

FINLEY MARTHA

SIGNING THE
CONTRACT AND WHAT
IT COST

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Signing the Contract and What it Cost

«Public Domain»

Finley M.

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CHAPTER I

A WANDERER

“Lost! lost! lost!”

The sun had set amid angry clouds; deep shadows already filled the recesses of the forest through which the iron horse went thundering on its way, while an icy wind, bringing with it frequent dashes of rain and sleet, swept through the leafless branches of the trees, tossing them wildly against a dull leaden sky.

A lady, gazing out into the gathering gloom, started with a sudden exclamation of surprise and dismay. Her husband leaned hastily past her to see what had called it forth; then, with a smile at his own folly in forgetting that at the rate of speed with which they were moving the object, whatever it might be, was already out of sight, settled himself back again, bending a look of mild inquiry upon her agitated countenance.

She shivered, and drawing her shawl more closely about her, put her lips to his ear, that she might be heard above the noise of the train.

“It was a face, John – a woman’s face upturned to the sky, wan, distressed, wretched, with great sorrowful eyes. It just gleamed out upon me for an instant as we swept by, and was gone. Poor thing! poor thing! she must be in sore trouble.”

He shook his head with a smile of conscious superiority of wisdom.

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you, my dear, or waste your sympathy upon a wandering gypsy, who would not exchange places with you if she could.”

The train was slackening its speed, and they could now converse with ease.

“She is no ordinary tramp,” was the quick, earnest reply. “And if ever bitter, hopeless grief and despair were written on a human face, they were on hers. I wish we could go back and find her.”

“Quite impossible, Dolly; so let us talk of something more agreeable.”

“We change cars soon, don’t we?” she asked.

“Worse than that; we get out at the next station and wait there two mortal hours for another train.”

“Clearfield Station!” shouted the conductor, throwing open the car door.

An acre or two of ground had been cleared of trees, though many of the stumps were still standing; there was no appearance of a town; only a depot and a few shanties scattered here and there, the whole hemmed in by the forest, except on the two sides where the road had cut its way through.

The train stopped, and John and Dolly – otherwise Mr. and Mrs. Kemper – alighted, and the gentleman hurried his wife out of the rain and sleet into the depot.

A very forlorn place it looked with its rusty stove, filthy floor and windows, and hard, straight-backed wooden chairs and settee, which gave small promise of rest or ease to the delayed and weary traveller.

“What a wretched hole!” said Mrs. Kemper, sending a rueful glance from side to side. “How long did you say we’d have to stay here, John?”

“Two hours, Dolly. Here, take this chair by the fire, and I’ll go and see what can be done.”

He came back presently, and pointing through the window, “You see that light yonder, Dolly?” he said. “It comes from a shanty some hundred yards away, where they tell me we can at least find cleanliness and a cup of hot tea. There seems a lull in the storm at this moment, too; shall we go and try it?”

“By all means,” she answered, rising with alacrity and taking his offered arm. “I presume the walking is bad enough, but my boots are thick.”

Picking their way carefully between stumps and pools of water, just visible in the deepening gloom, they reached the place.

It was a long, low building of rudest structure, its walls rough boards nailed on horizontally, leaving large cracks between, with merely a covering of painted canvas upon the outside to keep wind and rain at bay. The gable-end with its one door and window, in which burned the lamp that had guided them, faced the road.

Entering, our travellers found themselves in a small waiting-room, very simply furnished, but invitingly warm, clean, and tidy.

A neatly-dressed young woman greeted them with a pleasant “Good-evening,” and throwing open an inner door, asked if they would walk out to supper.

“I should prefer just taking something here,” said Mrs. Kemper, shrinking back at the sight of a long table with only a number of rough-looking men about it. “Couldn’t you bring me a cup of hot tea and whatever you have to eat?”

“Yes, ma’am, of course;” and the girl vanished to return presently with the tea, a piece of steak, bread, butter, and hot corn-cakes.

Out in the forest a woman was battling with the storm – a woman with a child in her arms. A slight, willowy form was hers, once the perfection of grace in outline and movement, now bent and staggering with weakness; a face whose bright, soft eyes, glowing cheeks, and ruby lips were not long ago the admiration or envy of many, though now wan and pinched with famine and wasting sickness.

It was the same face that Mrs. Kemper had seen from the car window, upturned despairingly to the stormy sky as for a moment the weary wanderer paused and leaned against a tree by the roadside to gather strength and breath for renewed exertion.

Both were well-nigh spent, and hope so nearly dead within her that, but for the babe in her arms, she had lain her down to die there in the lonely wood, with no human creature near to pity or console.

But mother-love was stronger than the love of life: she had taken the thin faded shawl from her own shoulders to wrap it about the little one, and so had kept it comparatively warm and dry, while she herself was drenched to the skin. Her limbs were almost benumbed with cold, and the cutting wind, as it dashed the rain and sleet full in her face, seemed piercing to her very vitals.

Twilight was fast deepening into night; the way grew dark and slippery; now her feet sank in the mud, and she struggled out only to slip into a pool of water, or to stumble and fall over a stump or log, or to catch and tear her clothing on some thorny bush.

The pauses for breath grew more frequent, the steps, as she moved forward again, weaker and more tottering, the weary arms could scarce sustain the weight of the child, and she knew not how far distant was the nearest human habitation. She was about to give up in utter despair, when the gleam of a not very distant light seen through the trees inspired her with new hope and energy.

She pressed forward, and presently emerged from the wood and found herself at Clearfield Station, with the light in the window of the shanty inn shining out ruddily not a hundred yards away.

She crept to the door and knocked faintly.

Mr. Kemper, who had just finished his supper, rose and opened it.

“Come in,” he said. “This is a public house, and I presume no one will object,” he added, catching sight of the ragged, dripping figure.

She stepped in, staggered to the fire and dropped down on the floor beside it.

“Drunk!” he muttered, with a gesture of disgust.

“No, no, John! she is ill – starving perhaps! – poor thing! poor thing!” cried his keener-sighted wife, springing forward, barely in time to catch the sleeping babe as the weary arms relaxed their hold and the wanderer sank back against the wall in a state of semi-insensibility, her eyes closed and not a trace of color on cheek or lip.

“She’s dying!” exclaimed Mr. Kemper in a frightened whisper; and rushing to the inner door, “Somebody run for a doctor, quick! here is a woman who seems to be very ill!” he cried hurriedly.

“None to be had within three or four mile,” returned a gruff voice from the table. “What ails the woman? and who is she?”

“I don’t know; but something must be done.”

“Give her a cup of your tea, Irene,” said the voice.

“A few drops of brandy from the flask in our luncheon-basket, John,” said his wife. “I always take it along in case of sickness, you know.”

But the child, a girl of eighteen months, woke with a cry, “Mamma! mamma!” and at the sound the mother’s eyes unclosed.

“Give her to me – my little Ethel!” she said faintly.

“You are ill, my good woman, not able to hold her,” Mrs. Kemper said, as she reluctantly complied with the request.

“Yes, and I – have eaten nothing to-day – and have walked many miles.”

“Poor soul!” exclaimed Irene, the kind-hearted mistress of the shanty, coming in with the tea. “Here, drink this, and I’ll bring you some supper. You look more dead than alive, and the rain has soaked you through and through. Dear, dear! you’ll catch your death o’ cold!”

She raised the wanderer’s head as she spoke, and held the cup to her lips.

It was eagerly drained to the last drop, and seemed to revive the poor creature greatly.

Food was brought, and the babe devoured it as if half famished, but the mother ate sparingly. She was evidently very ill, almost dying, thought those about her, and hastened to do all in their power for her relief and comfort.

Plainly she was, as Mrs. Kemper had said, no common tramp: there was lady-like refinement in face, voice, and manner; her accent was pure, her speech correct and even elegant, as, in answer to kindly inquiries, she gave a brief account of the causes of her present sad condition.

At an early age she had been left an orphan and without any natural protector; had married some three years ago, and two years later her husband had died, leaving her penniless, in feeble health, and with a babe to support. She had managed for a time to earn a scanty living by needlework, but there was little demand for it where she lived, and wages were very low; so, taking her child in her arms, she had set out in search of other employment or a better location.

It had proved a long, weary quest, and here she was, in utter destitution and about, she greatly feared, to die, and leave her helpless babe with none to love or care for it.

With the last words a great sob burst from her bosom; and clasping the little creature close,

“Ah my darling, my little Ethel, if I might but take you with me!” she moaned in anguish.

“Ah now don’t take on so,” Irene said kindly. “You’ll be better to-morrow. Walking all day in the cold, and gettin’ wet too, it’s no wonder you’re down-hearted like; but cheer up, you’ll get over it and find work, and maybe see as good days as ever you did.”

The wanderer thanked her with a grateful look, as she continued silently to caress Ethel; the child, no longer cold and hungry, hanging about her mother’s neck, stroking her face lovingly, and prattling in innocent glee.

Mrs. Kemper watched her with delighted, longing eyes, the tears starting to them once and again.

“What a lovely, darling little creature she is!” she whispered to her husband; “just the age our Nellie was.” And then she added a few words in a still lower tone.

He nodded acquiescence; and turning to the mother, said that he and his wife would like to adopt the child and bring it up as their own; that they would do so if she would at once give it up entirely to them.

A look of mingled grief and terror came over her face at the bare suggestion. She clutched her treasure in a death-like grasp.

“No, no! how could I? how could I?” she cried, “my baby! my precious baby! my all! no, no, never, never!”

“Take time to consider,” he said soothingly. “I am sorry to distress you, but, as you have yourself said, your child will soon need another protector, and it is very unlikely that another will be readily found to do as well by her as we would.”

“But wait – wait till I am gone!” she moaned. “She is my all, my all! Oh, ’tis hard to die and leave her! My baby, my baby, your mother’s heart will break!” and the tears fell like rain on the wondering little face upturned to hers.

“Don’t ky, Ethel’s mamma! Ethel love ’oo!” cooed the babe, lifting her dress to wipe away the tears, while with the other arm she clung about her neck, then kissing her wet cheek again and again.

Mrs. Kemper, with great tears of sympathy rolling down her own cheeks, knelt at the wanderer’s side, and, taking one thin hand in hers, said:

“I feel for you, my poor, poor friend! I do indeed. I know a mother’s heart, for I once had a little one like this, and when death snatched her from me I would gladly have gone down into the grave with her, for she was my only one. That was ten years ago. I have never had another, and it is not likely I ever shall; and now when you feel that you must leave this darling, will you not let me have her to fill the vacant place in my heart – in *our* hearts and home, for my husband will love her dearly too, and be a good father to her?”

“Oh, gladly, when – when I am gone!”

“But we cannot wait; we must go on our journey in another hour. And it will be to you only parting a little sooner; for her good too. You cannot be selfish where your dear child is concerned.”

“No, no, God knows I would suffer anything for her. I love her better than my own soul. But I cannot give her up till – I must. Have pity, have pity! she is all I have left – parents, sister, husband, home, all – everything gone but her – my precious, precious baby! Oh, don’t, don’t ask me to let her go from my arms while I live!” she pleaded in heart-broken accents, and with bitter sobs and tears.

“We would not if it could be helped,” sobbed Mrs. Kemper, “but it cannot; and for her sake you will give her to us now?”

Mr. Kemper joined his arguments and entreaties to those of his wife. They engaged to do all in their power for the well-being and happiness of the little one, treating her in every respect as if she were their own offspring, on the one condition that she should be given up entirely to them, never to be claimed by any one – even a near relative, or the mother herself, should she by any possibility survive.

Mr. Kemper had torn a leaf from his note-book, and, with pen and ink furnished by Irene, had drawn up a deed of gift to that effect, which he was urging the mother to sign.

“No, no! I can never, *never* agree to *that*!” she cried in reference to the last stipulation. “Live without my own precious child! never, never!”

“A mere form,” he said. “You cannot live many days, my good woman; do you not feel that it is so?”

She but clasped her child closer, while her whole frame shook with the violence of her emotion. She seemed almost ready to expire with the mental anguish superadded to her great physical prostration.

At length the distant rumble of an approaching train was heard.

“There, you have but a moment left for decision,” said the gentleman; “that is the train we must take. Will you sacrifice your child’s welfare or your own feelings?”

She was now seated beside the table, her child asleep in her arms.

He laid the deed of gift he had made out before her as he spoke, and put a pen between her fingers.

She lifted her eyes to his with a look of wild anguish fit to move a heart of stone.

He simply pointed to the unconscious babe.

She looked at it, seized the pen, hurriedly scrawled a name at the foot of the deed, and fell back fainting.

But the shrill whistle of the locomotive and the thunder of the train close at hand aroused her.

“We must go now; let me take her,” Mrs. Kemper was saying in tones tremulous with great compassion. “I will love her dearly, dearly; I will cherish her as the apple of my eye. Let me wrap this warm shawl around her.”

“No, Dolly, I’ll carry her,” Mr. Kemper said, in a tone of half-suppressed delight, as he finished buttoning up his overcoat after safely depositing the note-book, with the deed of gift, in an inner pocket.

But silently the mother put them both aside. There was agony in her wan, emaciated face. She could not speak for the choking in her throat; but she strained the child to her heart, laid her cold white cheek to its warm and rosy face and kissed it passionately again and again.

“We must go,” repeated Mrs. Kemper. “Oh, my heart aches for you, but we *must* go!”

“We must indeed, poor thing! there’s not a moment to be lost,” added Mr. Kemper, taking the child from her with gentle force. “Here, this will supply your needs while you live, I think,” putting a roll of notes into her hand.

She dropped them as if a serpent had stung her, and with a wild cry rushed after him, as, hastily wrapping a shawl about the infant, he ran with it toward the train, his wife close behind him.

They had already tarried almost too long; had scarcely time to gain the platform of the nearest car ere the train swept swiftly on its way.

“My child, my child! give me back my child!” shrieked the distracted mother, pursuing with outstretched arms, the storm beating pitilessly on her uncovered head, her long, dark hair streaming in the wind.

For a moment she seemed to fly over the ground, love and despair lending her unnatural strength and speed; the next – as the train was lost to sight in the depths of the forest – she tottered and would have fallen but for the strong arm of a kindly switchman, who, hastily setting down his lantern, sprang forward just in time to save her.

“She’s in a dead faint, poor thing!” he muttered to himself. “Here, Bill,” to a comrade, “take a holt and help me to carry her into the depot.”

“Who is she, Jack? an’ what ails her?” asked Bill, hurrying up and holding his lantern high, while he peered curiously into the white, unconscious face.

“No time to talk till we git her in out o’ the wet,” returned Jack gruffly.

They laid her down on the settee.

“She’s a human critter and in sore trouble, that’s all I know,” remarked Jack quietly, drawing his coat-sleeve across his eyes as the two stood gazing upon the pitiful sight.

CHAPTER II

RESCUED

“Amid all life’s quests,
There seems but worthy one – to do men good.” —

Bailey.

A light covered wagon had just drawn up at the depot door, and out of it quickly stepped an elderly gentleman. Hurrying in with youthful alacrity, he glanced with eager haste from side to side of the dingy apartment. A look of keen disappointment swept over his features, changing instantly to one of grief and terror as his eye fell upon the little group about the settee.

“What – who – who is it? What has happened?” he asked tremulously, turning pale, and laying his hand on a chair-back as if to steady himself; then heaving a sigh of relief as the men stepped aside, giving him a view of the prostrate form, Jack Strong saying:

“It’s not Mr. Rolfe, sir, but on’y a poor female woman as has fainted. Mr. Rolfe, he didn’t come. Somebody’s took her child away from her, I do believe. Leastways she was screamin’ for it, and runnin’ arter the cars, which of course she couldn’t ketch. I reckon she’s sick too. Looks mighty bad, anyhow.”

“So she does, poor creature!” said the gentleman, approaching. “We must do something at once to bring her to. Water, Jack – quick! I wish Dr. Wright was here.”

But at that instant a moan came from the pale lips, and the eyes – large, dark, and lustrous – opened wide. They caught the pitying gaze of the new-comer. Feebly she lifted her arms toward him, then dropped them again, faintly murmuring:

“You have been gone so long, father, and I am ill – dying. Take me home.”

“That I will!” he said, obeying a sudden generous impulse, for he was much moved by the appeal. “Jack!”

“Do you know her, sir, Mr. Heywood?” queried the switchman in surprise.

“No more than you do, Jack, but surely she is in sore need of help, and I’m able to give it. In fact, I think it is a plain call of Providence. I’ve brought the dearborn, thinking to take home Rolfe and his luggage; but he hasn’t come, and here it is – the very thing to carry her in.

“But wait a moment; what do you know of her? Is she quite alone?”

“Indeed I don’t know nothin’ more than – ” began the switchman, but was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Irene.

“Is she livin’? where is she?” asked the girl, rushing into their midst breathless with haste and excitement. “Here’s some money the gentleman gave her, and she throwed it on the floor; I reckon because she thought ’twas paying her for the child.”

“My child! my Ethel!” cried the wanderer, starting up, but only to fall back again, overcome with weakness. “Come to mother, darling, come!” she murmured, her hand feebly extended, her eyes closed, while she moved her head restlessly from side to side.

“She’s out of her mind,” whispered the girl.

Mr. Heywood nodded assent; and drawing Irene aside, asked a few rapid questions, in reply to which she imparted all the information she could give in regard to the sufferer.

All he heard but strengthened his resolution to befriend the poor creature, and he at once set about making preparations for removing her to his own house, some three miles distant.

A quantity of clean straw was bestowed in the bottom of the dearborn, a buffalo-robe laid over it, making a not uncomfortable bed. On this the invalid was gently placed, and carefully covered with a second robe.

She made no resistance. She was quite delirious, and knew nothing of what was passing around her.

“Carefully now, Mike,” the old gentleman said, taking his seat beside the coachman; “the poor thing’s in no state to bear unnecessary jolting.”

“Hallo! hold on there a minute; here’s a message for you, Mr. Heywood!” cried the telegraph operator, rushing out from his office with a piece of paper in his hand. “From Rolfe, sir; he’s all right – missed the train, that’s all; will be here to-morrow morning.”

“God willing,” added the old gentleman reverently, taking the paper with trembling fingers; “and His name be praised that my boy is safe. I’m obliged to you, Dixon.”

The storm had increased in violence: the showers of rain and sleet now fell almost without intermission, and the wind blew with a fury that threatened danger from falling trees as they drove on through the forest, their progress necessarily slow because of the state of the road and the intense darkness.

The raging of the tempest was not favorable to conversation, and few words passed between them, while the woman for the most part slept heavily under the influence of a narcotic, only a moan or a muttered word or two now and then escaping her lips.

Mr. Heywood was one of the early settlers of Iowa. He had invested largely in land on his arrival, and in the course of years had, by its rise in value, become quite wealthy. The log cabin in the wilderness, in which the early years of his married life were passed, and where his children had first seen the light, was now replaced by a large, handsome brick house standing in the midst of well-kept gardens and cultivated fields. “Sweetbrier” Mrs. Heywood had named the place, and it was often pointed out to strangers as one of the finest residences in the county. The Heywoods had not, however, been exempt from trials: four out of six children had passed away from earth. Of the two survivors, the eldest, a son, had emigrated to California several years before this, and was now returning for his first visit to his old home, parents, and sister.

Ada, the daughter, a fair girl of eighteen, was full ten years younger than Rolfe, he being the eldest and she the youngest born.

In the sitting-room at Sweetbrier mother and daughter eagerly awaited the coming of the loved travellers – father and son.

The room was tastefully furnished, a bright wood fire crackled cheerily on the hearth, and an astral lamp on the centre-table shed a soft, mellow light on two happy faces, on books, pictures, lounges, and easy chairs.

In the adjoining room a table was set out with snowy damask, fine French china, and silverware, in readiness for the feast preparing in the kitchen, whither Mrs. Heywood occasionally hied to oversee the labors of her cook.

“How the wind does blow!” she remarked, returning from one of these little excursions. “It’s a dreadful night for your father to be out. I wish Rolfe had come yesterday.”

“I wish he had,” said Ada, running to the window. “How very dark it is! I’m sure they can’t see the road, or any tree that may be blown down across it. Mother, I am afraid they’ve met with some accident, for it’s nearly ten o’clock – high time they were here.”

“We’ll not distress ourselves, dear, with anticipating evil; both we and they are in the Lord’s keeping,” replied the mother, striving to put away anxious thoughts. “I think Peace and Plenty will be able to find the road; I never knew them to miss it yet, even in nights as dark as this. Come, sit down by the fire, Ada, and read me again the letter you received from your brother the other day; that will help to while away the time till they come.”

The girl complied, drawing the letter from her pocket, and seating herself on an ottoman at her mother's feet.

"I wonder," she said, refolding the missive, "that Rolfe has never married. I pity the somebody that's missing such a good husband."

"Time enough yet," said the mother, smiling; "he is only twenty-eight. There! I hear the rattle of the wheels." Both sprang up and hurried to the outer door, each heart beating high with delighted expectation.

They were just in time to see Mr. Heywood alight from the vehicle, which had already drawn up before the entrance.

"My dear," he said, hurrying up the steps into the portico, "don't be alarmed. I have not brought our boy, but he's safe and well; sent me a telegram to say he'd missed the train, and will be here tomorrow, God willing."

"Well," she said, with a sigh, "it's a sore disappointment, but I'm thankful it's no worse. You've had a hard ride, and –"

"Have brought an unexpected guest with me," he interrupted hastily. "Mary, dear, remembering the Master's words, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me,' you'll not object to taking her in, for she may be one of His."

"Who, Joseph?" she asked in a startled tone.

"A poor, forsaken, dying creature, Mary; I've not been able to learn her name." And he hurried to the assistance of Mike, who had fastened his horses and was preparing to lift the woman from the wagon.

Taking each an end of the buffalo-robe on which she lay, they carried her in between them and laid her gently down before the sitting-room fire.

Mrs. Heywood had hastened to order a room and bed made ready, and now, returning with such restoratives as were at hand, knelt by the side of the sufferer to apply them.

"How young! how pretty!" she said in surprise, gazing down at the unconscious face with its broad white brow, cheeks now slightly flushed with fever, sweet mouth, and large, lustrous eyes, which suddenly opened wide upon her, then closed again, while a deep moan escaped the lips and the head moved restlessly from side to side.

"She's very ill, poor dear!" said the old lady. "Ada, my child, don't come near lest her disease should be contagious. We ought to have the doctor here as soon as possible, Joseph."

"I'll go for him," said Mike, starting for the door.

"Hark!" cried Ada, "there's a horse galloping up the drive. Who can it be coming at this hour on such a night?"

Mrs. Heywood rose to her feet, and they all stood for a moment intently listening; then, at a "Hallo!" from a familiar voice,

"Why, it's the doctor himself!" they exclaimed simultaneously, the old gentleman and Ada running out to the hall to greet him.

He had already alighted from his horse, and was coming in.

"All well?" he asked almost breathlessly, not even pausing to say good-evening.

"Yes – no!" returned Mr. Heywood. "This way as quick as you can, doctor; we've a poor creature here who is very sick indeed."

"Ah, that explains it," remarked the physician, as if thinking aloud, while hastily following his host.

He pronounced his patient in a brain-fever and very ill indeed.

"The poor creature (evidently a lady) must have been half famished for months past, and has hardly strength to cope with the disease," he said, "yet with the blessing of Providence upon skilful treatment and the best of nursing" – with a bow and a smile directed to Mrs. Heywood – "she may possibly recover."

“Poor dear! my heart is strongly drawn to her,” said the old lady, twinkling away a tear as she bent over the bed where they had laid the sufferer, and softly smoothed back the hair from the pale forehead, “and she shall not die for lack of anything it is in my power to do for her.”

“Singular!” murmured the doctor meditatively. Then glancing from the face of his patient to those of his old friends, “It doesn’t seem to have occurred to you to wonder how I came here so opportunely to-night,” he remarked.

“Why no, to be sure,” said Mr. Heywood. “How was it? We have been so taken up with this poor creature’s critical condition as to have no thought for anything else.”

“Just so. Well, I was hurrying home from the bedside of a patient some two miles from here; very anxious to get home, too, out of the darkness and storm; when suddenly it was strongly impressed upon my mind that I was needed here and ought to come at once. It was a good half-mile out of my way, as you know; bad road, too, through the thickest of the woods, where the wind was blowing down trees, and one might at any moment fall on and crush me and my horse; but so strong was the impression I speak of that I really could not resist. And there surely was a providence in it,” he added reverently, “for by to-morrow morning medical aid would have come too late to give this poor woman even a chance for life.”

“I am sure of it,” said the old lady; “and in her coming here also. I shall watch with her through the night, doctor.”

“And I shall share your vigil,” he replied.

The morning sun rose bright and clear, but its cheerful light brought no alleviation of the wanderer’s pain. She lay tossing on her couch unconscious of all the solicitude felt for her, all the kindness lavished upon her, now muttering incoherently, now crying out for “her child, her Ethel, her sweet, darling baby.”

Immediately after breakfast Mr. Heywood went himself in search of a nurse, and having procured one, and seen her established by the bedside, he and Mike again drove over to the depot at Clearfield, reaching there in time for the morning train. When they returned Rolfe was with them.

CHAPTER III

ONE FOR LIFE

“And doth not a meeting like this make amends
For all the long years I’ve been wand’ring away?” —

Anon.

A noble, handsome fellow was Rolfe Heywood, and though the suffering stranger guest was neither forgotten nor neglected, “joy crowned the board” at Sweetbrier upon his return, and the weeks that followed were full of quiet happiness to himself, parents, and sister.

He was succeeding well in the new State of his adoption, and hoped to persuade these dear ones to join him there at some not very distant day.

He took a benevolent interest in the sick woman, and rejoiced with the others when the physician pronounced the crisis of the disease past and the patient in a fair way to recover.

“She’s come to her full senses now, and there ain’t no doing anything with her,” announced the nurse a few days later, looking in at the open door of the room where the family were at breakfast. “Not a morsel of food will she take, not a drop of medicine will she swallow. She just lays there with her eyes shut, and every once in a while I see a big tear a-rollin’ down them thin, white cheeks o’ hern.”

She withdrew with the last words, and while finishing their meal the family held a consultation on the case.

On leaving the table, Mrs. Heywood repaired to the sick-chamber.

The face resting on the snowy pillows was not only wan and emaciated, but wore an expression of deepest melancholy. The eyes were closed, but not in sleep, as Mrs. Heywood at first thought. Stepping softly to the bedside, she stood silently gazing upon her, thinking how sad it was that one so young and fair should be already weary of life.

“My baby, my baby!” came from the pale lips in low, heart-broken accents, and tears trembled on the long silken lashes that lay like dark shadows on the white cheeks.

“My poor, poor child,” said the old lady, bending down to press a gentle kiss upon her brow, “do not despair. Try to get well, and who knows but we shall be able to find your treasure and restore her to you.”

“Yes, to be sure,” said the nurse, putting a spoon to her patient’s lips. “Swallow this that the doctor left for you, there’s a dear, and then take a little of this beef-tea, and I’ll warrant you’ll feel a heap better.”

“No, no, take it away. Let me die in peace,” she sighed, averting her face, and with her wasted hand feebly putting the spoon aside.

“I want to die – I’ve nothing to live for now.” And great tears rolled down the pale sad face. “Ah, me! I gave her to them, and they will never, never give her up! Oh, my darling! my baby! my little Ethel!” she cried, bursting into hysterical weeping.

Endearments, persuasions, caresses, reasoning, exhortation on the duty of doing everything in our power to preserve the life God has given – all were tried by turns, but in vain. She lay there in silent despair, seeming neither to hear nor heed.

Though nearly as much interested in the suffering stranger as were his parents and sister, Rolfe had not ventured into the sick-room, and so had never yet seen her face; nor had he ever heard her voice or learned her name, of which last, indeed, they were all ignorant.

Something was taking him to his own apartments that evening on leaving the tea-table, when he met Mrs. Scott, the nurse, coming down the stairs.

“Do you leave your patient alone?” he asked.

“Never for long. I’m going down to my supper, and I’ll speak to Miss Ada to come up and take my place for a bit.”

She had left the door of the sick-room ajar. A moan caught Rolfe’s ear in passing, then the words, “Oh, my baby, my baby!” He started violently, a strange pallor suddenly overspreading his face. He stood still, intently listening. The words were repeated; and hastily pushing the door open, he stepped to the bedside.

“Ethel, Ethel! Can it be? Oh, Ethel, my light, my life!”

“Rolfe!” she cried, starting up in the bed, with both hands extended, the large, lustrous eyes full of joy and amazement.

He took her in his arms, seating himself on the side of the bed; her head dropped upon his shoulder, and folding her to his heart, “Yes, it is Rolfe,” he said. “Oh, Ethel, have I found you again? Are you mine at last?”

“Yes, yes,” she faintly whispered. “But they told me you were married to another; then – ”

“Never, never, my darling! I have loved you always – you alone. Oh, why did you write so coldly, rejecting my offered heart and hand, and telling me that another had won you?”

There was no answer. The strength excitement had supplied for the moment was gone, and she lay apparently lifeless in his arms.

With a sharp cry of agony he laid her back upon her pillow, and began chafing the cold hands and pressing passionate kisses on the pale lips.

Hearing his cry as she neared the door of the sick-room, Ada hurried in, full of wonder and alarm.

“Rolfe!” she exclaimed in astonishment.

“Ada, make haste! Throw up the window to give her air! Hand me that bottle of ammonia – quick, quick! she’s dying! she’s dead! Oh, Ethel, my life, my love! have I found you only to lose you again?” he groaned, redoubling his efforts to restore her to consciousness, while Ada, divided between amazement at his presence there and excessive agitation, and her fear that life was really extinct, hastily obeyed his orders.

“Thank God, she yet lives!” he said in tones tremulous with emotion, as at length the eyelids began to quiver and a long, sighing breath came from the white lips.

“Rolfe,” they whispered very low and feebly.

“Yes, yes, I am here, my poor little Ethel,” he answered, kneeling by her couch and fondly caressing her hair and cheek. “You will live for me, and nothing in life shall ever part us again.”

A beautiful smile crept over her face as she opened her eyes for a single instant; then closing them again, she fell asleep with her hand in his.

Ada stood on the farther side of the bed, looking and listening in increasing surprise and wonder.

Mrs. Heywood and the nurse stole in on tiptoe and beheld the scene in no less astonishment and perplexity, but Rolfe motioned them all away, and kept guard over the slumbers of the invalid as one who had a superior and undoubted right.

She slept quietly, awoke refreshed, and refused neither food nor medicine at his hands.

But he would not let her talk.

“Wait, my Ethel, till you are stronger,” he said, “and then we will tell each other all. In the mean time we may rest content in the knowledge that we are restored to each other, and no earthly power can part us.”

Lips and eyes smiled brightly, and a faint color stole into her cheek, but faded again as she moaned sadly, “My baby, my baby!” the tears stealing down her face.

“We will find her; she shall be restored to you. Nothing is impossible to a determined will,” he said with energy.

She believed him, and once more resigned herself to peaceful slumber.

It was now near midnight, yet a bright light burned in the sitting-room. Mr. and Mrs. Heywood and their daughter, too much excited to think of retiring, sat there waiting for they scarce knew what. Reluctantly leaving Ethel to the care of the nurse, Rolfe joined them.

“Yes,” he said, in answer to their inquiring looks, “we knew and loved each other years ago in Jefferson, where I first set up business. She was an orphan, and the sweetest creature I ever saw, but very much under the influence of an older sister – a proud, selfish, scheming, domineering woman. She, I have always thought it was, who came between my love and me. I meant to speak before I left, and tried to do so, but she contrived to foil every attempt. Then I wrote, and the answer was, I have little doubt, dictated or forged by her.”

“She rejected you?”

Mrs. Heywood’s tone was both inquiring and indignant.

“Yes, mother; but don’t condemn her unheard,” he said, with a smile of filial affection. “That in so doing she did not follow the dictates of her own heart I now know beyond a question.”

“I don’t want to be uncharitable, or to wound you, Rolfe,” returned his mother, flushing slightly, “but that any woman should reject the man she loves and marry another seems to me both weak and wicked.”

“Wait, my dear, till you have heard her story,” said the old gentleman. “We don’t know how she may have been deceived and betrayed.”

A few days later Rolfe came to his mother with an explanation which even in her eyes exculpated Ethel.

“Ah, well, poor thing! she’s had a hard time of it,” said the old lady, wiping away a tear. “And I hope, Rolfe, if she falls into your hands you’ll try to make it up to her.”

“I shall indeed,” he said, with a peculiar and very happy smile. “Come, mother, come to her room with me. The minister is there, my father and Ada too, and Ethel and I are now to be made one for life.”

“Rolfe!” she cried in astonishment.

“Yes, mother; I cannot let her feel herself alone in the wide world any longer, and I must have the right to nurse her back to health. You will not withhold your consent, mother dear?”

“No,” she said, with a half-bewildered look as she accepted the support of his offered arm, “not if it is to make you and that poor young thing happy; but it is very sudden.”

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE REVELATION

“The web of our life is of a mingled
Yarn, good and all together.” —

Shakespeare.

For a few days the little Ethel was quite inconsolable, crying sadly for “Mamma;” but the new parents were very tender, patient, and affectionate, and the old love gradually faded from the baby memory, till at length it was utterly forgotten in the new. So also was the name her true mother had given her, Mrs. Kemper changing it to Florence, which she liked better.

Anxious that the child should believe herself their own by birth, the Kempers considered it fortunate that it was while journeying to a new home in the West, among strangers, in the little town of Cranley, that they obtained possession of her.

They breathed no hint of the little one’s history, and none of their new acquaintances had the least suspicion of the truth, as indeed how should they when to both parents “our little Floy” was evidently as the apple of the eye?

So loved and cared for, and blessed with a sweet, generous, affectionate disposition, hers was a bright, sunny childhood. She was spared even the loneliness of many an only child, finding companion, playmate, and friend in the little son of the nearest neighbor.

The grounds of the Aldens and Kempers adjoined, and immediately upon the arrival of the latter, friendly relations were established between the two families. Mrs. Alden called upon her new neighbors, taking with her her five-year-old Espy, a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed boy, who straightway fell in love with the lustrous, laughing brown orbs and dark curls of baby Floy.

She sat on a cushion by the side of her new mamma, daintily habited in white, a gold chain about her neck, knots of blue ribbon at her shoulders, and a wide sash of the same at her waist. The plump little arms hugged close to her bosom a doll half as large as herself, while the sweet baby voice sang cheerily, “Bye, baby, bye!”

“What’s your name?” asked Espy, regarding her with admiring eyes.

“Florence,” answered Mrs. Kemper quickly, “but we call her Floy for short.”

“That’s a pretty name, and you’re a pretty baby,” he said, giving her a kiss. “Nex’ time I come I’ll bring my kitten. She’s a nice cat, and I love her; but I’ll just give her to you, if you want her.”

“I was never more surprised,” remarked Mrs. Alden in an aside to Mrs. Kemper. “He prizes that kitten above all his other possessions.”

And thus it ever was from that first moment. Nothing could be, in Espy’s esteem, too good, beautiful, or precious to be given to Floy – “his little wife,” as he began to call her before she was three years old, challenging a special proprietorship in her with which no other boy was allowed to interfere.

A day seldom passed in which he did not present some offering at her shrine, though it were no more than a sweet-scented clover-blossom or a brightly-tinted autumn leaf.

They shared each other’s joys and sorrows: all her little griefs were confided to him; to her he recounted all his boyish dreams of future achievement when he should arrive at man’s estate.

He was a born artist, and found in Floy his chief inspiration; for while his parents and older brothers and sisters laughed at and discouraged him, she believed thoroughly in him, and was sure he would some day be a Rubens, a Raphael, a Michael Angelo, or something even greater than any of them or all put together; and her graceful little figure and winsome face furnished him with a model that he was never weary of copying.

Mr. Alden, hoping that this son would embrace one of the learned professions, determined to give him a liberal education; and the first great grief either Floy or Espy had known was the parting when the latter went away to school. Yet there was compensation in a steady correspondence, kept up with the knowledge and approval of their parents, and in the joy of the reunion when vacation brought Espy home again.

Cranley could boast of a good school for girls, and Floy did not go from home for her education. At seventeen she was a very pretty, engaging girl, and as Mr. Kemper had prospered, and was known to be in easy circumstances, she had plenty of admirers; but she remained true to Espy, though theirs was as yet only a tacit engagement.

Floy graduated from school in June of that year, and Mr. Kemper took her and his wife on a summer trip to the East. They spent several weeks at the sea-shore, visited Philadelphia and New York and other places of interest, then turned homeward.

All had gone well with them, and now within a few miles of Cranley they were speaking of this gladly, thankfully.

“Oh, yes, we’ve had a delightful time,” said Floy, “and yet I am eager to be in our own dear home again. There is no place like home when it is as happy a one as ours.”

Mr. Kemper smiled indulgently upon her.

“Quite right, my little girl,” he said, “and our Floy makes half its brightness to us. Is not that so, mamma?” addressing his wife.

“It is indeed,” she answered, half sighing as the thought suggested itself that, some day, another would have a stronger claim than they upon this darling of her heart.

The whistle blew, the train slackened its speed, then came to a stand-still at a little country station.

“Peaches! apples! pears!”

A boy had come in with a basket of fruit on his arm.

Mr. Kemper bought liberally of him; then selecting a gold half-eagle from the contents of his purse, he dropped it into Floy’s hand, saying, “There’s a trifle for you. I wonder how long it will be before you spend it.”

“A good while, papa, if you keep me in greenbacks enough to supply my wants,” she returned gayly, as she deposited it in a dainty portemonnaie. “Thanks for the gift; I’ll be sure to think of you when I look at it.”

“Better put it in bank along with the rest; there’s five hundred dollars there now to your credit.”

“Then I can afford to keep this to look at.”

The smile died on her lips almost before the words left them.

“Something’s wrong with the engine,” a voice was saying behind her. “Nobody knows how long we’ll have to stop here, and we’re not up to time by half an hour. Hark! what’s that? Another train coming! we shall be run into!”

Faces paled with sudden fear; men and women started to their feet in wild affright. There was a shrill whistle, answered by another, a rush and roar, then a crash, many voices blending in an awful cry, and Floy knew no more till, waking as from a deep sleep, she felt herself gently lifted, while a strange voice said:

“She’s only stunned; not much hurt, I hope. But this other woman is horribly mangled, and the man – well, his pains are over for this life at least.”

Instantly restored to perfect consciousness, Floy opened her eyes with a cry, “Mother! father! oh, where are they? Let me go to them!”

The men set her down on a fragment of the wreck, and turned to help those in greater need.

The girl passed her hand over her eyes as if to clear her vision. Oh, was it not all a horrible dream? The heaped-up ruins, the bleeding, mangled forms of the dead and dying, the shrieks, the

groans, the cries for help, the running to and fro of those who were trying to give it, the frenzied search for missing loved ones, the wail of anguish over the wounded and the slain!

What was that they were bearing past her? Could that be her mother's voice asking in quivering, agonized tones for husband and child?

She sprang up and ran after the rude litter on which the crushed and bleeding form was borne along toward a farm-house a few rods distant. She caught sight of the face, white with the pallor of death and convulsed with pain. A gleam of joy shot over it as the eyes fell on the face and figure of Floy. "My darling! safe, thank God!" came from the pale, quivering lips.

"Mother, mother!" cried the girl.

"Be comforted, darling; I can bear it; 'twill not be for long," gasped the sufferer.

They carried her into the house and laid her on a bed. Floy knelt by her side, grasping the dear hand in hers, laying it to her cheek, pressing it to her lips, passionately weeping with a grief that seemed to rend her heart asunder.

"Floy, dearest, it is all right. God's will be done. He knows best. He will comfort you."

The quick ear of the girl scarcely caught the low-breathed words, and with the last Mrs. Kemper fainted.

At the same moment a gentleman came hastily in and stepped to the bedside.

Instinctively Floy comprehended his errand, even ere he laid his finger on the pulse or raised the shawl that half concealed the shattered form.

She rose, outwardly calm and collected.

"Can my mother live?" she asked.

"For some hours," he said, looking pityingly into the grief-stricken face of his questioner.

"Where is she hurt?"

"Poor child! how shall I tell you? Her lower limbs are completely crushed, and even amputation would not save her life."

Floy caught at the bedstead for support, a low cry of heart-breaking anguish bursting from her lips. "Oh, mother, mother! And my father!" she gasped, "oh, where is he?"

"The gentleman who occupied the same seat with this lady? Ah, my dear child, he is done with pain."

The girl sank upon her knees again, hiding her face in her hands and trembling in every fibre. So sudden, so terrible were these successive blows that the very earth seemed slipping from beneath her feet.

"Dear Lord, her heart is overwhelmed; lead her to the Rock that is higher than she."

The words were spoken by an old woman in homely attire who was assisting the physician in his efforts to restore Mrs. Kemper to consciousness. The tones were very tender and pitiful, and the aged hand rested lightly for an instant upon the bowed head.

"Oh, could not *one* have been spared to me?" cried Floy in a burst of agony. "Fatherless! motherless! oh, that I too had been taken!"

"Dear child, He will be your Father and your Friend, and life will grow sweet again, and now He knows and feels for all your pain."

A groan of agonizing pain came from the crushed form on the bed.

Floy rose and bent over her, the hot tears falling like rain upon the pallid, death-like face.

"Mother, mother! how can I bear to see you suffer so?"

The white, quivering lips tried to wreath themselves into a smile, and the anguished eyes looked tenderly into hers.

"Beloved child, it will – soon – be over, and I – shall be at home – indeed."

Her eyes sought the doctor's face. "How long – "

"A very few hours at the most."

"Then leave me alone with my child," she said, speaking in a stronger voice than before.

The physician gave Floy some directions in regard to the administering of restoratives, and he and his assistant withdrew.

Left alone together, hand clasped in hand, mother and daughter gazed tenderly, mournfully into each other's eyes, silent tears trickling down the cheeks of both. Then gathering up all her failing energies for the task, Mrs. Kemper told Floy in a few brief sentences the story of her adoption and all they had heard from her true mother's lips in the little shanty inn at Clearfield Station.

Some things she said which, though they fell almost unheeded upon Floy's ears at the time, afterward, when she had come to care for that unknown mother, were a great comfort. It was pleasant to have learned from the dear dying voice that she who gave her being was unmistakably a lady by birth and breeding, whom even a stranger recognized as gentle and lovable.

"I have never been able to remember without a pang of regret and remorse her agony of grief in parting from you," said Mrs. Kemper. "We have never heard from her, and I think she must have died soon after, for she seemed then in an almost dying condition."

"Oh, then why tell me of her? why, dearest, darling mother, rob me of the belief that I am your own child – yours and father's?" sobbed the heart-broken girl.

The dying eyes looked into hers with yearning tenderness.

"Precious one," she whispered faintly, for her strength was waning, "I would spare you every unneeded pang. But," she went on with frequent pauses for breath, "the knowledge may some day be of use to you. You may find relatives, my poor, lonely darling. You will find the deed of gift among your father's papers; your mother's name is signed to it. There is a will, my husband told me, leaving everything to you and me, all to be yours at my death; so, my –"

"Oh, mother, darling mother, what do I care for that now – now when I have lost my father, and you too are going from me!" cried the girl in an agony of grief.

"Nothing now, I know," the mother said with pitying tenderness, "but I am glad my darling will not be left penniless; it would be hard for you to earn your own bread. And the dear home, Floy, will be yours."

Her eyes closed, but the lips still moved, and Floy, bending over her, caught the broken, faintly murmured words, "Home – many mansions – my Father's house –" Then all was stillness and silence.

"Mother, oh, mother! speak to me once more!" cried the girl, pressing passionate kisses on the pale brow where the dews of death already gathered. "Is it well with you, darling mother? No fear? No doubt, no darkness?"

A beautiful smile played about the dying lips, and again a faint murmur reached the daughter's intently listening ear: "All is peace – peace – the sweetest peace; I know that my Redeemer liveth. Trust Him, trust Him; He will – never – leave you."

A gentle sigh, and Floy knew that she was alone. No wail of sorrow broke the deep hush of that death-chamber, no tears fell from the burning eyes of the solitary mourner. They found her with the still form clasped in her arms, her dead mother's head pillowed upon her bosom, the tearless eyes gazing with mingled love and anguish upon the calm, sweet face on whose unruffled brow Peace had set its signet. The lovely smile yet lingered about the pale lips which to Floy's ear seemed ever whispering, "All is peace, peace, the sweetest peace."

CHAPTER V BETROTHED

“We all do fade as a leaf.” —

Isaiah 64:6

“My Adah! let me call thee mine.” —

Byron.

“Floy!”

Only a word, yet what a world of love and tender sympathy spoke in the tone and in the touch of the hand that gently caressed her hair.

The girl started and looked up.

“Oh, Espy!”

Her cheek dropped again upon the head resting on her bosom, and now the blessed tears came in a flood.

Espy, just returning from college, had been scarcely an hour at home when the news came flashing over the wires that about five miles away a terrible railroad accident had occurred, in which several prominent citizens of Cranley, among whom were the Kempers, had been killed or wounded.

Nearly frantic with fear for Floy, Espy rushed to the depot, and learning that a special train would be sent immediately to carry aid to the sufferers, hurried home again with the tidings.

Mrs. Alden had already packed a basket with such things as she thought might be needed, tied on her hat, and, with a shawl on her arm, stood in the doorway anxiously looking for her son’s return.

He came running, caught up the basket, and, giving her his arm, began to retrace his steps, merely saying in a voice hoarse with emotion, “We must make all haste, mother, or we’ll be left.”

“Floy?” she cried pantingly, as they almost flew over the ground. “Oh, I don’t know!” he gasped, “there are a thousand reports.”

It was only on reaching the scene of the disaster that they learned who, of all their friends, had been killed or injured. What a relief to know that Floy was not of the number! But ah, was she unhurt, with that crushed and almost broken heart?

They found her as we have described. They shared her grief, for they had both become strongly attached to those whose sudden, untimely, and terrible death she mourned.

“Thank God for those tears!” sobbed Mrs. Alden. “Dear child, our loss is her gain; and she has gone to be with the husband she loved so well. The Lord was good to both in letting them go together.”

“Yes,” whispered Floy, laying her precious burden gently down.

Wiping away her tears, she pressed one more long, lingering kiss upon the pale lips, then turned, and giving her hand to Espy, suffered him to lead her from the room.

Truly the girl’s heart was overwhelmed. Her adopted father – whom, until within the last hour, she had deemed in very truth her own – was only less dear than his wife, and the double bereavement, so sudden, so terrible, was enough to crush her young spirit to the earth; and yet was there an added depth of anguish in the thought of the strange revelation made to her by that beloved dying voice.

It seemed to rob her of the full right to the poor luxury of grief. Others also were nearer by the ties of blood; yet oh, it could not be that any other loved them with half the strength of devotion that filled her heart, that any could mourn for them as she who for sixteen years had been enshrined in their affections, and lived continually in the sunshine of their love!

She could not bear to tell this sorrow to any earthly creature; not even Espy must know the sad secret. There was only One into whose ear she could pour out *all* her griefs. That she could tell Him all and know that He listened – that in all her afflictions He was afflicted – saved the poor heart from breaking.

Mrs. Kemper had been an only child; Mr. Kemper had outlived his brothers and sisters; so that there were no nearer relatives than nephews and nieces, all of whom resided at a great distance. Word was sent to those whose addresses were known, but they were not waited for, as it was impossible they should arrive in time for the funeral.

The Aldens were very kind, treating Floy quite as if she belonged to them, and relieving her of every care in regard to the necessary arrangements for performing the last offices of love to the departed.

It was the evening of the day on which she had looked for the last time upon the dear faces of the loved and lost. At her own request sympathizing friends had all withdrawn and left her alone, and Espy, coming softly into the parlor unannounced, found her weeping bitterly before Mrs. Kemper's portrait.

"Floy, dearest Floy, my own little wife, would that I could comfort you!" he whispered, taking her in his arms.

"You have been – you are a great comfort to me, Espy," she said, gently releasing herself.

"Then why may I not embrace you, dear Floy? Ah, I understand! it is because there has never been a formal engagement between us. But we know we love and belong to each other. Is it not so? Darling Floy, promise to be my wife."

She answered with a look that made his heart bound.

"You are all I have now, Espy," she sobbed, allowing him to draw her head to a resting-place on his shoulder; "all I have to love or to give love to me."

"I wish you knew how much I love you, Floy, my poor stricken one, and how I long to comfort you!" he whispered, clasping her close with many a tender caress.

"The cloud is very, very black!" she sighed. "Oh, it seems as if my heart will break! The blow has been so sudden, so terrible – I cannot fully realize it yet. I am stunned. I seem to be living in a dream – a horrible dream; a dreadful nightmare is upon me," she moaned. "Oh, Espy, wake me and tell me the dear father and mother, alive and well yesterday, are not now lying in the cold grave!" and she shuddered and hid her face, while choking sobs shook her from head to foot.

"They are not there; they are beyond the stars, in the region of unclouded light, dear Floy," he said.

"Yes, yes, that is true! and oh, thank God that you are left me still!"

No one intruded upon them, and they parted only when it was time for Floy to retire.

Worn out with grief and the fatigue of her journey, she fell asleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

The sun was up when she woke again, birds were singing in the tree close to her window, and the glad voices of children at play on the other side of the street came pleasantly to her ear. Had she escaped from her horrible nightmare?

Alas! for only an instant; it was upon her again. Bitter tears coursed down her cheeks. How lonely and desolate was her lot! but ah, Espy's love was left her still. There was balm for her wounded spirit in that thought.

Then came another – the secret imparted with Mrs. Kemper's dying breath. Had not Espy now a right to know the truth as well as she?

She pondered the question for a moment. She was sure it would make no difference in his love, as why should it indeed? But he should know; she would have no concealments from him who was to be her second self.

And, after all, how little there was to tell! What did she know beyond the bare fact that she was the child of her reputed parents only by adoption?

Ah, the paper, the deed of gift her mother had spoken of – she must find it; it would at least tell her her true name. Oh, what an added grief to think that she had no right to the one she had borne since her earliest recollection! and yet, they having given it to her, had she not a right?

On leaving the breakfast-table, where she had gone through the form of taking her morning meal, she went directly to the room where Mr. Kemper's books and papers were kept, and began her search, at first with confident expectation, though in trembling, eager haste, then anxiously, and at length in sadness akin to despair. She had examined one receptacle after another, till all had been gone over without coming upon the object of her quest. A leaf torn from a note-book – it must be a small paper, easily overlooked; and with that thought in her mind she began her exploration anew. She had not given it up yet when the servant-girl came to say that Mr. Alden was in the parlor.

Floy repaired thither at once.

It was not Espy, but his father, who came forward as she entered, took her hand in his and led her to a sofa, where he seated himself by her side.

"My dear child," he said, "Espy has told us all, and we are very glad; though of course it is only what we had looked forward to as a settled thing for years past."

His manner was so paternal and affectionate that for a moment Floy was too much overcome for speech, so vividly did it remind her of the father she had lost.

He understood her emotion, and tried to console her with the assurance that she need no longer feel herself orphaned and alone in the world, since he and his wife would henceforth regard her as their own child.

Then he went on to speak of the necessity of a settlement of Mr. Kemper's estate, asking her whether there was a will, and who was appointed executor, adding:

"Your father once expressed a wish that I would undertake that office for him, at the same time telling me that his intention was to make a will dividing his property equally between you and his wife, her half to revert to you or your heirs at her death; but the subject was not mentioned between us afterward, and I do not know anything more about the matter."

"Mother told me there was a will," said Floy, "and it would give me everything. But I do not know where to find it."

"Doubtless it is somewhere among his private papers," said Mr. Alden; adding reflectively, "It will be quite a task for you to examine them, and you should have help. I am very busy just now, but Espy is entirely at leisure. Shall he come and help you look them over?"

The young man came in while his father was speaking, and, on hearing an explanation of the matter, eagerly seconded the offer. Anything to assist Floy, especially if it kept him in her dear society.

"I am ready to begin at once, if it suits your convenience and inclination," he said to her, and she answering that it did, his father left them, and they repaired together to the room where she had been so busy all the morning.

CHAPTER VI THE SEARCH

“Omission to do what is necessary
Seals a commission to a blank of danger.” —

Shakespeare.

There were papers scattered over the table, and one or two had fallen on the floor.

“You see I had begun the task before your father came,” Floy said, with a sad smile; “but before we resume it I have something to say to you,” she added with an effort, growing so pale that Espy caught her in his arms, thinking she was about to faint.

“My poor Floy!” he said, “if it is anything painful, don’t tell it; there is no need.”

“I want you to know it, Espy,” she sighed low and tremulously, “but to keep it secret from all others unless – unless it – circumstances should render it necessary that – ”

Her head dropped upon his shoulder, and with a burst of hysterical weeping, “Oh, Espy, Espy!” she cried, “I’m more than orphaned; I’ve lost my identity; I’m not Floy Kemper – not the child of the dear parents I mourn, except – except by adoption!”

He was greatly surprised, but only drew her closer to him, as one made dearer still by her sore distress, her utter loneliness; and as she went on in her low, quivering tones, “I’ve none now but you; I’m all alone in the wide world – not a relative living, so far as I know,” a strange thrill of joy mingled with his sympathetic grief – joy that she was his, his alone to love and cherish to life’s end; that on him only she would lean as her earthly stay and support.

Something of this he whispered in reply, accompanying his words with fond caresses and endearing epithets.

“How good and noble you are, my Espy!” she said. “You still hold me to your heart without waiting to learn who or what I am.”

“You are my own little Floy, whom I have loved from her very babyhood,” he interrupted, holding her fast as she made a movement as if to release herself from his embrace, “and that is all I care to know.”

She lifted her large, lustrous eyes to his with a look of grateful love. “No, no, I will not take advantage of your generous affection,” she said, the tears streaming down her cheeks. “Wait till I have told you all – till you know everything. Till then I will not hold you bound by – what passed between us last night.”

“I will not accept my freedom” – he began impetuously. But she stopped him with an imperative gesture.

“Hear my story.” And in a few rapid sentences she gave him the facts as learned from Mrs. Kemper.

His face brightened as she proceeded.

“What is there in this, Floy, to come between us, or even to raise an objection to our union in the mind of the most captious?” he asked. “You were born in wedlock, your mother was a lady, and presumably your father a gentleman. Besides, there is absolutely no need that any one but our own two selves should ever learn these facts. You are known as the child of Mr. and Mrs. Kemper, and that you are not, concerns us alone.”

“Is that so?”

“Certainly; and now let us look for the will.”

“The will!” A sudden painful thought had flashed upon her. Espy saw it in her face.

“Well, dearest, what is it?” he asked.

“If we should not find it?”

Her voice was low and husky.

“Then we shall do the best we can without it,” he answered cheerily, turning to the table and taking up a roll of papers tied together with a bit of red tape. “Have you looked at this?”

“No – yes, but only with care enough to make sure that the deed of gift was not among them. But the will – if it is not found, does not the law give everything to father’s relatives? and will not that make this – this secret of mine public?” she asked, speaking with difficulty, as if the subject were almost too painful for discussion.

Espy started, and dropped the packet upon the floor; but recovering himself, stooped to pick it up, saying with determination:

“But we *will* find it; of course it must be here or somewhere about the house. Cheer up, Floy dear, and let us go to work.”

They spent the greater part of three days at their task. Every paper was unfolded, shaken out, examined and re-examined, every nook and corner diligently ransacked, and thorough but unavailing search made for secret drawers, yet neither will nor deed of gift could be found.

At last they were forced to the conclusion that the deed of gift was irrecoverably lost; the will also, if it had ever existed, which seemed very doubtful.

“Ah, what success to-day?” asked the elder Mr. Alden, coming in upon them as they were slowly replacing the papers in the secretary, almost hoping, even against hope, to yet come upon the missing papers.

“None, sir,” answered Espy.

“What! no will? Surely you must have overlooked it. Mrs. Kemper you say, Floy, told you there was one – just such as Mr. Kemper had told me he purposed making – and he could have no motive for concealing it. Let me think; possibly he may have carried it on his person. Have you examined the pockets of – ”

“No!” cried Espy, starting up with animation. “Floy – ”

“Oh, I cannot!” she groaned, hiding her face.

“No, no, assuredly not; forgive me, darling,” he whispered, bending over her; “but may I?”

She gave a silent assent, and he and his father left the room.

In a few moments they returned, Espy carrying a large-sized pocket-book, old and worn, which he placed in Floy’s hands, saying, “This is all we found. It is for you to open and examine it.”

She did so, her tears dropping over it all the time. It contained a little change and a few papers of no great importance – receipted bills, memoranda, etc.

“It is not here; he never made it,” she said huskily, pushing the book and its contents from her. “Ah, father, father, what has your neglect cost me!”

“Don’t be so distressed, child; there is really no occasion,” said Mr. Alden soothingly. “I don’t know why, as I told Espy yesterday, you and he have taken so much trouble to hunt for the will, as, you being the only child, the law gives all to you in case your father died intestate, as it seems he did.”

She lifted her white face, which she had hidden in her hands; she would not see Espy’s imploring look.

“No, Mr. Alden, you mistake,” she said; “I, lacking the will, am not the heir.”

“Nonsense, my dear child! ’Tis you who are mistaken. Why, how could you doubt that you, his only child, inherit Mr. Kemper’s property by natural right, unless he chose to will it, or part of it, to some one else?”

She seemed shaken with contending emotions; but controlling herself by a strong effort, and looking with steady, mournful gaze into the eyes of him whom she addressed, “I thought – I believed – oh, I never *doubted* till the hour that I became doubly orphaned – that I was his own child and – and hers!”

She paused for an instant, with her hands tightly clasped over her heart, then went on in lower and more tremulous tones. “But she – my mother – as I must call her still – she told me with her dying breath that – that I was theirs only by adoption.”

Mr. Alden, who had been standing, staggered back and dropped into a chair, looking perfectly astounded.

“Who – who are you then?” he gasped at length.

“I – I do not know, except – ”

“Never mind, Floy, my own little wife,” whispered Espy, throwing a protecting arm about her and making her lean on him.

Then turning to his father, he stated the facts as succinctly as possible.

Mr. Alden listened with a grave and troubled air, and, when his son had finished, sat for some moments in silent cogitation.

“Well,” he said at length, “this is a rather bad business; and yet – perhaps not so bad as it looks. Floy, how many are in this secret – about your birth, I mean?”

“Our three selves only,” she answered.

“Good! very good!” he said, rubbing his hands with a complacent smile. “Your sex is not famed for ability to keep secrets, but I’ll trust you for this one.”

She gave him a look of surprised inquiry.

“So long as you are believed to be Mr. Kemper’s own child,” he went on to explain, “no one will dispute your right to the property, and it’s very considerable, Floy – worth taking some pains to secure.”

Her dark eyes opened wide upon him in half-incredulous, indignant surprise, but he gave her no opportunity to speak.

“And it is yours of right, for, as we all know, Mr. Kemper intended it for you, and you will only be fulfilling his wishes in retaining possession, which, as the old saying has it,” he added, with an unpleasant laugh, “is nine points of the law.”

CHAPTER VII

A WICKED SUGGESTION

“All your attempts
Shall fall on me like brittle shafts on armor
That break themselves, or like waves against a rock.”

Massinger.

Utter amazement at so base a proposal kept the girl silent for an instant; then releasing herself from Espy's supporting arm, she stood erect before her tempter, her hands tightly clenched, a crimson tide rushing over the face so pale but a moment ago, the great dark eyes flashing with indignant anger, then filling with tears of deeply wounded feeling.

“Ah, I see; you were not serious. You could not believe me capable of such a crime. But it was a cruel jest,” she said in a choking voice, and ending with a burst of almost hysterical weeping.

“Crime!” echoed Mr. Alden testily. “Girl, you don't know what you are talking about! How can it be a crime to take the property your father accumulated expressly for you?”

“I beg, sir, that the matter may be allowed to rest for the present,” interposed Espy; “we have had a hard day's work, and Floy is not in a condition, either mentally or physically, to attend to business.”

“Well, well, just as she pleases; there's no particular hurry, and I'd be the last one to want to distress her,” returned Mr. Alden, and taking up his hat he stalked out of the room, evidently not over-pleased. In fact, his ire was roused not a little by the term Floy had applied to his proposition.

“Crime indeed!” he muttered to himself as he hurried down the garden path. “As if I – I could be thought capable of suggesting a crime!”

He hastened to his wife with his grievance.

“Oh, well, never mind the child; she's only a slip of a girl, and I dare say hardly knows what a crime is,” Mrs. Alden answered soothingly. “But really, remembering how they doted on her and petted her, I never was more surprised at anything in my life than to hear that she wasn't their own.”

“Nor I, Jane; and if she's going to be such a fool as to publish the thing and give up the property that she knows, and we all know, was intended for her, why – I'll withdraw my consent – ”

“Oh, now, Nathan, don't say that!” hastily interrupted his wife, knowing that he was an obstinate man and prided himself on keeping his word. “You might come to wish you hadn't, for she's a nice girl, and we're all fond of her – you as well as the rest of us. There, now, I must go and see about supper,” she added, making an excuse to leave him before he had had time to commit himself.

Worn out with grief, excitement, and over-exertion, Floy went to bed that night with a raging headache, and for the next two or three days was able to do little but lie on the sofa.

Espy was with her almost constantly, saving her as much as possible from every annoyance, and comforting her with his sympathy and love.

They were not days of mirth and gladness, but of much heaviness of heart, yet often looked back upon in after years with tender regret, a mournful sweetness lingering about their memory.

As by mutual consent both Floy and Espy avoided the subject of the missing papers and her future action in regard to the property. It frequently obtruded itself upon Floy's thoughts, but she refused to consider it for the time being; it must wait until she had strength for the struggle which she foresaw was before her if she would follow the dictates of an enlightened conscience.

Mr. Alden grew impatient.

“Espy,” he said at length, “what is Floy going to do?”

“She has not told me, sir; the subject has not been mentioned between us.”

“Then it’s high time it was; I hope you’ll talk to her about it to-day, and try to convince her of the reasonableness of the course I have recommended.”

“I should rather not undertake it, sir. I am not at all sure that hers is not the right view of the matter.”

“Come, now, don’t be a fool, Espy!” returned his father angrily. “You’d be standing amazingly in your own light, if you mean to marry the girl; it’s a fine property, and would give you just the start in life you need. Why, you might give up studying for a profession and devote yourself at once to your beloved art,” he added, with an unpleasant laugh.

The young man flushed deeply. “I should despise myself, sir, if I could act from such motives,” he said, forcing himself to speak quietly, though the hot blood coursed through his veins.

“Your father doesn’t mean that he wants you to marry for money, or to do anything dishonest to get it,” interposed Mrs. Alden. “All he asks is that you will persuade Floy not to throw away what we all know was meant for her.”

“No, I’ll take back that request,” said the elder gentleman. “Leave her to me; that’s all I ask.”

“I shall not try to influence her one way or the other,” said Espy. “But, father, be patient with her if she can’t see things just as you do. She’s almost heart-broken already, poor child!”

This conversation had taken place at the breakfast-table, and immediately on the conclusion of the meal Espy hastened to Floy to learn how she was in health, determined to save her from an encounter with his father until she felt quite equal to it.

He found her free from pain, calm and quiet in manner, though with an expression of deep sadness in her large dark eyes and about the lines of her mobile mouth. She was strangely changed from the careless, light-hearted creature of a week ago. Sorrow and bereavement had done the work of years, and the child of yesterday had become a self-poised, self-reliant woman.

She had spent some hours that morning in earnest thought, asking wisdom and strength from Him who has declared Himself in a peculiar sense the “Father of the fatherless,” and in searching His Word for direction; and now her mind was fully made up.

Espy told her of his father’s intended call, and asked if she would see him, adding, “Don’t hesitate to decline, Floy. You can guess his errand.”

“Yes,” she said, sighing slightly, “and I cannot follow his wishes, because it would be doing violence to my conscience. But I will hear all he has to say. Ah,” she added, tears filling her eyes, “it is hard to be compelled to do what vexes and angers those you love and would fain please rather than yourself! Espy, will you turn against me?”

“Never, never, my poor child! I will stand by you through everything.”

The door opened, and the elder Mr. Alden came in.

“Ah, good-morning, my dear child,” he said, taking Floy’s hand. “Glad to see you about again! should have been here before, but Espy insisted that you were better let alone.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Please be seated.”

He was not long in introducing the real object of his visit, but approached the subject with more caution than before. He spoke of Mr. Kemper’s great fondness for her and his fatherly pride in her, and the determination he had been frequently heard to express, that if he could prevent it his darling should never know what it was to want for the comforts and even luxuries of life.

“Yes,” murmured Floy, the tears stealing down her pale cheeks, “father loved me very dearly, and was always tenderly careful of me.”

“And can you believe that he would want the property he accumulated to be enjoyed by some one else, and you left to struggle with poverty?” asked Mr. Alden.

“No; oh no, no!”

“Ah!” There was a world of meaning in the slight exclamation. It said, “So you are coming to your senses at last! you see now that I was right, and I’m delighted that such is the case.”

“Do not mistake me, Mr. Alden,” said the girl, sighing. “I am certain father would have preferred to leave me well provided for, but he may have finally concluded that it would be more just to leave his property to those who were related to him by ties of blood.”

Emotion stopped her utterance; she had not yet learned to think and speak calmly of the fact that there was no natural tie between herself and those who had been as the dearest of parents to her.

“Nonsense!” was the angry exclamation that rose to Mr. Alden’s lips; but checking himself, he said in a tone of mild expostulation, “I am sure, my dear child, you need not trouble yourself with any such fears. He made every cent of his money, and certainly had a perfect right to leave it as he pleased. And there is not the least doubt in my mind that you would be following out his wishes in retaining possession of it. Indeed I think it would be very wrong as well as foolish to do otherwise.”

“Why wrong?”

“Because it would be disposing of his property as he would not have wished it to be disposed of.”

“Ah, Mr. Alden, suppose you were his next of kin, would you not see this matter differently?”

“Well – possibly our own interests are very apt to blind us to the rights of others.”

Floy smiled faintly, thinking how nearly akin to a man’s own interest was that of his son.

“Yes,” she said, “that is human nature; we are naturally selfish, I as well as others; so much so that if I knew the property was lawfully mine I should never think of giving it away.”

“Then don’t.”

“Ah, it is not mine to give or to keep, but must go to the rightful heirs.”

Mr. Alden bit his lips with vexation, rose and paced the room for some moments; then, having recovered control of himself, came and sat down by Floy.

“I know you want to do right,” he said pleasantly, “and I have only to convince you that the course I wish you to take is right to induce you to take it.”

“I cannot tell you how gladly I should do so,” she answered.

At this moment Espy, who had taken no part in the conversation, though a deeply interested listener, was, much to his discontent, summoned away by a message from his mother.

Mr. Alden did most of the talking for the next hour, going over the old arguments again and again, but bringing forward little that was new except that Mr. and Mrs. Kemper, in adopting her as their own child, had given her all the rights of a child, and therefore, will or no will, she was the proper heir.

“Is that according to the law of the land?” she asked, a gleam of hope shining in her eyes.

He evaded the question. “Human laws are very faulty; we need not always be bound by them.”

“No, not when they come in collision with the higher law of God; but that is not the case in this instance.”

After a moment’s thought and stroking of his beard, he began on another tack, speaking of Espy and his plans, and dwelling at considerable length upon the great advantage it would be to the young man if his wife had sufficient means to give him a start in life.

Floy heard him to the end in unbroken silence, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, a look of pain more than once crossing her features, while the color came and went on her cheek.

He seemed to have finished, but she neither moved nor spoke.

“Well,” he said, rising and taking up his hat from the table where he had placed it on entering, “I’ll leave you to think it all over. Good-morning!”

“Stay!” she said, suddenly rising and standing before him, her hands still clasped, a look of anguish in her eyes as she lifted them to his, her voice tremulous with emotion, not from any faltering of purpose. “I need no further time for deliberation. I have thought and prayed over this matter, and my duty has been made very clear to me. Right and justice must be done, at whatever cost to me or to – ”

The last word was lost in a bitter, choking sob.

Mr. Alden turned abruptly on his heel and left the house.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. ALDEN AN ABETTOR

“A settled virtue
Makes itself a judge: and satisfied within,
Smiles at that common enemy, the world.” —

Dryden.

“What is it, Nathan?”

Mrs. Alden had come upon her husband pacing the front porch of their dwelling with angry strides.

“That girl!” he said between his shut teeth. “I wash my hands of her and her affairs, and Espy shall never marry her with my consent, mark that, Jane!” and he brought down his clenched fist with emphasis upon the open palm of the other hand.

His wife looked disturbed, but after a moment’s thought said cheerfully, “She’ll come round yet, Nathan, and you don’t mean that to stand if she does?”

“No, of course not; but she isn’t going to come round; she hasn’t the sense to understand and appreciate an argument, and has somehow got her head full of Quixotic notions. I suppose she thinks she’ll make a grand heroine of herself by giving up everything to Kemper’s relations, and that they’ll generously hand back a share of it, or maybe the whole; but she’ll find out when it’s too late that she’s made a wonderful mistake.”

Mrs. Alden had her own opinion regarding Floy’s sense, but was far too wise to contradict her husband.

“I haven’t lived with him forty years for nothing,” she sometimes said. “I’ve found out that the only way to manage him is to seem to give in to all his notions. So I never cross him, and I generally contrive in the end to have things pretty much as I want them.”

Seeing she made no reply to his remark, Mr. Alden went on to give her a detailed account of his interview with Floy, winding up with, “There, now, what do you think of that?”

“Poor young thing!” sighed his wife, “it’s really dreadful to think what she’s gone through in the last two weeks, and perhaps she couldn’t quite put her mind on what you were saying so as to take it all in. Give her a little time; she may come around yet to your way of thinking. I must go and see about dinner now.”

“Yes,” he answered absently. “Suppose you go over after dinner; coaxing will move a woman sometimes when argument won’t.”

“I’ll try,” she said as she hurried away. It was what she had intended, though she had not thought it best to say so.

Mr. Alden’s departure had left Floy alone, for Espy had not yet returned. Sinking down upon the sofa, she wept convulsively for some minutes. Presently she grew calmer, and, wiping away her tears, rose and went to her father’s writing-desk.

Seating herself before it, she selected a sheet of note-paper, took up a pen, and was in the act of dipping it in the ink, when Susan, the maid of all work, put her head in at the door, saying, “Mr. Crosby’s in the parlor, Miss Floy, asking to see you.”

“Thank you very much for coming,” Floy said when she had shaken hands with her visitor. “I was just about to write a note asking you to call.”

“I shall be glad if I can be of service to you,” he said. “I should have called sooner, but returned only last night from a pleasure-trip, the first I have taken in years. Now what can I do for you?”

Mr. Crosby, the first lawyer in the place, had been Mr. Kemper's legal adviser.

At first Floy seemed unable to speak. She rose, and motioning Mr. Crosby to follow her, led the way to the room she had just left. They were closeted together there for an hour, in which Mr. Crosby learned the whole story of Mrs. Kemper's death-bed revelations, and the unsuccessful search for the deed of gift and the will.

"I am extremely sorry to hear all this," he said. "I was pretty certain there was no will, because Mr. Kemper had spoken to me about drawing one up for him, telling me that he intended leaving the bulk of his property to his wife and daughter, but not going sufficiently into particulars to enable me to write out the instrument without further instructions. These he delayed giving me from time to time, being always so much occupied with his business. If you were, as I always believed till now, his own child, the omission would make little or no difference; but as it is, it leaves you quite unprovided for. If I had known the truth I should have urged him strongly to attend to the matter without delay. It's a bad business, a very bad business for you, Miss Floy! I feel for you from the bottom of my heart, and I would do anything in the world I could to help you."

"I believe it, Mr. Crosby," she said with emotion, "and if you will undertake –"

"To communicate with the heirs at law? Certainly; and I shall try to induce them to allow your claim to a share in the property you have so generously resigned to them –"

"Not generously, Mr. Crosby," she interrupted, "only justly."

"Ah, well, if you will have it so; but Miss Floy, you might have kept the secret revealed by your mother locked up in your own breast, and retained the property without the least danger of interference from any one. Did you know that?"

She gave a silent assent.

"And even leaving the inheritance of the estate out of the question, you would have been glad to keep the secret?"

"Yes; oh, yes!" she said, covering her face with her hands, while the tears trickled between her fingers.

He looked at her with undisguised admiration.

"You are a noble girl!" he exclaimed; and rising, paced the floor to and fro.

"Oh!" he cried, "the mischief that simple neglect will do! It has been the ruin of thousands, and through it men have, in multitudes of instances, frustrated their own most cherished plans and purposes. Mr. Kemper schemed and toiled to provide for the old age of himself and wife, and that he might have wealth to bestow upon you, the darling of his heart; and now, through his own omission, it will pass to others, one or two of whom, I happen to know, are spendthrifts, who will probably speedily waste their shares in riotous living. It's a thousand pities! If we could but bring proof of your formal adoption, making you his legal heir –"

"There is none," she sighed, "and perhaps they are very needy – those heirs – and may do better with this than you expect, Mr. Crosby. We will not blame poor dear father. How ungrateful it would be in me to do so after all that he and mother did for me – after all the love and care they bestowed on me for so many years! I had not the slightest claim on them, yet they clothed, fed, educated me – made my childhood and youth so bright and happy. Oh, never did poor little waif fall into hands so kind and tender!"

"Your sentiments do you honor, Miss Floy," said Mr. Crosby, "and now I will return to my office and attend to this matter at once. I shall write the heirs, letting them know how entirely they are indebted to you for this accession of property, and urge upon them the justice of allowing you a share in it."

He shook hands with her, said a few encouraging, hopeful words, and departed.

"Glad he's gone at last," said Susan, putting her head in at the door again. "Thought he never would go, and your dinner is drying up over the fire till 'tain't hardly fit to eat. Come, Miss Floy, I'll have it on the table by the time you can get out to the dining-room."

Floy brought little appetite to her meal, and ate mechanically, scarcely knowing what the viands were.

She had just risen from the table when Mrs. Alden came in. Floy flushed slightly on seeing her. She knew that Mr. Alden had gone away very angry, and was doubtful how far his wife would be in sympathy with him.

But the greeting of the latter was kind and motherly as usual.

“I’m so glad the poor head is better again,” she said, kissing the girl affectionately. “You must forgive me for calling Espy away this morning. I had to get him to drive out to the country for butter and eggs, for there were none to be had in town, and I’d nobody else to send. He hasn’t got back yet, or you may be sure he’d have been in again.”

Talking on, with hardly a pause for a reply, Mrs. Alden gradually approached the subject of the morning’s conversation between her husband and Floy.

“I honor you for your intentions, my dear,” she said. “I know they are altogether good and right, but you’re very young and inexperienced, and I think have a morbid conscientiousness that blinds you to your own interests, and, if you’ll allow me to say it, to Espy’s too, because if you’re going to be man and wife you can’t have separate interests.”

“Dear Mrs. Alden,” said Floy, with a patient sigh, “you cannot surely think it is ever right to do evil that good may come, or that ill-gotten wealth will be of real benefit to its possessor?”

“No, child, certainly not,” she answered with some annoyance, “but those questions don’t apply in this case. You needn’t be afraid that anything my husband does or advises could be wrong, because he’s too good a man.”

It probably did not occur to the loyal wife that she was reversing the Bible test – judging of the fruit by the tree, instead of the tree by its fruit.

“I do not think he would do or advise anything that he thought wrong,” returned Floy gently; “but you know each of us must act according to his or her own conscience, and mine absolutely refuses to see this matter as Mr. Alden does.”

“Well, I mostly let him judge for me,” said Mrs. Alden. “I find it’s the only way to have peace, and I can’t live in a constant broil; not that he’s particularly ill-natured, but he naturally thinks he ought to be master in his own house. Another thing, Floy: if he once sets his foot down there’s no getting him to lift it again, and he vows that if you persist in giving up this property Espy shall never marry you with his consent. So, you see if you can’t be persuaded there’ll be endless trouble for us all.”

Floy’s cheek crimsoned and her eye flashed, while the pretty head was thrown haughtily back as she drew herself up with an air of wounded pride.

“It was your son who sought me, Mrs. Alden, not I him; nor shall I ever thrust myself into a family where I am not wanted and should be made an element of discord.”

Mrs. Alden was thoroughly dismayed.

“My dear child,” she hastened to say, “I did not mean to hurt your feelings, and I can’t bear the thought of losing you. But Espy will never give you up; he’d break with his father and all of us first, and – ”

“He can’t marry me against my will,” interrupted Floy; “so pray dismiss all anxiety on that score. I would no more rob you and Mr. Alden of your son than – than I would steal the inheritance of the heirs at law of this property.”

“Oh, Floy, Floy, to make you break with Espy is the very last thing I intended; don’t do it; he’d never forgive me; but oh! if I only could persuade you to keep this secret of your birth and – ”

“It is already too late,” answered the girl in a low, quiet tone, “the deed is done.”

CHAPTER IX

WHAT ESPY SAID ABOUT IT

“Dost thou deem
It such an easy task from the fond breast
To root affection out?” —

Southey.

“What shall I do? what *shall* I do?” Mrs. Alden asked herself again and again as, in great perturbation of spirit, she awaited Espy’s return. “How angry and distressed he’ll be, poor boy!”

She was at a loss to determine whether it would be best to break the news to him herself, or to let him hear it first from Floy or his father.

But circumstances decided for her. As she sat at the window watching the lengthening shadows as the sun drew near his setting, and saying to herself that Espy was very late – it was nearly tea-time, and she almost began to fear that he had met with some accident – she heard the gate swing, and turning her head saw him coming up the gravel walk that led from it to the house.

He moved with rapid strides, and there was an angry flush on his cheek, an indignant light in his eye, which told her at once that he had already been made aware of the unfortunate turn affairs had taken.

In a moment more he stood before her with folded arms, firmly-set mouth, and stern eyes.

“Espy, my son! Oh, I am so sorry!”

“Yes, mother,” he said, “my father and I have had a quarrel; he called me into his office as I passed, and ordered me to give up all thoughts of Floy – my little Floy that I’ve loved from my very infancy!”

“And what did you say, Espy?” she asked tremulously, feeling as if the very unreasonableness and tyranny of the command must have of itself almost deprived him of the power of speech.

“Say, mother? that he might as well ask me to shoot myself through the heart, and that I’d never give her up; I’d die first.”

“But – but, Espy, what – what if she gives you up?” gasped his mother, fairly frightened by his vehemence.

He staggered back as if struck by a heavy blow, while a deathly pallor overspread his face for an instant.

“But she will not!” he said hoarsely; “she has pledged herself to me, and she’ll never prove false to her word.”

“But she is very proud, Espy – too proud, I think, to come into a family where she’s not wanted; and she’s a good girl, and will see that it’s your duty to obey your father.”

He dropped into a chair, and for a moment seemed lost in thought; then with a sigh, “My father may have a right to control me even in this while I am a minor; but, as you know, mother, in six months I shall have reached my majority, and then I’ll be my own master, and shall consider that in a matter which will affect my happiness so much more nearly than his, and probably for my whole life, I have a right to follow my own wishes. Besides, there is Floy’s happiness to be taken into account. She says she loves me; we’ve pledged ourselves to each other, my father consenting to it at the time – and could he ask me to play so base a part as to forsake the dear girl merely because she has become poor and friendless? I think even he would despise me if I could be guilty of such meanness; and most assuredly I should despise myself!”

He had risen to his feet with the last sentence, and now, as he stood erect before her, with kindling eye and glowing cheek, he looked so noble and manly that his mother's heart swelled with pride in her son.

“No, you'll never do anything mean or dishonorable, Espy,” she said, smiling up at him.

Then growing suddenly grave, and an anxious, troubled look stealing over her face at the recollection of her husband's anger, which she knew must have waxed hot at his son's resistance to his demand: “But there'll be no peace between your father and you if you go against his will; so if Floy chooses to break the engagement herself, you needn't feel called upon to try to hold her to it.”

“Mother,” he said, “you are keeping something back; tell me all. You have spoken to her – told her what father says?”

His eyes were gazing steadily into hers, and there was a mingling of grief and suppressed wrath that made her fear to answer him. She hesitated, then said hastily:

“You'd better go to her. She can tell you what she likes.”

He turned without a word, caught up his hat, and went.

CHAPTER X

FLOY'S RESOLVE

“A beam of comfort, like the moon through clouds,
Gilds the black horror, and directs my way.”

Pride – her woman's pride – had sustained Floy in the late interview with Mrs. Alden, and enabled her to resign Espy with apparent indifference; but when his mother had gone, leaving her alone, a sudden sense of utter desolation came over the girl, and hastening to her own room she locked her door, and throwing herself on the bed, buried her face in its pillows, while bitter, bursting sobs shook her whole frame.

“Was ever sorrow like unto my sorrow?” was the cry of the poor aching heart. “Have I not seen the grave close over my more than parents, earthly possessions swept away, and now resigned my love – all, all that was left me!”

The storm of grief was violent but brief. She seemed to hear again the prayer offered for her by the aged saint standing at her side in that other hour when heart and flesh were failing, and with passionate earnestness went up the cry, “Lord, my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the Rock that is higher than I!”

Ah, all was not lost! Himself He had left her still, and with the thought she grew strong to do and endure.

She was endowed by nature with vigor of body and mind, and much firmness and decision of character. Her sobs were stilled, her tears ceased to flow, while with determined resolve she forced her thoughts to leave the past and busy themselves with plans for the future.

A new hope, a new desire had been gradually growing in her mind for the past few days. Her mother – her own mother, who had so loved her in her infancy – was there not a possibility that diligent, persevering search might be rewarded by success in finding her?

Perhaps she was still poor and ill – feeble in health – and if so, oh, how gladly would her daughter toil to supply her needs! how lavish filial love and tenderness upon her – the poor weary one who had hungered for them so long!

How she was to earn a support for herself alone Floy did not know, but hope was strong within her young breast, and she felt that with such an incentive to exertion she could not fail.

“Yes, she does live, and I shall find her – my poor, sorely-trying, precious mother!” she caught herself saying half aloud.

There was a gentle rap on her door at that moment, and a sweet-toned voice asked, “Shall I come in, Miss Floy? If you would rather see me at another time, dear, I'll go away and come again.”

Floy sprang to the door and opened it, admitting a little, plainly-dressed woman with a sweet face framed in with silvery hair. A pair of mild blue eyes looked pityingly into the tear-stained, sorrowful face of the young mourner, and hastily depositing upon a chair a large package which she carried, the little woman held out her arms.

Floy threw herself into them, hid her face on the kindly bosom, and burst into a fit of passionate weeping.

Her friend soothed her with silent caresses till she grew calmer, then spoke a few tender, sympathizing words.

“You feel for me, dear Auntie Wells,” sobbed Floy, “and yet you do not know nearly all that has come upon me. I have one Friend who does; but oh! our hearts crave human sympathy, and counsel too, when we are young and inexperienced.”

“Tell me all, dear child, if you will; I have no great store of worldly wisdom, only such as years can give, but I have seen many more of them than you, and my sympathy you shall certainly have.”

“I think you must have just the kind of wisdom I want, because you have gone through just such a lonely, struggling life as seems to be before me,” Floy said, calming herself and wiping away her tears.

“A lonely, struggling life for you, child!” Miss Wells exclaimed in an incredulous tone as she passed her hand caressingly over the pretty head resting on her shoulder. “Struggling! with the fortune your father has left you? lonely! with Espy still yours? How can it be?”

“The fortune is not mine, and Espy! – I have – have given him up!”

The first words were spoken low and hurriedly, and the last came from the white lips in a sharp cry of agony.

Utter astonishment dominated for the moment every other feeling in Miss Wells’s breast; then infinite pity and tenderness took its place, and gathering the girl to her heart, she wept over her as her own mother might, asking no questions, feeling no curiosity, every other emotion lost in the boundless compassion which would have done or suffered almost everything to restore its object to happiness.

Hannah Wells, now far on the shady side of fifty, a woman with a large, loving heart, had found few upon whom to lavish the wealth of her affection, and upon Floy she had poured it out without stint.

For many years she had maintained herself by her needle, first as seamstress, then as dressmaker; and employed by Mrs. Kemper in both capacities ever since the coming of the latter to Cranley, had often made her home in that house for weeks and months together, always treated with the kindly consideration accorded to a welcome guest or one of the family; for, spite of her poverty, Miss Wells was unmistakably a lady.

She was a woman, too, of excellent common-sense, sterling integrity, and deep piety, evinced by a life of blameless purity, a thoroughly consistent walk and conversation.

She was now enjoying a moderate degree of prosperity, having a little home of her own and something laid by for a rainy day.

She kept a number of apprentices now, who usually carried home the finished work, but loving Floy so dearly, she had herself brought home the poor child’s mourning.

The love and caresses of this old and tried friend were as balm to the sorely-wounded heart. Floy presently grew calmer, and poured out her whole story, including her half-formed plans for the future, seeking advice in regard to the latter.

Miss Wells entered into them with deep interest, highly approving Floy’s course in regard to the property, and of her resolve first to search for her long-lost mother, then to seek employment by which to earn a living for herself and for her mother if found.

“Don’t be afraid to try it, dear,” Hannah said; “try it with determination to let no difficulty conquer you, yet trusting in the Lord, and you will succeed. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. Yes, dear, I’ve tried it, and proved it in my own experience. Like you I was left an orphan early in life, and without means. I had relations who gave me a home, enough to eat, and decent clothes, and didn’t seem to grudge it either; but I saw that they had plenty of other uses for their money, and I couldn’t bear to have them do without anything in order to provide for me; so I resolved to strike out bravely for myself, trusting only in the Lord, and from that day to this He’s taken care of me: and its so sweet, *so* sweet to take everything as a gift right from His dear hand.”

CHAPTER XI

LOVE AND PRIDE

“Had we never loved so kindly,
Had we never loved so blindly,
Never met or never parted,
We had ne’er been broken-hearted.” —

Burns.

As the dressmaker left, Espy came in and went direct to the parlor, where Floy sat in an attitude of deep dejection, her elbow on the arm of the sofa, her cheek resting on her hand.

He sprang to her side, and, as she started and half rose from her seat, caught both hands in his.

“Floy, Floy, what have they been doing? What have they been saying to you? Never mind it, darling, nothing shall ever come between us.”

The eyes that met his were full of anguish; the lips moved, but no sound came from them.

He threw his arms about her as if to shield her from harm. “Floy, dear, don’t mind it. I can’t bear to see you look so. Isn’t my love enough to make you happy? Ah, if you only knew *how* I love you, dearest!”

“But – oh, Espy, I’ve given you up! I’ve no right now to your love!”

“Given me up! Do you not love me, Floy?” His voice grew hoarse with emotion.

“You are all I’ve left – all.”

He bent his ear to catch the low-breathed words. His heart gave a joyous bound, and he drew her closer to him; but she struggled to release herself.

“Espy, you are free. I have given you up.”

“I will not accept my freedom, nor give you yours, my own little wife – I may call you that, because we are pledged to each other, and it’s almost the same: we belong to each other quite as much as if we were already married.”

She shook her head with sad determination. “Your father refuses his consent, and – I – I cannot go into a family that is not willing to receive me.”

“My father had no right to withdraw the consent already given!” he exclaimed hotly.

“That was given to your union with the rich Miss Kemper, not with a poor and nameless waif,” she returned, with a bitter smile.

“Ah! but I pledged myself to neither the wealth nor the name, but to the dear girl who has not changed unless to grow dearer and lovelier still.”

“But I think children are bound to respect the wishes, and certainly the commands, of their parents.”

“I’m not a child!” he cried, with a mixture of anger and pride. “I shall be my own master in a few months; then I shall not consider his consent absolutely necessary, and in the mean time I shall not break my engagement to you.”

“No, Espy, but I release you.”

“I will not be released!” he cried, with increasing anger, “nor will I release you!”

“You will surely not be so ungenerous as to hold me to it against my will?” she said coldly, averting her face and moving farther from him.

A sudden suspicion flashed upon him, a pang of jealous rage stabbed him to the heart, and he grew white and rigid.

“You love another; you have played me false, and are glad of an excuse to get rid of me!” he said in cutting tones.

She made no reply, but drew herself up proudly, yet kept her face turned from him.

“Farewell, then, false girl; you are free!” he cried, rushing madly from the room.

Floy looked after him, with a dreary smile more pitiful than tears.

“Oh, Espy, Espy! must we part like this?” she sighed inwardly, putting her hand to her head.

“Miss Floy, are you sick? got a headache?” queried Susan, coming in. “What can I do for ye?”

“Nothing, thank you, Susan; I’ll be better soon.”

“Try a cup o’ tea; it’ll do ye good. I heard Mr. Espy go ’way, and I thought I’d just come and tell you that supper’s ready.”

Something in Susan’s tones jarred upon Floy’s sensitive nerves, and, with a sort of dull comprehension that the girl’s rising suspicions must be lulled to rest, she rose, went to the table, and forced herself to drink a cup of tea and swallow a few mouthfuls of food.

The blow dealt her by Espy’s parting words began to lose its stunning effects, and to be succeeded by a feverish impulse to fly from him and from these scenes of former happiness, of present sorrow and loss. She left the table with the sudden resolve that she would set out that very night on her intended journey in search of her long-lost mother.

Fortunately Mr. Crosby, thinking of some new question to ask, called at the door just as she was passing through the hall on her way upstairs.

“Have you any idea where to go, Miss Floy?” he asked, when she had told him of her intention to depart immediately.

“Yes,” she said, “I remember having heard what route father and mother took in coming out West, and she told me the name of the station where they met my own mother and obtained possession of me; I mean to go directly there and make inquiries.”

“You will find things greatly changed since then,” he remarked, meditatively stroking his beard. “Let me see: how many years?”

“Nearly sixteen.”

“Ah, yes! and these Western places grow so fast! The lonely little station may have become a city, and you are very young and – comely,” he added, with a look of kindly concern. “My child, I hardly like to see you start on this expedition alone, and yet I have no authority to forbid it. Do you think you can take care of yourself?”

“No, sir, I cannot,” she answered, low and tremulously, “but the Father of the fatherless will not leave me alone, and I am not afraid.”

A train going in the desired direction passed through Cranley at midnight; it was the one Floy must take. Mr. Crosby engaged to procure a ticket for her, and to see her and her luggage safely on board.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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