

Part II Chapter 46 –Rhodora 1851-1852

By September when the Dalys returned, they had more important matters than Lena's new dress to attend to. Where they would stay was their chief concern.

Mr. Daly had agreed that it was only right that his wife and their children be given the big house on Washington Square. Since beginning his relationship with the actress he had maintained rooms at the Union Club, close to the courthouse and to his office and to the theaters. He frequently stayed there to be closer to her. He amiably agreed to vacate the family home, if he were allowed to visit the children there whenever he liked. Mrs. Daly's lawyer had only to notify him when she wished to move back in. He would take Mr. Ruggles with him as his butler/valet.

Mrs. Jones won the first round of a tug-of-war and the family were returning, not to Washington Square, but to Second Avenue, where Mrs. Jones began a campaign to keep her daughter and grandchildren with her.

"You see how frail I am, Helena. How can she think to leave me now?" Mrs. Jones protested..

"She needs to regain her life. Before I moved here last year, she went out in the afternoons, had friends over for cards. Now she acts like an old lady, pretending she can't live without me,." Mrs. Daly complained.

Finally, it was agreed that they would move back home at Christmas. Mrs. Jones would have her own room with them to stay whenever she liked.. .

Amidst all this, no one mentioned or even noticed Lena's new dress, until one day Will, passing her on the stairs, glanced at her and laughed, "Lena! I see you took my advice!"

"Oh, yes, it's all owing to you."

"Well, you look much better."

"Thank you so much. Your approval was all I longed for!"

"It's a big improvement. You really did look wretched." If they were teasing each other, it hurt.

Mrs. Daly heard them speaking to each other and called, "Will, come down here, please."

Lena ducked quickly into Mrs. Jones' rooms, where after plumping up the cushions for Mrs. Jones she resumed her reading. She thought she caught murmured phrases, "apologize," "needs our support" "pity," "so poor" . . . "be kind".

Mrs. Jones appeared to have dozed off so Lena could stop reading. "Pity . . . support . . . poor." Had Mrs. Daly really said that to Will? She was shocked and hurt. Was she only given this employment because Mrs. Daly felt sorry for them? Was she another of Mrs. Daly's charities and improvement projects? Did Mrs. Daly regard her as an opportunity of benevolence? How could she accept kindness based on pity? What would Will think of her?

She felt insignificant, as if her only worth could come from what her family owned. Most of the girls she knew at school came from families like hers--large families with fathers who were laborers. Most older children like her worked. Why should anyone feel sorry for them? Why would Mrs. Daly pity her family and why warn her son? She supposed it was better than being blamed for being poor, as they sometimes were. ..

Finally, Lena brought herself to confront her mother with her feelings. "Is it true, Mama, that Mrs. Daly employs me only because she feels sorry for us and wants to help our family? Are we another of her reform projects???? How can I hold my head high knowing that I am a charity case??? Papa refuses charity, didn't he? I don't want anyone to pity me or us! In school I was always a leader, at the head of my class. I've never been pitied. You remember, Mama—all my teachers encouraged me to continue school? Now I feel as if all that was nothing. I have no future." She began weeping.

"You were a good student, Lena, and you were lucky to have received as much education as you did. You remember how many girls your age had to go to work to help their families much earlier than you did? And you are lucky Mrs. Daly wants to employ you. If it weren't you, it would be someone else. You get to work in a good family, where you are able to see good manners and breeding, rather than in a laundry or doing house cleaning. With my fancy education, I worked as a cleaner and kitchen helper in a rooming house when we first came."

Lena went to work with a load on her heart after that. All her natural lightness and buoyancy, her boldness and bravery had left her, extinguished by her servant's role. She retreated into modesty and decorum. "I will behave as if I expect nothing of life," she told herself. "Mama is right; I am lucky to have gotten as much as I did and now to have this position."

Little John seemed to sense her confusion. He could barely wait until she came home each day and ran to hug or jump on her. He followed her around and asked nothing but to be with her, and, if she were busy, as was usually the case,

to help her. "You're my own true sweetheart, Johnny darling. You love me for myself, and I love you too."

Will met her as she came up the stairs one day. "What's got into you, Lena? Have you given up? Have you lost your courage? You're not even fighting with me anymore."

Lena just shook her head, took off her bonnet, and headed in silence toward Mrs. Jones' rooms.

"Lena, if you're still angry with me, forgive me. I was just teasing you. You were right. I was a lout."

"It isn't about you, Will. I don't have anything against you. It's my problem. I can't talk about it. I'm sorry. Please, don't insist." She closed the door and retreated behind her "servant's veil," as she thought of it.

She buried herself in what she could do for Mrs. Jones, fussing over her and brushing her hair, plumping her cushions. She had decided that she preferred reading Reverend McCheyne to Emerson, and had asked Lena to read from the *Ten Virgins and Other Sermons on the End Times*. The sermons afforded her great comfort, and Lena noticed they even kept her awake. She personally didn't find Rev. McCheyne nearly as interesting as Emerson, but managed to find some passages that helped her.

"You will never find Jesus so precious as when the world is one vast howling wilderness. Then he is like a rose blooming in the midst of the desolation, a rock rising above the storm." She pictured herself in a howling wilderness, adrift on a vast sea, and saw that precious rose, that rock rising above the storm. She could cling to that rock.

After enough reading, Mrs. Jones would ask her to ring for lunch, after which she liked to nap, then have tea, then, if any of the grandchildren were about, she sent Lena to ask them to come join her for a game of whist. Molly was usually home from school by then and was so obedient that she always came. Will had previously complained that he hadn't time to play cards, avoided answering the door if possible. Since his mother had talked to him, however, he made himself available, and seemed almost eager to join.

Because Molly didn't want to be his partner, claiming he always cheated, Lena had to play opposite him. He was on his best behavior, Lena noticed, amusing his grandmother with his antics, leaning over to see his sister's or grandmother's cards, seeming to find these games hilarious, forcing Lena to laugh with the rest.

As her partner, he surreptitiously signaled her his strategies, nudging her with his foot under the table if he wanted her to raise his bid, clearing his throat to warn her not to raise it, winking when he was about to take a trick. Lena did not want to give him away, lest Molly might object and stop playing. She began to enjoy his secret communications and to look forward to the days when Mrs. Jones would call for a game of whist. She tried to conceal her disappointment when no one was available or Mrs. Jones didn't want to play.

The mounting number of immigrants arriving in New York brought news of the rising scale of famine deaths; the mounting tide of Irish immigrants threatened to engulf the city. Nativists--as native-born Americans were proudly called--organized secret societies with patriotic-sounding names like the *Order of United Americans* and the *Order of the Star-Spangled Banner*, to keep immigrants out, or at least, out of the mainstream of society for years. They nominated candidates who aimed at passing laws requiring that all candidate for public office be native-born, and that citizenship be granted only after 25 years of residence. When asked about their societies, members would only say "I know nothing," and were naturally called "the Know-Nothings."

The new immigrants affected everyone, even Tom and Bridget. They had received no news of their families for several years. The last Bridget heard, her family had lost the lease on their cot and had gone to live with relatives who hadn't yet been evicted from their plot. Since then she had heard nothing. Now, suddenly, word came through the Immigrant Aid Society that her father had died in the summer of 1850, and that relatives with whom he and her mother had been living had been evicted and taken refuge in the poorhouse. There was no way of finding them once they disappeared in the poorhouse.

Bridget was distraught. First she had lost his namesake, now she had lost him. She was still young—only thirty-seven. She might have more children. If she were blessed with another son, he too would be William, after her dear father. She hoped her hunch proved right, that she was pregnant

For Christmas that year, Lena was given a whole week off, during which Mrs. Daly would be moving back to Washington Square. Her last day of work, she was surprised to receive a gift from Mrs. Jones, who never usually gave her anything.

"Will said that you enjoyed reading Emerson with me and suggested you might like this," Mrs. Jones told her.

It was a book of Emerson's poems. She looked inside the cover and saw that it was inscribed "Christmas, 1851. To Helena, our Rhodora." She thanked them,

wished them joyful Christmas and New Year, and left, eager to discover what “Rhodora” meant. She would find the meaning in one of the poems, she hoped.

She had no chance even to open the book at home, as she was never alone. She hid it in a basket with her few other treasures from school. She was immediately borne on the spinning carousel of preparing meals; feeding, changing, bathing, clothing, napping and caring for the younger children; cleaning, cooking and baking; going to Mass on Christmas making holiday visits.

It wasn't until Saturday after Christmas, that she had a chance to be alone. She went to Confession—her parents would go with Daniel once she returned. She took the book into the darkened church and sat in a pew where others knelt waiting their turn. Opening the book, she read the inscription again and looked at the Table of Contents.

There indeed was a poem titled, *The Rhodora*.

*On being asked, Whence is the flower?
In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.*

“To Helena, our Rhodora.” She read it again and again. She had never heard of the flower, but Emerson called it “the rival of the rose”! It seemed to be a flower that bloomed in a hidden place where no one could see it but birds like the “red-bird,” the cardinal. It must be a red flower, and it rivaled the rose! If she were sentimental, she would be flattered at the implication that like the flower, her charm was wasted, blooming in a hidden place.

“Beauty is its own excuse for being.” Somehow she felt that Will was sending her a message of reassurance. “Why thou wert there, . . . I never knew, But . . . suppose, The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.” She took it as a kind gesture from Will, wanting to make her feel good after their fight, telling

her that he saw it. No, she wouldn't read too much into it. The servant veil would protect her.

She made her Confession with a lighter heart and didn't mention that she had despairing thoughts and sometimes wondered if God was good and just.

Before she could return to Mrs. Jones', she received word to come instead to Mrs. Daly's house instead. Mrs. Jones had gone there to spend Christmas with them, and hadn't felt well and was staying on for a brief time.

At the Daly's, Lena was surprised to find that Mrs. Jones had suddenly become incapacitated. She had been given a spacious room located at the front of the house on the second floor, similar to her own room at home.

"Come here, Helena, and help me to the day-bed by the window," she asked. "It's warm here with the sun coming in. I couldn't think of going out now in the snow." There she would lie, staring at the street, interrupting Lena's reading with an occasional sigh or groan. Her daughter stopped by more frequently. All the children made a fuss over her. At length Mrs. Jones became too feeble to rise out of bed. A nurse was hired to look after her. Lena was let go for a while, "until Mother regains her health." The family became genuinely concerned.

"Will Grandma die?" Molly asked. Lena wondered privately if the woman were really ill or simply relished the attention.

Bridget was loath to lose the wages, but could use Lena with her, as she was preparing for the birth of someone whom she hoped she could name William.

Within a month, Lena was called back. "Mother wants to get out of bed, Helena. She's ready to take a few steps. A nurse is really not necessary. All she needs is someone to get her out of bed, support her, to push her about in a wheel-chair, and maybe read to her and play cards with her."

Lena noticed that during the time she had been away, Mrs. Jones had managed to have most of her necessities moved over to her new quarters and her extended stay had been long enough to establish a routine. She clearly planned to stay as long as her daughter would allow.

Lena assisted her out of bed, then gradually about her room, then out into the hall. She wanted to go down stairs but was afraid of falling. "Why did they let me get to this point, Helena? Why didn't they make me stay on my feet?"

It was thanks to Will that she eventually came down stairs. She insisted that she could do it by herself, if he could hold her up, but in the end, he carried her. .

By May, she wanted Will to carry her wheel chair down the steps, then carry her down, so that she could sit while he and Lena pushed her about in the park.

“I want to see the carriages and hear the sounds of the horses and see movement and life.”

She sat bundled up, holding her sunshade, quietly watching the parade of pedestrians and carriages while Will and Lena sat on a park bench nearby waiting for her to ask to be taken in. Before long she was dozing in the warm sunshine.

The two young people sat side by side. Lena asked about Columbia. He was ending his second year. “it’s all Greek to me,” was all he would say.

“How do you like Emerson’s poems?” Will asked. They hadn’t mentioned the book since she received it at Christmas.

“I’ve memorized several.”

“The Rhodora?”

“I liked that one, yes. Although I’m not certain what he was trying to say?” She really meant “what *you* were trying to say.”

“I don’t remember the words, but hadn’t he discovered this beautiful flower in a most unexpected place, and wondered why God had put it there to bloom where no one could appreciate it. And he wanted to reassure the beautiful flower that she wasn’t wasting blooming in vain in that dark place, that she brought her loveliness with her and shed it on that bleak setting. To be beautiful was enough. Sounds rather insipid, the way I say it, I’m afraid.”

Will had understood it far more than she had. His explanation opened her heart to his understanding. She had been afraid to dwell on its implications, but Will had expressed them fully. She could say nothing more than, “You’ve said it beautifully, Will. Thank you for explaining it to me. You read more deeply into it than I.”

Encouraged, he continued, “You could say that a beautiful soul can’t help but be beautiful, no matter where she is; she doesn’t need a salon; she will shine even in a dark, deserted place.”

“Perhaps she just needs God to put the right poet there as well.”

“William Henry,” Bridget said when the priest asked what the new baby would be called. She had asked Lena if there had ever been a president named William.

“William Henry Harrison. Our teacher told us how sad it was that he caught a cold at his inauguration and died of pneumonia a month later, because he hadn’t worn his hat or coat on that day. None of our class will ever not wear our coats and hats!”

William Henry was baptized in June, 1852. “We’ll call him Willy or Billy. That way we won’t get confused,” Bridget decided.