<u>III</u>	7

The Nemesis of Motherhood

Harriet Prescott Spofford

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- I
- II
- III

"There are two moments in a diver's life:
One, when a beggar he prepares to plunge,
One, when a prince he rises with his pearl.
Festus, I plunge." -- Browning.

The Nemesis of Motherhood

I

THE hospital of the prison was little more than a whitewashed corridor with bald daylight coming through the high gratings. The nurse was neither soft-footed nor soft-hearted.

But the woman occupying one of the cots there was as oblivious of outer circumstances as if she were in the middle of a cloud. It was, in fact, thick cloud that swathed her, body and soul, in black shadow, as she lay there with her baby three days old. If she herself had ever been fair to see, there was small reason to suspect the possibility now; and the little dark atom of humanity she held would perhaps have given any but its mother a feeling of repulsion.

She had been sentenced to a term of years at hard labor for her crime. Although a young woman, she was an old offender. It was held among the officials that there was nothing so bad or so vile that she might not be a part of its wickedness. She had lived on the plane of an animal, an exceedingly cunning and rather vicious animal. Her memories, could she have awakened them, would have revolted any listener however abandoned, and have hardened the heart of an angel.

Yet as she lay there and felt the little new being at her breast, two great tears welled from under her closed eyelids and paused upon her cheeks; a sunbeam through the grating touched them and painted in them the reflection of all heaven. The nurse saw the sunbeam, and drew the shade down; no one looked for any reflection of heaven in that woman's tears.

She was suffering little from her physical troubles, although prostrate from weakness. She knew that everything was wrong with her; but that did not trouble her; she had been in hell too long, she would have said, to fear now; and, to her, death, not birth, seemed a sleep and a forgetting. But through all her varied experience, this was her first child; and the condition where she found herself was a new hell, and one undreamed of before. This little creature, drawing her life into itself, was something for which she felt a fierce protecting instinct — an unspeakable and angry need of interposing herself between it and the cruelty of the world. Her child — it was foreordained by fate that it must suffer. Her daughter — there was not power enough in the universe to hinder her from sharing her mother's lot. The child must grow up in the alleys, in the gutters. Her first words would be oaths; little criminals would be her companions; sin must be her daily sight, evil must be her atmosphere; she the bantling of a ribald moment, and by right of descent possessor of her mother's indecency. Wrong would come to her earlier than it had come to herself — she remembered sharply the first stirring of the vicious impulses in herself, the first temptation; the first yielding; the bad, bitter joy; the end in wretchedness, in despair, in ruin. He had gone free — and where there was one of her there were ten of him — and she felt the multitude of him lying in wait for this girl drawing now from her veins the impulse, the yielding, the riot, the rage; and once more the fierce instinct of protection made her clasp the child so closely that it cried out with a feeble cry.

The nurse came and looked at her curiously and saw the tear and went away. The child dropped off to sleep. But far from sleep was the mother, with a fire ravaging her brain. She saw the way marked out for this child; she saw not only that, but the bleeding feet with which she must tread it.

But yet — it was not impossible — she could be saved from all that. There were people who could take her out and away, who could surround her with the things of a different life — she who was innocent now.

Innocent? Was she innocent, this child born with an injured body, with a diseased soul? No intelligence, no cunning, no benevolence, could evade the inevitable. For what she was, that her child was. You do not gather figs from thistles. What she had made herself, she had made her child; what she had become, that her child became also. In being born, the child became all that. This soft and shapeless lip was ready for the lie; those tiny clutching fingers for the theft; those helpless hands for the secret murder; that body would grow lithe and supple for all sin, and would one day wither in the fire of pain. Born vile, to wallow in slime, the child would take only what was given to it — from the unknown, nameless father corruption; from the mother the blackness of shameless things of midnight. All that the mother had done she would do; all that the mother had suffered she would suffer. Had there been any happiness in her part? Not one jot. The child would live to curse the day she saw the light.

She rose on one arm and looked at it. She laid her thin hand on its thin cheek. Her heart suddenly stood still with a wild, unused sensation — could it be love for the child? She fell back on her pillow a chill sweat of horror

The Nemesis of Motherhood

covering her. All this evil she had given her child in giving it life.

There was something else she could give it.

In the morning the nurse and the doctor could not say that the mother had not overlain the child in sleep. It did not seem best to make any search into the affair, since for this mother's child death was so much better than life.

The Nemesis of Motherhood

II

Every sound in the large and lovely room was muffled by the rich rugs, the silk-hung walls, the heavy curtains. A fire burnt low on the hearth and sent a ruby shadow here and there, flickering over the alabaster vase, the ivory carving, the water-color on the panel, the blue silk coverlet and the billowy lace about the bed. The room was full of the fragrance of a hundred roses. An attendant, velvet-shod, carried away a small gold tray with a bowl of china as translucent as a flower; another nurse sat by the fire and dreamed over the pillow that lay across her knee. All seemed well with the young mother; all seemed well with the child.

She rested deep among her pillows, in a sleepy content; but quite determined on no more experience of this sort. Why could not the race have been continued in some other way? It really seemed as if there were some malevolence toward women. How much she had missed since they forbade her to dance or to ride. The idea of her foregoing all her pleasures for this — and life so short at the best! She would be on a horse again the moment she was able, before the frosty weather was all gone. She had lost the Hunt Ball, as it was. Well, here was the heir, anyway; and he would have to do.

A gush of music came through an opening door or window, a thrill of violins and flutes; there was a small and early german in the next house — how vexatious to be here! And all the rehearsals for the theatricals were over without her; and every one had declared there could never be such a Cleopatra as she; and she had ropes and ropes of pearls to wear, and miles of rose-colored gauzes half to hide and half to reveal the rose-colored tights. Very likely there would have been a fuss; but what was the use of being beautiful all to yourself? At all events, the gauzes would do for the skirt-dances they were going to give for the Blenheim Spaniel Hospital.

There would be some cotillions, anyway, before Lent. She hoped she wasn't going to come out of all this with her color gone. And her figure — it would be a pity if the gowns that had just come from Paris shouldn't fit her now. She would have the boxes opened to-morrow and the gowns spread out for inspection — one of them ought to be simply exquisite — cherry-colored satin, the front embroidered with seed-pearls, cut very low, but with a high ruff, and clouds of old Venice point. Lester van Dycke always said when she wore that shade that Watteau should have painted her. Poor Lester — she couldn't understand why there should have been any feeling about that little flirtation; he was only teaching her how to smoke a cigarette like Carmen. And then it was diverting to see just how far you could go and stop. And really she had been awfully hard up when he lost that money to her at poker. Thank goodness, it was all paid back before he was sent off on that whaling voyage to break up his drinking. How people do slip in and out of your life. — What was that woman doing now? Oh, indeed — they needn't bring that baby to her; she didn't want him.

The nurse, a wise woman as nurses were in the days of Pharaoh, turned down the silken sheet and laid on the mother's arm the bundle of soft wool and filmy lace, baring the little pink face. "I never supposed babies looked like that. Isn't he comical? And you needn't think I'm going to nurse him," she meant to say aloud, but really said only to herself. "He can be brought up by hand; or you may get all the foster-mothers you please. I won't be tied down by a chain two or three hours long, and grow a fright into the bargain!"

"We can't let the little man starve," the nurse was saying. "At any rate, just for the present," she urged. "Till the doctor comes again and we can get just what is wanted."

Were all nurses like this? Wasn't she compelling? A sort of civilized She. Well, if she must. But not to keep it up. How absurd! How perfectly ridiculous! But they were not to think she was going on with it and forego the races and the yachting and everything else. "Don't you know," she said in her thoughts to the baby, "that you're dreadfully in my way?"

The baby smiled — the vacuous little grimace of a baby — and opened his eyes. "Dear me," she said. "How interesting! Do you imagine he sees me? Fancy! And look at the fingers — aren't they quite perfect? And his eyes — why, they're really — just look at the little fine corners! Do you suppose he knows I'm his mother? Oh, I am his mother!" And the little head had snuggled into place. She gazed at him in a bewildered wonder: something seemed to be taking hold of her very heart-strings. Oh, this scrap of a creature was part of her life itself! She had made him! She had struck this spark of a soul into a being! The idea! But why? The dear person had a soul, of course. And she fell to wondering what kind of soul it was. What kind of a soul — why, didn't people say the son

The Nemesis of Motherhood

was the avatar of the mother? A soul like hers, to be sure. My gracious, what kind of a soul was hers?

It seemed suddenly to be growing black everywhere about her, whether owing to the new sensations and to exhaustion, or to the too illuminating thought. All along the dusky wall she saw written in letters of flame, Mene, mene, tekel upharsin. She half laughed to think it should be in plain, every-day characters instead of Persian script. Thou art weighed in the balance — and found wanting.

What did it mean? What was weighed? What was found wanting? And what was this blackness? Was she fainting? Or, oh, was she dying!

Heavens! Was this dying? Was she sinking, failing, letting go of life? Don't let her die! Oh, don't let her die! She didn't want to leave all these pleasant things. She was afraid. For, oh, she was not fit to die! She must have made some exclamation, for the nurse was sprinkling her face. "It is all right," the woman was saying. "She is coming to. It's not unusual." Yes; it was no longer black about her: she was in the middle of a great light; she seemed to be withering in it, like a leaf in the fire. In the middle of the great light she saw herself for what she was. In that unknown and vast beyond, her little worthless soul would be lost. That was the kind of soul she had — a little, worthless, paltering one.

That was the kind of soul, then, she had given to her boy. He was to grow up in this great moving world as trifling, as light-minded, as slight as she, she who cared only for the pleasures that waste the body and starve the soul! His little velvet cheek lay on her breast — oh, how dear he was; how sweet he was, the little new person! And she had made him as useless, as light as a bubble. She recalled a deceit she had practised just before his birth — a scandal she had stimulated; the case that had been laid before her of bringing out a poor man's family for just the money that would buy the emerald cross she wanted, and she had taken refuge behind the immigration laws, and there were the emeralds in her jewel-case; her face burnt to remember the champagne she drank the night she first wore those emeralds — heaven knows what silly things she said! Yes, yes; there was no help for it, this son of hers would want ease, glitter, wine, bibelots! Pleasures that had been follies in her would be follies in him, too, and worse than follies. Her frivolity would be in him effeminacy, her idleness would have made him a voluptuary. He would know nothing and care less for the sin and sorrow on his right hand and his left; he would not waste an hour of his laughing life on any of the grief and pain that made discord in the music. A silken sybarite, he would yield to every temptation; every gaiety would allure him. The thrones of the world might rock, he would not know it if his clubs were sound. His ambitions would be in his clothes, in his horses. He would have no strength to fight the forces of evil — he would be a part of them. Insufficient, of no purpose in the great scheme of the growth of the race — oh, was she thinking of her boy, her little son, the dear new, tender life? And then again that sinking, that slipping into outer darkness.

No, no, she must overcome it; she must not die; there was something for her to do; she could not afford to die! She could not have him, when his time came, go out into the dark the trumpery thing she was herself, as he needs must if she did not live to hinder it. He would be without strength to resist the press of evil, for she had given him no strength; he would be without impulse to do good, for she had given him no impulse; he would be without value in the scales of the universe, for she had given him no value. She must live to lead him past the temptation, for she would recognize it; to bid him to see the pitfall; to find, herself, and show to him, the shining mark beyond; to help him in all those straits and perils where being her son, he must otherwise be helpless. That other woman whom the doctor was to bring, that foster-mother, she must go away again. They should give her something for her own baby; but she could not have this one. She might be a better woman; he might draw force and will from her; but from his own mother he would draw love, and the love should keep him safe.

The fire fell, and all was still in the room. The nurse drowsed in her chair. The very roses seemed to hush themselves in dropping now and then a petal lest they wake the mother and the child from their deep, sweet, regenerating sleep.

The Nemesis of Motherhood

III

There was but one room in the log-cabin of the forest clearing. The summer moonlight poured in a flood of pale-green silver through the open door and the windows, glorifying all the place.

The young mother, lying there with her first-born beside her, had done what she could to make the spot homelike till something better should replace it; and it wore a certain reminiscence of castle halls in the tapestry of skins, in the huge antlers, in the crossed arms.

The woman, who had come from a dozen miles away to be with her now — one to whose help she had gone herself when the forest-fever smote the household there, was in the lean-to with the doctor. The husband was out hunting, unaware of the imminence of the event; and the two lads were with him. There was no one in the room but the mother and her child.

No one? What was this shape in the moonlight — this shining mist — the winged shape of a great angel, gleaming obscurely in the bloom of the broad glow? What the darker shape of another that seemed the shadow of the first? Or were they shapes at all, or more than the phantasmagoria of a failing brain?

She was too weak to note anything closely; but she felt in long thrills through all her frame the soft, slow breathing of the baby at her side, and her soul was full of a rapture of gladness. She felt, moreover, vaguely conscious of a certain dim sense of triumph, for although her father's holdings had gone in a distant branch to the heir male, she knew that she, inheriting of her father, that her son, inheriting of her, truly represented the race — not that son of many alien mothers who now had name and place.

Left dowerless, through mishap, she had married a man of adventurous spirit, and had come out here, a pioneer, to begin fresh life; her son was to be one of the makers of the new world. But of none of this she thought now or was aware, save as a dull undercurrent. She faintly remembered thinking before he was born that this child was to be the flower of his race; that his mother must make him so; that his mother's father had already made him so — that father in whom there had been no taint of dishonor, of self-seeking, of uncleanness, of distemper of mind or body. Perhaps the nobility had lain dormant in herself; she had feared that; she had tried to rouse it — but on the whole had given herself small time to dwell upon it. There had been far too much to do to think if she possessed virtues and graces. She had had plans, in the early days, of great work among the prisons she would visit, and the help she would give the convict people; of the way in which she would bring pleasure to certain of the insane; and, when war broke out, of the help she might be as an army nurse — she familiar with sick-rooms. But she had had no chance to bring herself to proof; for her father had needed her every hour. And when he had died, she had married a poor man, a prince among poor men as she felt, and she had come out with him to build a new home under new conditions. As, upon the voyage, she had looked over at those in the steerage, her heart had swelled with pity, and with a sense of being in reality one of them, with no right to more ease; she had gone in among them, and an old woman there had died in her arms, and to the child of a poor young wife she had rendered the first offices. And as her foot touched shore her heart had swelled again, but with a sort of ecstasy, thinking of the great promise this land gave to the oppressed of all the earth. On the train across the country she had found two little lads whose people had died and who were bewildered at their homeless condition; and she and her husband had taken them to their home in the wilderness.

Over here life had not been easy; but she had given no sign. It had been beyond her strength; but she had never faltered. She was making home and happiness and she had found a vivid joy in it. She had been lonesome in the long days of necessary solitude; but no one knew it. She had been home-sick for old sights, old faces, old luxuries; but there was always a smile on her lip when any one looked. Sometimes her husband took her with him on his errands to the distant town, and as she saw the busy people going to and fro a great love swept from her to one and all of them. And when her child was coming, she was so glad of him that that love for others seemed only to have opened the way for an inexhaustible fountain of love flowing to him and through him. She had a sort of smiling memory that it took generations to make a gentleman — it had meant generations of mothers, of course; and after all was a gentleman in the first place other than a man of the people who loved his people? Fate must have begun in season with her child. She searched herself, if by mischance any hidden sin in her could come to light in him; she had prayed almost hourly that he might have truth, courage, a pure heart, a generous hand, a

The Nemesis of Motherhood

selfless spirit, and that, when the ordeal came, if one must go, the child should stay and have his share of the joy of the world that she had found so sweet, unwitting that her very prayer gave him all the loftiness she craved for him.

And now the son had been born to her and slept beside her, a strong and lusty boy, the builder, possibly, of a new race; surely, as she had dreamed, the last richness of an old one. She lay with indistinct, half-wandering fancies, looking into the pouring moonlight. For a moment she was quite sure she saw them — the two great angels; and then the eyelids dropped dreamily, and she saw no more.

"It is a child," said the shadowy angel, hovering over the bed, "whose mother had given him the strength that becomes a man, who has a place to take in the world, a work to do, and a will to do it. The race needs him. He is yours."

"It is a mother," said the shining angel, "who has already given her child the welcome that makes a joyous soul. He shall not miss her smile. He is what she is. He will need love since he will give so much. And she is all compact of love. She is one of the forces of Life. Death, I cannot surrender her."

And the dark angel fled away into the moonlight, and the shining one fanned sleeping mother and child with his wings.