

# *Rebecca Harding Davis Society Newsletter*

## *Volume 12, no 1, November 2020*

*The Society for the Study of Rebecca Harding Davis and Her World*

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**Vice-President, Publications and Newsletter Editor:** Mischa Renfroe

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### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

If you have any publications or presentations on Davis or her world that you would like to have recognized, please send them to Robin Cadwallader ([rcadwallader@francis.edu](mailto:rcadwallader@francis.edu)) or Mischa Renfroe ([mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu](mailto:mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu)). We're always looking for material for the newsletter and would like to highlight the work of new (as well as seasoned) scholars in the field of Davis studies.

### **Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal (Special Issue on RHD)**

We are pleased to announce the publication of this special issue of *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* vol. 49, no. 7, 2020, edited by Robin L. Cadwallader and Alicia Mischa Renfroe. For more information, see <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/gwst20/current>

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### **CONFERENCE REPORT by Aaron Rován**

With many conferences still in the planning stages due to covid-19 concerns, we have not finalized our plans for 2021. We typically sponsor panels at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association (May 2021) and the triennial meeting of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers (November 2021). Stay tuned for more information from Aaron Rován, Conference Activities Coordinator. We hope to reorganize the following sessions that were cancelled last year:

**“Borderlands, Boundaries, and Contested Spheres in the Writings of Rebecca Harding Davis”** was organized by Vanessa Steinroetter and Robin Cadwallader and originally scheduled for the meeting of The Society for the Study of Southern Literature in April 2020.

“Discovering the Identity of the New South: Northerners Crossing Borders in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Here and There in the South’” by Jane E. Rose, Purdue University Northwest

“Rebecca Harding Davis, By-Paths in the Mountains, and Convict Labor in Western North Carolina” by Mae Miller Claxton, Western Carolina University

“Prisoners of Life: War, Marriage, and Tradition in the Works of Rebecca Harding Davis” by Robin L. Cadwallader, Saint Francis University, Pennsylvania

“The Idea of the Borderlands in the Civil War Writings of Rebecca Harding Davis” by Vanessa Steinroetter, Washburn University.

**Possibility, Toxicity, and Metaphysics in Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills”** was organized by Aaron Rován and originally scheduled for the annual meeting of the American Literature Association in May 2020.

“Possibility and the Unfinished in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” by Kacie Fodness, University of South Dakota

“The Rhetoric of Secrecy and the Epistemological Problem of Rights in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” by Sean J Kelly, Wilkes University

“Toxic Ghosts in Davis’s and Melville’s Industrial Fiction” by Lauren S. Peterson, University of California, Davis

**Economics and Gender in Rebecca Harding Davis’s Novels** was organized by Aaron Rován and originally scheduled for the annual meeting of the American Literature Association in May 2020.

“Reimagining Reconstruction in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Waiting for the Verdict*” by Kristin Allukian, University of South Florida

“Mimesis and the ‘Man Marriage’: Protesting Marital Rape in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *The Second Life*” by Arielle Zibrak, University of Wyoming

“The Question of Maternalism in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day*” by Sophia Forster, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

“‘Tigers in the Drawing Room’: Futurity and Queer Motherhood in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Frances Waldeaux*” by Stephanie Vastine, University of North Texas

## **RHD: Her World by Alicia Mischa Renfroe**

Rebecca Harding Davis's "A Story of the Plague" is featured below in "From the Pen." This piece concludes during a cholera epidemic and may be inspired in part by outbreaks in Wheeling and elsewhere. For instance, in *Rebecca Harding Davis: A Life Among Writers*, biographer Sharon M. Harris points to a major Mississippi River Valley occurrence in the 1830s as a possible context for the story; this outbreak eventually resulted in about 20,000 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Like many river towns in the nineteenth century, Wheeling, Virginia (later West Virginia), dealt with cholera on several occasions. In "Wheeling in the Time of Cholera," historian William H. Gorby describes two major incidents, one in 1832-33 and another in 1873.<sup>2</sup>

Davis returned to Wheeling after graduating from Washington Female Seminary in 1848 and remained there until she married Clarke Davis and moved to Philadelphia in 1863. At some point in the 1850s, she began contributing pieces to *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, and during Davis's time in Wheeling, the newspaper reported several cholera flare-ups, often in a special section titled "Cholera Items," and frequently included advertisements for cures. Here are a few pieces for context:

### ***The Wheeling Intelligencer***

Thursday Morning, October 13, 1853

We publish to-day an interesting article on the "Geological Theory of the Cholera," by Mr. Lea of Cincinnati. It contains many facts worthy of attention, and the theory, we understand is supported by Doctors Locke and Ray, gentlemen of eminent scientific and professional attainments. The *Cincinnati Gazette* in publishing this article says it has been in the habit of publishing Mr. Lea's articles on his Geological Theory, these five years past, and learns from him that during that time not one well authenticated fatal case of cholera has occurred where rain water was exclusively used; yet allowing one or two to have occurred out of hundreds, the exceptions would prove the rule. Vaccination does not always prevent the small pox. The subject is certainly one of deep interest and great importance, and we are glad so many facts can be adduced to establish the truth of Mr. L.'s theory.

[This issue devotes almost two columns to reprinting Lea's piece.]

### ***The Wheeling Intelligencer***

Monday Morning, January 16, 1854

Cholera—Interesting Facts.

This is a subject of deep interest to the whole human family, and we gladly avail ourselves of all occasions to adduce new facts in support of the too long neglected, too much slighted, theory of Mr. Lea, usually called, "The Geological Theory of Cholera," which has received great publicity in the columns of the *Gazette* within the last five years.

We copy from our exchanges:

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis: A Life Among Writers*. West Virginia University Press, 2018. pp. 199.

<sup>2</sup> William Hal Gorby, "Wheeling in the Time of Cholera," Special Pandemic Issue, *Upper Ohio Valley Historical Review* vol. 41., no. 2, 2020, pp. 6-21. [https://www.ohiocountylibrary.org/docs/n9\\_UOVHR\\_Vol41-No2\\_Pandemic-issue\\_web.pdf](https://www.ohiocountylibrary.org/docs/n9_UOVHR_Vol41-No2_Pandemic-issue_web.pdf)

The *Galveston Civilian*, speaking of Cholera, says:

"The entire use of cistern water in Galveston, has, we sincerely believe, been the cause of the immunity which our citizens have enjoyed from this disease, although many cases have been brought here from New Orleans since 1818. We believe that if vessels and steamers were supplied with rain water, we should hear little or nothing of cholera upon them."

From the Houston, (Texas,) *Telegraph*, of 16<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1853.

"It has been ascertained that the cholera is malignant in those countries where the inhabitants are accustomed to use water impregnated with salts of magnesia and lime, and its lavages are most fatal where springs are most abundant in the magnesian limestone rocks. Even in these countries, however families that use cistern water are almost universally healthy. We have noticed that those families in Texas that are accustomed to use cistern water, are seldom affected with cholera, or any other disease resembling it. When the cholera prevailed with such fatal malignity at San Antonio it was confined almost exclusively to those families that used the river water, which is so strongly impregnated with lime that a white crust is formed on the rocks along the river banks at Goliad, and the river loses its transparent appearance, and seems of a milky hue. This water, which, in ordinary seasons, is regarded as equal to the most wholesome upon the globe, seemed to operate like poison while the cholera prevailed. If by the use of so simple a beverage as rainwater, the ravages of this frightful disease can be stayed, the inhabitants of those sections where it is liable to prevail, should provide immediately a supply of this wholesome fluid, and thus secure themselves from the attacks of one of the worst scourges of the human race. The poisonous quality of the river water at Houston, corresponds precisely during the prevalence of cholera with that of our wells and springs."

***The Wheeling Intelligencer***

Wednesday Morning July 26, 1854

Cholera—A Narrow Escape from Being Buried Alive—A correspondent of the Boston Journal, writing under date of Manepy, Jaffna, Ceylon, April 12th, furnishes the following thrilling account:<sup>3</sup>

"I have alluded to the ravages of the disease in the parish of Manepy, as having been fearful. I never before realized the presence of death as for some time when the pestilence was at its height. In some instances the attack seemed to be nothing but death from the outset, and the victim was hurried into the grave within six hours, and even less, from the time of the appearance of the disease. The people have such a fear of having a corpse in the house, that they bury as soon as possible after breath has left the body, and in some cases, we have reason to believe, even before life is extinct. Several instances of this kind have been reported, and in regard to the death of some of the native Christians by this disease, we have had most painful suspicions and fears. I will mention one or two authentic cases where persons narrowly escaped being buried alive, as such instances may not be without use as a warning even in America. One occurred in February in a village (Aslvority) adjoining Manepy.

A person attacked with cholera requested his friends not to bury him at once if he died, but to wait for some time. He died within eight or nine hours, as was supposed, when his friends, without regarding his plainly expressed wish, prepared for the internment but one of them having recalled the dying man's request, delayed the funeral three or four hours. Meanwhile the body moved, and the man asked for cony or gruel; the heat of the body returned, and the man has since regained his usual health. Again, only a few Sabbath mornings since, a teacher in the Sabbath school at this station—which school, by the way, has been entirely broken up for more than three months by the cholera—pointed out to me a little girl who was supposed to have died; but as it was late in the afternoon she was wrapped in a mat—nearly all are buried here without coffins of any sort—and the

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<sup>3</sup> Manepy is a town in Sri-lanka, located in the Jaffna district. The American Ceylon Mission was located there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

corpse left till the morning for interment. During the night the poor little creature revived so much as to complain of the cold, and ask for food, when she was cared for, and has since become so well as to be able to attend the Sabbath and day schools.

***The Wheeling Intelligencer***

August 2, 1854

CHOLERA. The total mortality of Philadelphia the past week, reached 673. We have already published telegraphic reports of 99 deaths of cholera, including the almshouse report, which is about 20, the disease having attacked the old women's ward. Four members of one family were interred yesterday afternoon, having died of cholera on Friday and Saturday—a father, mother, and two sons. Three children survived, two of whom are very sick.

The deaths in Boston during the week ending at noon on Saturday were 180, of which about one-third were cholera. The cholera at the Massachusetts State Prison is subsiding. No case has yet proved fatal. The prisoners, to the number of 112, have been attacked more or less violently.

The *Dayton Gazette* learns directly from Eaton, Ohio, that the cholera is prevailing there in its most malignant form. A number of deaths have occurred.

The number of deaths in St. Louis for the week ending Oct. 24<sup>th</sup> inst., was 206, of which number 85 are reported as having died of cholera, showing a decrease of 63 when compared with the previous week.

The number of deaths at Hermann, Mo., from the time the cholera first broke out (the first week in June) to the 11<sup>th</sup> of July was about 160, most of them of cholera. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> of July but one death has occurred, and the place has been comparatively healthy. A few cases of fever have taken place.

Eight deaths occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> Ward at Newark, N.J. during the twenty four hours ending on Friday. Several others in different parts of the city were reported.

The number of interments in Detroit, for June, was 210; and from the 1<sup>st</sup> of July to the 25<sup>th</sup>, 607—making aggregate of 817 since the first of June, at which period cholera first prevailed.

**FROM THE PEN OF RHD: “The Story of the Plague”**

From: *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* vol. 58, Feb. 1879, pp. 443-449.

SOME time in the first twenty years of this century one of the Van Horns of New York, with an Irish gentleman named Daly, made a tour of the Southern States. The men were friends, young, shrewd, and energetic; they had each a moderate capital to invest in manufacturing purposes, and were strongly tempted to try the South as an unbroken field for their enterprise. They were so hospitably welcomed every where as to make their journey a kind of triumphal progress. Being young, they drank, dined, flirted, and went with equal zest alternately to camp-meetings and to races; but, being shrewd, they brought their money home again to invest.

“It will never do, Daly,” said Van Horn. “It is the wagons for these very plantations which we mean to make. Here is the lumber, the water-power, cheap fuel, and cheap labor; but, for all that, we must go a thousand miles away to make the wagons.”

Daly nodded and laughed. The end of the matter, as far as he was concerned, was that he invested his money in the Northern wagon factory, but that he married and settled in Alabama. There was something that reminded the Irishman of home in the establishments of these lavish land princes of the Gulf States, in the great wooden cabins in which they lived, with the rain dripping through leaky roofs upon magnificent beaufets<sup>4</sup> heaped with silver plate, where dogs, naked negro babies, and fleas ran riot over the bare floors, and beautiful women with ill-fitting gowns and rivers of diamonds about their shapely throats looked lazily on. Back of this dirt and splendor was the negro background—hundreds of half-worked slaves, and a nature tropical, rank, sensuous. Daly relished with keen appreciation every feature of this life—the gambling, duelling, lavish generosity, devout church-going, passionate love of family. To Van Horn it was all alien and distasteful.

“I tell you,” he said, vehemently, one day, as they discussed it, “there is a stupor in the moral atmosphere, like malaria in a sunny air. It is rather agreeable, I confess, in the rich planter. It is a virtue when it shows itself in his princely hospitality and good humor. But see what it does for these poor whites in towns, the same class that with us would be mechanics, shrewd tradesmen, or—”

“Shrewder thieves?” suggested Daly.

They were walking, as they talked, on the wharf of a border town on the Ohio—a town which has since been converted by Northern capitalists into a mass of iron foundries, but which was then a drowsy village. The pigs tramped leisurely through its one long muddy street, or rooted under the porches draped with roses and red honeysuckle; black puffs of smoke from the low stern-wheeled boats at the wharf drifted lazily up against the hills that walled in the town with ramparts of splendid autumnal color. The wind, blowing from off the river, was cold and bracing; there was a smell of bitumen in it. The red brick of the houses was streaked with sooty shadows. The same bitumen colored the clouds until they lay in masses of intense crimson and emerald up higher and higher against the blue roof overhead.

Van Horn glanced critically about him. “Just look, Daly!” he said. “Nowhere is nature more prodigal. These hills are full of coal and minerals; the soil is rich as that of the West Indies; yet nowhere will you see such contented poverty. See that fellow!”—touching lightly with his foot a lazy fat lout who lay stretched on a pile of hogs-heads. “That’s a fair specimen of the class—ignorant, ragged, and brutal. I’ll wager anything you choose that he will go on sleeping in the sun until the end, and die as much of a brute as ever.”

Daly glanced at the boy, and the generous color rose to his cheeks. “Nothing of the kind,” he said, hastily. “This lad has as good stuff in him as you or I, and he means to be a man. Come on; it is nearly time for the boat to start. You ought to be careful, Van Horn,” he said, when they had passed up the wharf. “That boy was not asleep, and you cut him to the quick.”

Looking back, they saw that he was standing watching them. A few minutes later they came down from the hotel to go on board the little steamer which lay pulling and snorting at the landing, and Daly caught sight of the boy, again standing apart from the crowd, looking eagerly at him.

He was Zack Nealy, a “bound boy,” who drove a dray for Pettit and Clay, a forwarding house upon the wharf. He wanted to see this gentleman again who had said he had the stuff in him of which gentlemen are made. Zack probably had never thought of himself before as anything but the driver of a dray. He was keen, eager, and, like Daly himself, he had a drop of Irish blood in him. There was not a point in this good prophet’s face, figure, or hearing which he did not note—the gallant carriage, the steady eye, controlled voice, even the set of the long, rich, fur-trimmed surtout.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A buffet or sideboard for china.

<sup>5</sup> A man’s overcoat.

The boy's heart was beating like a drum hard against his chest. "As good stuff in me! Be a man like that—like that!" He did not open his lips, but it seemed to him that he was shouting aloud with excitement.

Daly stepped over the gangway, and then as the boat shoved from shore looked again in the crowd for the boy. He had said what he did from mere compunction and the good-natured wish to atone for Van Horn's heedlessness; the same kindly pity filled his mind now, and made him, when he caught the kid's eye, smile and raise his hat as he would do to an equal.

Zack stood stunned for an instant, then he took off his old hat.

"He shall never be ashamed of having done that to me!" he muttered, walking down the wharf to keep the boat and the fur-coated figure on deck in sight. He followed it for a mile or two, until it swept around the bend and was lost. Then he sat down among the papaw bushes on the shore, his hands clasped about his ragged knees, his face red, his half-shut eyes speaking new thoughts.

An American "wharf rat" would have been immensely flattered by this thing, and have forgotten it in a day. But there is a good deal of germinating power in hot Irish nature. Put a live idea into it with a kindly touch and you will be sure to hear of it years afterward.

The live idea had come to Zack.

The sun went down behind the Ohio hills on the other side of the river; now and then there was a slash in the shallow, dun-colored water as a greedy pike chased the minnows up to the bank; a black beetle toiled painfully over the red and yellow bed of pebbles at his feet; a brown squirrel peeped out of the purple iron-weeds behind him. Zack winked back to the tiny shining eyes. "Even that darned little rat wishes me luck," he thought. He sat thoughtfully shying pebbles into the water, and chuckling aloud now and then. A few rods further down the river were the sheds under which the Pomeroy's were trying to make window-glass. Some of the workmen had come out half naked from the furnaces, and were lounging about. Zack knew them all; he often ran for their drams, and drank with them.

"Here, Zack!" one of them called, holding up a stone jug.

He shook his head. "They're as good friends as I've got, but I'm a-goin' to take another track now."

His new purpose seemed like fire burning in him. He got up and walked restlessly up and down.

The men went into the mills. The sun had gone down; a damp twilight was gathering. Only a pale yellow glaze lingered above the line of Ohio hills, and a red pillar of flame rose from the chimneys of the works. For the first time in his life the boy felt quite alone in the world. This desperate venture seemed impracticable in the night; it took his breath to think of it. It would be so much easier to go on to-morrow driving the dray, boarding at Mrs. Taggart's.

At that moment there came from the other side of the river the sound of music—an air played on a violin. It was a Highland call to battle, full of rough vigor, and a strange melancholy underneath. At another time the lad probably would not have noticed it, but his Irish imagination was at fever-heat new. It seemed like a voice calling to him. "Come up higher," it said—"higher."

He listened, without moving, until the last note died away. Then he rose slowly and went back to the town. He used to say, for years afterward, “It was an air on a violin that was my salvation. I’d give five years of my life to hear it again.”

The road upward before an ambitious poor boy was broad and easy enough among the generous Southern people at that time. It was only necessary for Zack to go, as he did the next day, to his master and employer, and say boldly that he wanted an education, and the chance to make a man of himself. Colonel Pettit looked at him with lazy astonishment, then clapped him on the back.

“By gee, Sir, I didn’t think it was in you! I’m deuced proud of you, Zack, by gee!— pervedid it lasts overnight. Well, Sir, if you really mean the thing, you kin count on Josiah Pettit.”

The colonel gave him half of his time and a wheel barrowful of old school-books. Every body helped the boy, every body advised him. A boy who actually wanted to study, to work, to push himself on, was a black swan in the little town, of which it was lazily proud.

Through this sunny, sluggish atmosphere, therefore, young Nealy urged his way for seven years. Colonel Pettit cancelled his indentures when he was sixteen. He was by turns clerk on a river boat, a teacher, and shipping overseer for Pettit and Clay. Finally he took the course usual then with lads in the smaller Southern towns. He set out for the river cities, armed with s sheaf of “circular introductions” from business men, and money enough to support him for a month. In those halcyon days this was enough outfit for a boy going into the world to seek his fortune. The larger towns were ready and glad to absorb the vigorous young blood of the provinces. Zack had situations offered to him in Cincinnati and St. Louis, and accepted one in the house of the Chouteaus in the latter city. While there he studied medicine in his spare hours, and saved money to pay for two winter courses of lectures in Philadelphia. After that be practiced in the hospitals, and settled at last in a growing town of Western Pennsylvania. He was strongly minded to go back to his old home. Every man in it was his friend. He would rather have trumped over its muddy, sooty streets than have trod on fields of thyme and roses elsewhere. The very smell of its greasy smoke was sweet to his nostrils. But Colonel Pettit advised him not to come.

“A doctor must have a certain prestige,” he said. “He must be the social equal of his patients. Now we’re all mighty proud of you, Zack; but—”

“I understand. That’s all right,” interrupted Nealy, biting the end of his mustache nervously.

“That thar dray, you see! It’s ondyin’, that sort of remembrance, with Virginians.”

So Nealy, not without a certain angry ache at his heart, settled among strangers. One or two lucky hits soon discovered to the public of Fininburgh that he was far in advance of its two old physicians as regarded modern science. He showed an old-fashioned, distant courtesy toward women, too, very winning in a young man. With men, on the contrary, Zack was an inveterate talker; the Irish gift of telling anecdotes was an unknown art in slow old Fininburgh, and Zack, having knocked about a good deal in the world, had a capital story to fit every occasion. Before a month had passed, every man in the borough felt himself in some sort a partisan of this jolly, stout, Jewish-faced young doctor. He was asked every where to dinner, to tea. Most of the eligible young women of the county were discussed as suitable wives for him. You heard his gay, infectious laugh every where. The truth is, the fellow was thoroughly happy in his new quarters. This friendly recognition was the success which he craved. At heart he was still the homeless boy, hungry for companionship and affection. As for money, he took no account of it—not even enough, his enemies said, to pay his debts; which, by-the-way, I am afraid was true. Nealy was Irish.



When he had been settled in Finburgh for a year, the Shiras family came into the neighborhood. They were of English extraction, and belonged to a race of scholars. There did not seem to be much money in the family, yet the men belonging to it took no means to add to its income, but went on with their leisurely researches into the life of ancient Greece and the habitat of spiders calmly as if they had been millionaires. It was a new idea to Nealy—as it would be to most Americans—that men of straitened circumstances could find other and higher employment for life than the making of money. It pleased him immensely. He went often to the plain little cottage back of the pines. The repose, the unfathomed culture and wit hinted under their careless, trivial talk of every day, the mere fact that the stock of this family had been honorable gentlefolk for centuries—it was all a glimpse into a new world to Nealy. This was the Brahmin class which he had longed to enter. He watched the daughter of the house, Priscilla, at first with a kind of reverent awe and wonder, she being, as he thought, the highest type of this high class. She was not naturally as clever, probably, as the young girls of the town; but she had not an idea in common with them. Their talk was of house-work, of vulgar finery, and vulgarer flirtation. Priscilla knew no more of these things than of the squabbles of the fishwomen on the river-hank. She had spent most of her life in travelling through the beautiful places in the world; her companions were men who dealt with great facts and ideas. They had hedged the girl in from all rough unseemliness with a fine courtesy. In Zack's view she dwelt apart upon a height; it did not, indeed, at first occur to him that he could ever climb to a level with this young gentlewoman. Her father and uncle made a companion of Dr. Nealy. They found a genuineness and delicacy of feeling in the young fellow which were different from the other Finburghers.

“He is undoubtedly a man of good breeding and birth,” said Mr. Peter Shiras one day.

“On the contrary, he has hinted to me that he has struggled up from extreme poverty,” replied Priscilla's father.

“That may be,” retorted Uncle Peter, taking off his eyeglasses. “There were many scions of good families who landed penniless in Virginia. I never am mistaken in the species of a man, any more than of a spider.”

For three or four months young Dr. Nealy's mind was full of his new friends, whether he was in market, or in church, or at the bedside of a patient. He thought, probably, that he was studying them as a species, Miss Shiras being the best specimen. He had that sense of ownership in them which we have in a fine landscape which we alone have discovered. He could not tolerate the mention of them from any ordinary Finburgher; and when once a decent old farmer spoke of “that daughter of Shiras's,” though he did it respectfully enough, Zack could scarcely refrain from striking him.

He did not know what this meant until one day late in June. He had gone out with a night moth to Mr. Peter Shiras: he had fallen into the habit of taking out specimens after his last round of visits was over. It only needed a few moments for Uncle Peter to prove to every body that the specimens were worthless, and then they would have tea under the pines, while Priscilla, in her pale blue dress, sat at a little table and filled the cups.

This evening she was not at the table. Nealy glanced quickly around while he was talking of the moth. He saw her riding down the road, a tall, soldierly-looking man beside her.

“That is Henry Shiras,” said Uncle Peter, following his eye, “a cousin far removed. There was some plan when Miss Shiras was a child of a betrothal between them. But the young people settle such things altogether for themselves in this country. No, no, Dr. Nealy, you are quite mistaken about this moth. Look at its antennae.”

Then it was that Dr. Nealy first knew what had happened to him. He went home, promising to come back later in the evening. It was a very comfortable, even luxurious, home to which he went. A little money could command much in that cheap neighborhood. In a city the house, with its slopes of lawn and forest about it, would have been reckoned a stately dwelling. Nealy went restlessly up and down the halls and chambers, trying

to reason to himself. What had he to do with the Shirases, or their marrying and giving in marriage! He had filled up his thoughts and life with them lately, but he was apt to be vehement in his friendships. He had even furnished this house as he had fancied Priscilla would have done had it been hers, but that was because she was the only woman of her class that he had known, and he wanted to raise himself to her level.

Was that what he wanted?

No, a thousand times no! He wanted her —her—the woman herself! Soul and flesh and blood.

He saw his abject folly now, and the extent of it. Presently he went down to a hedge bordering the road where they must pass. When he saw them coming he crossed it and stood out on the wagon track. It seemed to him as if he could wrench the secret from her by a look, and know what he was to her, whether all or—nothing. He could not wait an hour to know it. Other men might woo gently and slowly the women they loved, but Nealy had the instincts of his progenitors, who carried off their wives by one fierce assault. Besides, he never had loved before, and there was all the force and depth in his passion which other men spend in fancies and flirtatious from their school-days up to middle age.

Miss Shiras, as she came up, was looking down, shyly listening to her cousin. She glanced at him when he paused, an admiring smile lighting her delicate face.

“She has listened to me with her head drooped in that way a thousand times,” muttered poor Nealy, “and smiled in just that fashion when I had done. What does it mean?”

It only meant that Priscilla was a well-conducted young woman; deferential to all men as her natural superiors; of an affectionate, dependent disposition, too, and apt to cling to the last person who talked to her.

Mr. Henry Shiras naturally was startled by the apparition of this stout, haggard young man in the middle of the road, who took off his hat as Priscilla passed, and forgot to put it on again. Zack was torn and controlled by this feeling which had broken bounds as absolutely as if he were a boy of sixteen.

“Most extraordinary behavior!” exclaimed Mr. Shiras. “Who is that person, Priscilla?”

Miss Shiras flicked her horse’s ear nervously with the whip. “Oh! that is Dr.—a man whom papa has noticed a good deal lately. A very nice person indeed, Henry,” in a stronger voice. “Uncle Peter thinks him an admirable judge of moths.”

“Better judge of moths than of manners, I suspect. What does he mean by staring after you like a maniac! Another specimen of that insolent American familiarity which you all seem to relish so much.”

“I do not relish it, Henry,” said the gentle Priscilla.

“Why, you were commending this fellow just now.”

“Oh no! I said he was very clever as to moths. But his manners, of course— He is an American, you know. He has had no opportunity of discovering the difference between himself and a thoroughly well bred man.” Her soft eyes were fixed thoughtfully on her cousin’s face. They gave the meaning to her words.

They stopped at the cottage just then, and when the soldierly young fellow lifted her from her horse, she smiled confidently back to him. Yesterday Nealy had lifted her from her horse and received the smile. Not that there

was a grain of coquetry in the girl. But her cousin Henry was so soldierly, so friendly, so English, while Nealy—yet really Nealy’s only fault was that he was out of sight.

Not out of hearing, however. The hot-headed doctor had followed them down the dusty road, and heard much of their criticism on himself. It did not hurt nor even surprise him that Priscilla spoke thus of him. Wasn’t it true! What was he but a bound boy, a drayman aping the gentleman? She knew it—she, standing on her height. As for Henry Shiras, he did not think for a moment of the man. He—all other men were nothing to him. The world was empty but for himself and this girl.

Neely stood hidden by the lilac bushes while young Shiras took leave of her and cantered down the hill. She stood irresolute a minute in the doorway, and then, turning into the library, she sat down by the piano and began to sing softly to herself. Her conscience feebly troubled her. She should not have ridiculed Nealy, who was—was— What was he to her? She smiled in a faint, decorous way as she asked herself the question.

The twilight had fallen. Zack, from outside, could dimly see the neat, slight figure, the fine, fastidious face. Great God! the gulf between them! She was to him just then all that was rare, high, unapproachable; as for himself, all his old poverty, ignorance, brutality, as Van Horn had called it, were present, and hung about his neck like a millstone. He groaned and turned away, when she struck the keys again and played an old Highland air. He stopped; he had heard it once before. It was the music which had long ago seemed to say “Come up higher” to him. Zack listened, hesitated, then it seemed as though new blood had rushed into his body. Pushing through the bushes, he entered the house.

If Nealy had wooed Priscilla after the conventional fashion of Mr. Henry Shiras and his like, he would have failed. He could not speak any alien tongue. But the poor fellow, being desperate, bared his heart to her, and, what was more, bared his life. The Irish hovel, the dray, the barefoot boy on the wharf, the long struggle upward—he told the whole story, and, as we know, he could tell a story well even when his life did not hang as now upon the words. Priscilla was gentle, affectionate. She had, too, a little cool spark of imagination somewhere; it kindled and burned. This was no ordinary man; it was a hero. This was the old story of Cophetua and the beggar-maid reversed.<sup>6</sup> The idea of her marriage to Dr. Nealy was not new to her. She had considered it frequently in her calm, systematic way. In all probability she must marry an American; Dr. Nealy’s present position was equal to her own; his house was very handsome, and he himself— She glanced at him, and blushed in a way that maddened him afresh. Henry Shiras? But Henry could not marry for years, and she was not, indeed, at all certain that he wished to marry her then.

All this while Zack poured forth his honest passion, his humility, his adoration of some goddess of a woman.

“Does he really mean me?” thought Priscilla. “He will always regard me in that way, our social positions being so different.”

Then it being time for her to speak, she told him, with a proper shyness and blush, that she preferred him to all other men as a friend, but that if he wished for more he must talk to papa, “though” (this with an arch smile) “papa is so involved in business with the ancient Greeks that he will not be likely to oppose our wishes.”

When he caught that emphasized word, Zack took the cool little hands in his and kissed them, and could have cried over them, his heart was so full.

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to “The King and the Beggar-Maid,” a 16<sup>th</sup> century ballad about the African king, Cophetua. The king fell in love at first sight with a beggar woman, Penelophon. The two marry, and after becoming the Queen, she loses the traces of her class background.

Two years later Dr. Neely sat, one warm evening in July of 1832, on the porch of his house. His wife was beside him. Her chair was placed so that the vine of pale pink roses trailed over her delicate head, with its neat crown of chestnut hair. It was Zack's fancy to always place it there.

"So absurd!" Priscilla said to herself. "Just where the bugs can drop on to my collar!" But to him she said nothing. These whims and fancies, even his hot Irish affection, were the product, she thought, of his vulgar condition in boyhood. She would not waste her wifely authority on trifles. When the vulgarity showed itself more offensively, it would be time to interfere. She was very fond of him, but she was always on the watch for it to show itself.

As for Zack, his boyhood or his old age troubled him very little just now. He had just eaten a good dinner, and begun a new pipe; his eyes were on his wife; his home was comfortable, his pocket was full; in the village he had all kinds of friends and jolly companions to make his life secure and happy. There, according to rule, we ought to leave him. But there is one short chapter more to give, and it began that day on the porch.

"I don't see," he said, reflectively, "how God could do any thing more for me, Priscilla, or bring me any higher up. Unless—well, I should have liked to see a little fellow skirmishing around here. I've often thought if I could only see a baby's head on your breast, Priscilla, as on other women's—" There was a grave, eager longing in his face.

His wife pursed her thin lips. "You often make a strange choice of subjects, Dr. Neely. This is especially distasteful to me. I suppose Providence orders our lot for the best."

"Oh yes, Providence— By George! there's Lloyd! I thought he was in Virginia. I'll go to the gate and meet him." He hurried away, glad that Lloyd had appeared just then. His bursts of enthusiasm usually received little dashes of cold water such as this.

"I'm a rough brute, after all," he thought. "But God knows I meant well."

Lloyd, who was a physician in Finburgh, did not come in. The two men stood at the gate talking a long time—so long that Priscilla grew uneasy.

"The dew is falling, and he has no hat," she said, and found it to take to him. As she came down the path she saw that both men looked grave and anxious.

"Not a word to my wife," muttered Zack; and they turned smiling to meet her.

"You are discussing some serious case?" she asked, putting Zack's cap on his head.

"Yes, Mrs. Neely."

"Then you do not want me. Come in soon."

When she was out of hearing, Zack said, "There is no doubt as to its being genuine Asiatic cholera?"

"None whatever. It has swept through the lower part of the town. You know where I mean?"

“By Pomeroy’s mills. Yes, I know every foot of ground and every man in that town. I was a boy there, you know. Well?”

“Every body who had the means to go, fled weeks ago; but the poor whites and negroes are there, and they are dying by the hundreds every day. No boat stops now. I heard the account from Clapp, who escaped on foot, and boarded our boat at Steubenville. He says their condition is horrible beyond belief: the dead lying unburied for days, until they are carted off and thrown into a pit together; want, starvation, among the living.”

There was a gathering horror, even fear, in Nealy’s face. “Why, Lloyd,” he said, “those people were like my brothers once. Want—starvation?”

“Oh, I mean the lower classes—mill hands, workmen.”

“So do I.”

“The well-to-do people, I told you, have fled. There are no nurses, Clapp said, and but one physician.”

“But one physician?”

Nealy, who never could keep still when greatly moved, walked abruptly away. It was some moments before he came back. Dr. Lloyd was watching him anxiously.

“What are you going to do?” he said.

“Good God! what can I do? Go to them, of course. But one physician—and I here, swilling my sherry and smoking my pipe!”

“But your wife?”

“Priscilla! Yes. I—I had not thought of her.”

“Of course you have not. You have not thought at all. It is a noble, generous impulse, Nealy, but not your duty. Think it over, and you’ll see that.”

“There is a stage at midnight to Pittsburgh!”

“Yes; but you will not take it. Tut, tut! Do you suppose the town here can spare you, or your friends, or your wife? Go in and talk it over with her. I’ll call on my way back. It’s not your duty to make yourself a martyr for these wretches. Their houses are filthy, and they are drunkards; so down they go. Let them go.”

As the old doctor rode down the hill he looked back and saw the stout figure motionless at the gate. It was late when he returned. Seeing a light in the office, he made his way there. Nealy met him at the door.

“You have determined to go?”

“Yes.”

The old man was greatly agitated, while Nealy was quiet.

“You will never come back, boy. Going from a pure atmosphere into that polluted air—”

“Nonsense! I will be at home again in a month’s time, please God. There are some papers I will leave with you. My—my wife. Something might happen, you know. It is all arranged for Pricilla. She will be comfortable as to money. I should not think it right to go else.”

“Money! What is money compared to the loss of—”

“Of me?” Nealy passed his hand over his face. “Don’t unnerve me, Lloyd. It’s right for me to do this thing. I can’t turn my back on these dying people. I’ve thought it all over.”

“What are we to do without you, Zack?”

Nealy smiled. “Yes, I know I’ll be missed in old Finnburgh.” Then his eye fell on his wife's closed door. He began to gather up his papers, his lips turning pale. “It’s right for me to go,” he said, roughly. “Don’t make me think of what it costs me.”

There was a pause. “Does she know?” asked Lloyd.

“No. I cannot say good-by to her. There is a letter for her with the other papers. Now go, Lloyd. Wait for me at the inn until the stage comes.” He went with Lloyd out on the porch; then he unclosed the shutter of his chamber, and looked in at his sleeping wife. If he opened the door it would waken her. The moonlight shone softly on the fine, somewhat hard face. Zack saw no hardness there.

“Dear little tender heart!” he said, the tears running down his rough cheeks. He had been too coarse for her. When he came back he would try harder than ever. When he came back! What if he never entered that room again?

An hour later the stage going south stopped at Finnburgh and took in a single passenger.

It was the 1st of September, and the plague was over in the little river town. The smouldering tires of tar still burned along the streets, but the houses were flung open, young girls were singing inside, children playing; the gardens were gay with prince’s-feather and fall roses. There was but one case reported to-day—the young doctor who had come to their help weeks ago. A crowd had gathered on the porch of the inn, most of them mill men and negroes whom he had nursed and cured. They stopped Colonel Pettit as he was going up to his room.

“How is he, colonel?”

“Tanner thinks he’s sinking. But he’ll pull through. There’s no justice in Heaven if he doesn’t pull through!”

Tanner, the one physician who had staid to fight the pestilence, met him on the landing. “Well, Sir—well?” cried the colonel.

The doctor shook his head. “Reaction with fever. You know what that means.”

Pettit nodded, groaning. “It’s God’s work, I suppose. But I don’t understand it. Why, Tanner, Zack Nealy has pushed his way up and up, since he was my bound boy. He is a man of education and means; he has a wife that loves him; he came here and saved hundreds of lives, and he’s shoved off—dies like a dog! By gee, Sir, I don’t understand it!”

“He’s a merry, affectionate fellow,” said the doctor, who was not given to abstract discussion, “joking between the paroxysms. He talked of his wife to me to-day with that awful tenderness which a mother has for her child. You’ll stay with him until I come back?”

“Yes.” The colonel went in and the door closed behind him. Hour after hour passed, and the crowd still waited, carrying the reports of his condition out to the town. Zack, who had left them long ago and came back to die for them, was the hero of the hour. About sunset an ominous silence fell on the place. The crisis had come; there was a chance that he would recover. A band on a passing boat played as they floated down the river an old air, a Highland call to action. It must have reached the dying man. A few minutes later Colonel Pettit came out.

“It’s over, boys,” he said; “Zack Nealy’s gone—gone higher than I can follow. God help me!”

### **RHD COMPLETE WORKS- Alicia Mischa Renfroe (Site Director)**

The digitalization of Davis’s complete works (<http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com>) is ongoing. Recent additions include:

“The Conductor's Story” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Hearth and Home*, 2 Dec. 1871, pp. 946-47. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, March 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/211> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

“Cured by Active Work” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *The Congregationalist*, 16 Aug. 1888. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, March 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/209> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"Daniel Ponge's Success." *The Congregationalist*, 28 Feb. 1884, p. 2. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, March 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/210> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"The Daughter-In-Law" by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Peterson's Magazine*, vol. 53, Feb. 1868, pp. 121-32. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Jan. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/205> (Contributed by Mischa Renfroe)

"Forgotten Worthies: David Zeisberger" by Rebecca Harding Davis. *The Congregationalist*, 14 Jan. 1886. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, June 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/216> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"From Door to Door" by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Congregationalist*, 13 Oct. 1877, pp. 2. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, June 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/215> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"A Great Object-Lesson" by Rebecca Harding Davis. *The Independent*, 30 July 1903. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Dec. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/219> (Contributed by Jency Wilson)

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“In the Old Days” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *The Independent*, 12 Nov. 1908. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Dec. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/218> (Contributed by Jency Wilson)

“Low Wages for Women” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *The Independent*, 8 Nov. 1888. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Dec. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/217> (Contributed by Jency Wilson)

“A Night in the Mountains” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Appleton’s Journal*, vol. 3, Dec. 1877, pp. 505-10. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Feb. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/208> (Contributed by Mischa Renfroe)

"Polly's Religion" by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Congregationalist*, 29 May 1884. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, May 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/212> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

“A Story of Life Insurance” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Peterson’s Magazine*, vol. 41, June 1862, pp. 447-54. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Jan. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/206> (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

“Truth Once More Stranger than Fiction” by Rebecca Harding Davis. *Congregationalist*, 10 Nov. 1898. pp. 648-49. Rebecca Harding Davis Complete Works Digital Archive, Feb. 2020, <http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com/items/show/204> (Contributed by Mischa Renfroe)

We welcome contact from anyone who wishes to input a text (please use Word or a compatible program; the site administrator will code and upload the texts) or write a Cultural Context Essay (a short 500 word piece about an issue relevant to Davis’s work). Just send an email to Mischa Renfroe ([mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu](mailto:mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu)) if you are interested in contributing to RHD Complete Works. We would like to thank the English Department at Middle Tennessee State University for its support of this important project by approving Research Assistants, PhD candidates Laney Jolley and Jency Wilson to assist with research and transcription.

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