

**FINLEY
MARTHA**

THE TWO
ELSIES

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Martha Finley

The Two Elsie / A Sequel to Elsie at Nantucket

CHAPTER I

"Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave."

LONGFELLOW.

It was a lovely summer morning, glorious with sunlight, sweet with the fragrance of flowers and the songs of birds.

The view from the bay-window of the library of Crag Cottage, the residence of Mr. George Leland, architect and artist, was very fine, embracing, as it did, some of the most magnificent scenery on the banks of the Hudson.

The house stood very high, and from that window one might look north and south over wooded mountain, hill and valley, or east upon the majestic river and its farther shore.

The nearer view was of well-kept, though not extensive, grounds; a flower-garden and lawn with a winding carriage-way leading up the hill by a gradual ascent.

It was a pleasant place to sit even on a sunny summer morning, for a tall tree partially shaded the window without greatly obstructing the view, and it was there the master of the house was usually to be found, at this time of day, with Evelyn, his only child, close at his side.

They were there now, seated at a table covered with books and papers, he busied in drawing plans for a building, she equally so with her lessons.

But presently, at the sound of a deep sigh from her father, she glanced hastily up at him.

He had dropped his pencil and was leaning back against the cushions of his easy-chair, with a face so wan and weary that she started up in alarm, and springing to his side, exclaimed, "Dear papa, I am sure you are not well! Do stop working, and lie down on the sofa. And won't you let me tell Patrick to go for the doctor when he has taken mamma to Riverside?"

"Yes, Evelyn, I think you may," he answered in low feeble tones, and with a sad sort of smile, gently pressing the hand she had laid in his, as he spoke. "It will do no harm for me to see Dr. Taylor, even should it do no good."

"What is that? send for the doctor? Are you ill, Eric?" asked a lady who had entered the room just in time to catch his last sentence.

"I am feeling unusually languid, Laura," he replied; "yet not much more so than I did yesterday. Perhaps it is only the heat."

"The heat!" she echoed; "why, it is a delightful day! warm, to be sure, but not oppressively so."

"Not to you or me, perhaps, mamma," remarked Evelyn, "but we are well and strong, and poor papa is not."

"A holiday would do you good, Eric," the lady said, addressing her husband; "come, change your mind and go with me to Riverside."

"My dear," he said, "I should like to go to gratify you, but really I feel quite unequal to the exertion."

"You need make none," she said; "you need only to sit quietly under the trees on the lawn; and I think you will find amusement in watching the crowd, while the fresh air, change of scene, and rest from the work you will not let alone when at home, will certainly be of great benefit to you."

He shook his head in dissent. "I should have to talk and to listen; in short, to make myself agreeable. I have no right to inflict my companionship on Mrs. Ross's guests on any other condition; and all that would be a greater exertion than I feel fit to undertake."

"There *was* a time when you were willing to make a little exertion for my sake," she returned in a piqued tone, "but wives are not to expect the attention freely bestowed upon a sweetheart, and so I must go alone as usual."

"Mamma, what a shame for you to talk so to poor papa!" exclaimed Evelyn indignantly. "You know –"

"Hush, hush, Evelyn," said her father in a gently reproving tone, "be respectful to your mother, always."

"Yes, sir," returned the child, with a loving look into his eyes. Then to her mother, "I beg your pardon, mamma, I did not mean to be rude; but –" with a scrutinizing glance at the richly attired figure before her.

"Well?" laughingly interrogated the lady, as the child paused with a slight look of embarrassment and a heightened color.

"Nothing, mamma, only –"

"Something your correct taste disapproves about my attire?"

"Yes, mamma; your dress is very handsome; quite rich and gay enough for a ball-room; but – wouldn't a simpler, plainer one be more suitable for a lawn-party?"

"Well, really!" was the laughing rejoinder; "the idea of such a chit as you venturing to criticise her mother's taste in dress! You spoil her, Eric; making so much of her and allowing her to have and express an opinion on any and every subject. There, I must be going; I see Patrick is at the door with the carriage. So good-by, and don't overwork yourself, Eric."

"Mamma," Evelyn called after her, "Patrick is to go for the doctor, you know."

"Oh, yes; I'll tell him," Mrs. Leland answered, and the next moment the carriage was whirling away down the drive.

"There, she is gone!" said Evelyn. "Oh, papa, when I am a woman I shall not marry unless I feel that I can always be content to stay with my husband when he is not able to go with me."

"But business may prevent him very often when sickness does not, and you may grow very weary of staying always at home," he said, softly smoothing her hair, then bending to touch his lips to her smooth white forehead and smile into the large dark eyes lifted to his as she knelt at the side of his chair.

"No, no! not if he is as dear and kind as you are, papa. But no other man is, I think."

"Quite a mistake, my pet; the world surely contains many better men than your father."

"I should be exceedingly angry if any one else said that to me," she returned indignantly.

At that he drew her closer to him with a little pleased laugh. "We love each other very dearly, do we not, my darling?" he said; then sighed deeply.

"Indeed we do!" she answered, gazing anxiously up into his face. "How pale and ill you look, papa! do lie down and rest."

"Presently, when my work has progressed a little farther," he said, putting her gently aside, straightening himself and resuming his pencil.

Evelyn was beginning a remonstrance, but at the sound of wheels upon the drive sprang to the window, exclaiming, "Can mamma be coming back already? She has perhaps changed her mind about attending the party. No," as she caught sight of the vehicle, "it is the doctor. I'm glad."

"Go, receive him at the door, daughter, and show him in here," said Mr. Leland; "and as I desire a private interview, you may amuse yourself in the grounds while he stays."

"Yes, sir; and oh, I do hope he will be able to give you something that will make you well directly," the little girl replied, bestowing a look of loving anxiety upon her father, then hastening to obey his order.

She received the physician at the front entrance, with all the graceful courtesy of a refined lady, ushered him into the library, then putting on a garden-hat, wandered out into the grounds.

It was the month of roses, and they were to be found here in great variety and profusion; they bordered the walks, climbed the walls, and wreathed themselves about the pillars of the porches, filling the air with their rich fragrance, mingled with that of the honeysuckle, lilac, heliotrope, and mignonette.

Evelyn sauntered through the garden, pausing here and there to gather one and another of the most beautiful and sweet-scented of its floral treasures, arranging them in a bouquet for her father; then crossed the lawn to an artistic little summer-house built on the edge of the cliff, where it almost overhung the river.

The view from this spot was magnificent, extending for many miles and embracing some of the grandest scenery of that region; and to Evelyn and her father, both dear lovers of the beauties of nature, it was a favorite resort.

Seating herself upon a rustic bench, she passed some moments in absorbed, delighted contemplation of the scene so familiar, yet ever new.

The thought that anything worse than a passing illness threatened her beloved father had not yet entered her youthful mind, and she was serenely happy as she sat there waiting for the departure of the physician as the signal that she might return to him.

From her earliest recollection he had been father and mother both to her, Mrs. Leland's time being too fully occupied with her onerous duties to society to allow her to bestow much attention upon her child.

Had the husband and father taken a like view of his responsibilities, Evelyn would have been left almost entirely to the care of the servants; but to him the formation of his child's character, the cultivation of her mind and heart, was a duty that outweighed all social claims, and to which even business might to some extent be sacrificed.

Nor was it a duty only, but also a delight. And so well was she rewarding his efforts that he found her, at thirteen, more companionable than her mother had ever been; taking an enthusiastic interest in his professional work, and sharing his aspirations after perfection therein and recognition as one of the foremost architects of his day.

In her esteem he had already distanced all competitors; no one else could plan a house so well for comfort, convenience, and beauty combined. Also he was to her the very embodiment of all that was unselfish, good, and noble.

She thought, and truly, that her mother failed to appreciate him.

While Evelyn waited the doctor subjected his patient to a thorough examination, not only feeling his pulse, listening to the beating of his heart, sounding his lungs and looking at his tongue, but cross-questioning him closely, his face growing graver with every reply elicited.

"You have told me everything?" he inquired at length.

"Yes, I think so; every symptom that I can recall at this moment. And now, doctor, I want you to be equally frank with me; tell me exactly what you think of my case."

"I cannot hold out any hope of recovery," was the unwilling reply; "but there is little, if any, immediate danger."

"You but confirm my own impressions," said Mr. Leland quietly. "But I would have a clearer understanding of your verdict; do you mean that I may have years of invalidism before me, or that a few weeks or months must bring the end?"

"You really desire to know the worst, my dear sir?" returned the physician inquiringly, a look of deep sympathy on his kindly face.

"I do," was the calmly resolute reply; "let me know the worst and face it in the strength God gives to His children according to their day."

"Then, my dear sir, I will be plain with you; but bear in mind that I lay no claim to infallibility; I may err in judgment, but I see no reason to hope that your life on earth will be prolonged for more than three months at the farthest, and I much fear the end may come in less than half that time."

The doctor could not at first judge of the full effect of his words, for Mr. Leland sat with his face half hidden in his hand.

For a moment a deathlike stillness reigned in the room; then Dr. Taylor said, low and feelingly, "You are a Christian, my dear sir, and for you dying will be but going home to a brighter and better world."

"Yes," was the reply, "and your tidings would have no terrors for me were it not – for those who must be left behind; but oh, the parting from helpless dear ones for whom my care and protection seems so necessary! – that is the bitterness of death!"

"Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let thy widows trust in Me," quoted the physician in sympathizing tones.

"Yes, yes; thank God for that precious promise!" exclaimed Mr. Leland. "And you, doctor, for reminding me of it," he added, stretching out a hand to his kind comforter.

It was taken in a warm grasp and held for a moment while other of the many sweet and comforting promises of God's Word were recalled to the mind of the sufferer, to his great consolation.

"I would it were in my power," the doctor said at length, "to hold out to you any hope of restoration to health. I cannot do that, but will write you a prescription which will, I trust, by God's blessing, give relief to some of the most distressing symptoms."

"Even partial relief will be most welcome," sighed the patient. "Ah, if I can but find strength for promised work!"

"Better let it alone and take what rest and ease you can," was the parting advice of the physician.

"What a long, long visit the doctor is paying!" Evelyn had said to herself several times before her eyes were gladdened with the sight of his carriage rolling away down the drive.

"At last!" she cried, springing to her feet and hurrying back to the house.

She found her father lying on a sofa, his face very pale, his eyes closed.

She drew near on tiptoe, thinking he might have fallen asleep; but as she reached the side of his couch he opened his eyes, and taking her hand drew her down to his breast.

"My darling, my beloved child!" he whispered, putting his arm about her and holding her fast with tender caresses.

"What did the doctor say, papa?" she asked, nestling closer to him and laying her cheek to his. "Does he hope to make you well very soon?"

For a moment there was no reply, and Evelyn, startled at her father's silence, suddenly raised her head and gazed earnestly, inquiringly into his face.

He smiled, a little sadly, and gently smoothing her hair back from her forehead, "I was thinking," he said, "of a text in the psalm we read together this morning – 'My soul, wait thou only upon God, for my expectation is from him.' He and He only can make me well, daughter."

"Then why send for the doctor, papa?"

"Because God works by means; it pleases Him so to do, though it would be no more difficult to Him to accomplish His designs without. He has provided remedies, and I think it is His will that we should use them, at the same time asking His blessing upon them, feeling that without it they will be of no avail."

"Then you are to have some medicine, I suppose?"

"Yes; and to be out a good deal in the open air."

"Oh, then, won't you come out to the summer-house and lie in the hammock there, with me close beside you to wait on you?"

"Presently; but I must write a letter first," he said, putting her gently aside and resuming his seat at the writing-table.

"Can't it wait till to-morrow, papa?" she asked. "You may feel stronger by then."

"It is to be only a few lines, to your Uncle Lester; and I want it to go by this afternoon's mail, that, if possible, it may reach Fairview before they have arranged their plans for the summer. I want them to come here to spend the hot months. Should you like it?"

"Yes, indeed, papa! I've always been fond of Uncle Lester, as you know, and I quite fell in love with Aunt Elsie and the baby when he brought them to see us on their return from Europe."

CHAPTER II

"How sudden do our prospects vary here!"

It was the breakfast-hour at Fairview. The young husband and wife chatted pleasantly over their coffee, omelet and rolls, strawberries and cream, the principal subject of discourse being the expected trip to Nantucket in company with her mother, grandparents, and the rest of the family at Ion.

Lester and his Elsie had been there the previous evening, helping to celebrate the first anniversary of the marriage of Edward and Zoe, and had readily fallen in with the plans for the summer outing proposed by Captain Raymond.

"You will go with us, of course, Elsie?" their mother had said, several of the others eagerly echoing her words, and they had answered that they knew of nothing to hinder, and should be delighted to do so.

So that question seemed fully settled, and now their talk was of needful preparations and arrangements for so long an absence from home; of the anticipated pleasures of the voyage and the proposed lengthened sojourn upon Nantucket Island, including the sketching of the most attractive features of its scenery.

Young, healthy, in easy circumstances, entirely congenial in opinions and tastes, they were a very happy couple.

Lester was meeting with marked success in his chosen profession – had received only yesterday a large price for one of his paintings; and as Elsie and he were essentially one in all their interests, her joy was fully equal to his, if not greater.

In consequence they were unusually gay this morning, and life seemed very bright and beautiful before them.

They lingered over their meal, and were just leaving the table when a servant came in with the morning's mail.

There were several newspapers and magazines; only one letter.

"From Eric, dear old boy! I was intending to write to him to-day," remarked Lester, as he examined the superscription.

"How nice, then, that his came just in time for you to answer it in yours," said Elsie. "I'll leave you to the enjoyment of it while I give my orders for the day," she added, turning from him toward the rear of the house, as they left the breakfast-room together.

"Yes, my dear, and when you have a spare moment to bestow upon your unworthy husband, you will find him on the veranda," he answered lightly, bending his steps in that direction.

Only a few minutes had passed when she sought him there; but what a change had come over him! All his gayety had forsaken him, his face was pale, and his eyes, as he turned them upon her, were full of anguish.

"Oh Lester, my dear, dear husband! what is it?" she cried, hastening to him and laying a hand tenderly upon his shoulder.

"Read," he said hoarsely, holding out the open letter to her, – Eric's letter, whose sad tidings seemed for the time to have driven away all the joy and brightness of life.

Glancing down the page, Elsie read:

"My dear brother, will you come to me? I have sore need of you. For a year past I have felt my strength failing; for the last few months matters have grown worse, till my days and nights are filled with pain and unrest; and today I have learned that the time has come for me to set my house in order, for I am to 'die, and not live.' Nay, not so: I am to pass from the land of the dying to that blest world where death can never enter.

"My physician tells me it may possibly be three months ere I reach 'that bourne whence no traveller returns,' but that in all probability I shall arrive there in less than half that time.

"And there is much I would say to you, my brother; much in which I need your kind help. You will be coming North for the hot season; I would gladly have you, your sweet wife and baby-boy spend it here with us; and to me it seems that there are few pleasanter places than this little home-nest of ours high up on the rocky banks of the grand old Hudson River. We have pure air and magnificent scenery, and it will be most comforting to me to have your loved companionship as I go down into the valley of the shadow of death.

"Thank God, it is only the shadow, and I shall go down into it leaning on the strong arm of my beloved. Jesus will be with me to the very end.

"But I may be asking too much of my sweet sister Elsie; you and she have, perchance, formed other plans more congenial to your tastes and wishes. If so, let me not interfere with them; consider my request withdrawn. Yet, shall I not have at least a sight of your loved faces ere I go hence to return no more?

"Lovingly, ERIC."

Elsie could scarce see the signature from the fast-falling tears.

"The dear brother!" she sobbed. "But, oh, Lester, be comforted! His troubles and trials are almost over, the battle nearly ended, the victory well-nigh won; and we know he will come off more than conqueror through Him that loved him!"

"Yes, I know, I know it; but he has been a dear brother to me, and, oh, how can I learn to live without him!" he answered, in tones quivering with emotion.

"'Twill only be for a time, love, and then you will be restored to each other, never to part any more forever," Elsie said softly, with her arm about her husband's neck, while her tears mingled with his, and her sweet lips were pressed again and again to his cheek.

He folded her in a close embrace.

"My dear, sweet, precious comforter," he said, "I can never be unhappy while God spares me my wife."

"Nor I, while I have you, dearest," she responded, with an added caress.

"And we will go to poor Eric instead of with mamma and the rest to Nantucket."

"My sweet one, I could not ask so great a sacrifice from you," he said.

"I can hardly feel it to be such when I think of your poor brother – our brother; for is he not mine also? We will go to him instead, and I know it will be with mamma's approval, grandpa's also. Ah, here they both come!" she exclaimed, in a tone of satisfaction, as the Ion family carriage was seen approaching through the avenue.

In another moment it had drawn up before the entrance, and Mr. Dinsmore and his daughter alighted. With the quick eye of affection the mother at once noted the sadness of her daughter's countenance, of Lester's also, and scarcely had she exchanged the morning greetings with them ere she inquired the cause.

Lester silently handed her Eric's open letter.

Tears trembled in the soft brown eyes as she read.

In compliance with a mute request from Lester, she passed it on to her father.

There was a moment of silence after Mr. Dinsmore had finished reading, then the elder Elsie said in low, sympathizing tones,

"My dears, you will go to him? Delightful as it would be to have you with us, I could not wish you to refuse such a request from one so near and dear."

"No, mamma dear, nor could we think of refusing," answered her daughter, quickly, glancing tenderly at her husband as she spoke, and receiving a grateful, loving look in return.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Dinsmore; "but I see no reason why you should not accompany us on our voyage, spend a few days at Nantucket, and then go on to New York. Do you, Lester?"

"No, sir; and if my little wife approves of that plan, we will adopt it,"

He turned inquiringly to her.

"I should like it very much," she said. "If you are quite sure it will not delay us too long," she added as an after-thought.

"No, scarcely at all, I think," returned Lester; "so we will consider that settled."

"Ah, I am glad that we shall not lose your company altogether," Mrs. Travilla said. "And do not despair for your brother, Lester, for many very sick people have recovered, even after being given up by the doctors. We know, too, that with God nothing is impossible, and that He is the hearer and answerer of prayer. We will unite our petitions in behalf of Eric, and if it shall be for God's glory and his good, he will be restored to health."

"Yes, mother; I have not a doubt of that," returned Mr. Leland, "nor of my dear brother's safety in any case. He is one who has lived the life of a Christian for years, and I am sure dying grace will be given him for dying time – whenever that shall come."

"And well may you be," said Mrs. Travilla, "for not one of all God's promises ever fails, and to each of His children He has said, 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'"

"If you want to answer your letter by return of mail, Lester, do not let us hinder you," said Mr. Dinsmore. "We are going to the village presently, and will mail it for you, if you like."

"Thank you; then I shall write at once," Lester replied, as he rose and left them.

"This change of plan will involve some change in your intended preparations, will it not, Elsie?" asked Mrs. Travilla.

"Not very much, mamma, as we are not likely to take part in any gayeties. I shall not need to have any new dresses made; indeed, I think I have already a full supply of everything necessary or desirable, in the way of dress, for both baby and myself."

"Then you will be ready for the trip as soon as any of us?" her grandfather said inquiringly.

"Yes, sir; I could pack to-day and start this evening if desired to do so," she answered with a smile.

"We will not put you to the test," he said, "but we hope to sail next Tuesday."

CHAPTER III

"We all do fade as a leaf." (Is. lxiv. 6.)

A fortnight had passed since the day of the reader's introduction to the dwellers in Crag Cottage; the June roses were blooming about it in even richer profusion than before; tree, and shrub and vine were laden with denser foliage; the place looked a very bower of beauty to the eyes of Lester and his Elsie as the hack which had brought them from the nearest steamboat-landing slowly wound its way up the hill on which the cottage stood.

On the vine-covered porch Eric lay in a hammock, his little daughter, as usual, by his side.

Though losing flesh and strength day by day, he still persevered with his work; had spent some hours over it this morning, but was resting now, his cheek fanned by the pure, sweet air from the mountain and river, his eyes now feasting upon the beauties of the surrounding scenery, and anon turning with fond, fatherly affection upon the face of the child he loved so well.

She was proving herself an excellent nurse for one of her age; never weary of waiting upon her loved patient, always striving to anticipate his every want, and doing her best to entertain him and make him forget his pain.

She was talking of their expected guests.

"I am so glad they are coming, papa," she said, "for I hope it will cheer you and do you much good to see your brother."

"And sister," he added with a faint smile; "your Aunt Elsie is a very lovely and interesting woman."

"Yes, but I hope they will let me have my father to myself sometimes," she said, laying her cheek lovingly against the hand that was clasping hers. "I'm hardly willing to share you even with Uncle Lester."

"No, not all the time," he responded; "we must have an hour alone together now and then. I should not like to be deprived of it any more than you."

She had lifted her head, and was gazing toward the river. "Papa, I think they are here!" she exclaimed. "There is a carriage coming up the drive."

"Ah, I hope so," he said, his pale cheek flushing with pleasure; and excitement lending him momentary strength, he hastily stepped from the hammock, and with Evelyn went forward to greet and welcome the travellers as they alighted, the hack having now drawn up before the entrance.

Both Lester and Elsie were much moved at sight of their brother – so sadly changed from the vigorous man from whom they parted less than a year before.

Elsie had much ado to hide her emotion, and even Lester's voice was husky and tremulous as he returned Eric's greeting and made inquiries regarding his health.

"It is much the same as when I wrote you," Eric answered, holding fast to his brother's hand, and gazing with a look of strong affection into his face. "And you are quite well?"

"Quite, thank you; but about yourself, Eric? Would it not be well to have other advice?"

"I believe there is none better than I have had, brother," Eric said. Then turning to caress the little one in its nurse's arms, "What a fine little fellow! a truly beautiful child, Sister Elsie. Ah, Lester I rejoice that you have a son to keep up the family name. May he live to be a great blessing to you both!"

"How sweet and pretty he is!" Evelyn said, caressing him in her turn.

"Aunt Elsie, shall I show you to your room?"

"If you please, dear." And they passed on into the house together, while Eric dropped exhausted into an easy-chair, and Lester took possession of another close at his side.

"You are very weak, Eric," he remarked, in a tone of mingled affection and concern; "and I fear suffer a great deal of pain."

"Yes, a good deal at times; but," he added with a joyous smile, "I shall soon be in that land where there shall be no more pain, and the inhabitants shall not say 'I am sick.'"

"Don't speak of it," said Lester hoarsely; "I must hope there are yet years of life in this world before you."

"What a very pleasant room; what a delightful prospect from that window looking toward the river!" Elsie exclaimed, as Evelyn led the way into the spacious, airy apartment set apart for the occupation of herself and husband during their stay.

"I think it is," Evelyn returned in a quiet tone; "that was the reason papa and I selected it for you. We have two other spare rooms, but this is the largest and has the loveliest views from its windows."

"Thank you, dear. Is your mamma well?"

"I suppose so; she was when we heard last, a day or two ago. She is at Newport, Aunt Elsie; she found herself so worn out, she said, with attending to the claims of society, that a trip to the seashore was quite a necessity. Do you put the claims of society before everything else, Aunt Elsie?"

"Indeed no," returned Elsie, with a happy laugh. "I'm afraid I put them last on my list: husband, baby, mother, grandpa, brothers and sisters, all come before society with me."

"So they shall with me when I'm a woman," said Evelyn with decision; "and papa shall always, *always* be first. I don't know how mamma can bear to be away from him so much; especially now when he is so weak and ailing. And I am quite mortified that she is not here to welcome you. She said she would be back in time, but now writes that she finds Newport so delightful, and the sea-breezes doing her so much good, that she can't tear herself away just yet."

"Well, dear, as she is your mother and my sister, we will try not to criticise or find fault with her," responded Elsie, in a gently soothing tone.

"No; I ought not," acknowledged Evelyn; "papa never does; at least not to me. Mamma said she thought we could entertain you for a short time, and we mean to do our best."

"Yes, dear child; but we must not allow your father to exert himself to that end; we did not come to be entertained, but to try to be of use to him."

"It was very kind," said Evelyn, gratefully; "it must have been quite a sacrifice, for you to leave that beautiful Nantucket so soon after arriving there; I know about it, because we were there two summers ago, and I could hardly bear to come away."

"It is very pleasant there, but so it is here also," responded Elsie.

Evelyn looked much pleased. "I am glad you like it, Aunt Elsie," she said. "I think it the dearest spot on earth; but then it has always been my home."

"You are justly partial to it, Evelyn," Elsie said, "for it is a sweet spot."

"Thank you. Our dinner will be ready in about an hour from now; but don't take the trouble to dress, there will be no one but ourselves," Evelyn said, retiring.

Elsie was not sorry to learn that her sister-in-law was absent from home; for though neither really disliked the other, they were not congenial; their opinions, their tastes, their views of life, its pleasures and its duties, were so widely different that they could have but little in common.

A proud, self-important woman would have taken offence at the lack of hospitality and consideration shown her in the failure of the mistress of the house to be present with a welcome on her arrival, but such was not Elsie's character. She had but a humble opinion of her own importance and her own deserts, so very readily excused and overlooked the neglect.

But his wife's conduct was very mortifying to Eric, as he showed in his apology for her, on Elsie's rejoining him and Lester on the porch.

Elsie accepted his excuses very sweetly, assuring him that she expected to find much enjoyment in his society, her husband's, and Evelyn's, and would have been very sorry had Laura returned home for her sake before her visit to Newport was completed.

Evelyn, too, felt much chagrin on account of the lack of courtesy and hospitality in her mother's behavior toward these relatives, esteemed by herself and her father as worthy of all honor. She made no remark about it to either of them, but tried very earnestly to fill her mother's place as hostess during her absence.

She was a very womanly little girl, with a quaint, old-fashioned manner which Elsie thought quite charming. It was touching to see the devoted affection with which she hovered over and waited upon her sick father. She was seldom absent from his side for more than a few minutes at a time, except when he sent her out for air and exercise.

Elsie usually accompanied her on her walks and drives, while Lester remained with his brother.

Eric seized these opportunities to open his heart to Lester in regard to the future of his only and beloved child, his one great anxiety in the prospect of death.

"I cannot leave her to her mother's care," he said, with a sigh and a look of anguish. "It is a sad, a humiliating thing to say in regard to one's wife, but I have been sorely disappointed in my choice of a partner for life.

"We married for love, and she is very dear to me still, but our tastes and views are widely dissimilar. She has no relish for the quiet pleasures of home, finds the duties of a wife and mother extremely irksome, and is not content unless living in a constant whirl of excitement, a never-ending round of pleasure-parties, balls, concerts, and other fashionable amusements.

"I cannot join her in it; and so, for years past, we have gone our separate ways.

"Evelyn, her mother having no time to bestow upon her, has been left almost entirely to me, and I have earnestly striven to train her up to a noble Christian womanhood; to cultivate her mind and heart, and give her a taste for far higher pleasures than those to be found in the giddy whirl of fashionable follies.

"I think I have already succeeded to some extent; but she is so young that, of course, much of the work yet remains to be done; and Laura is not the person to carry it on; also, I think, would not covet the task.

"Lester, if you will undertake her guardianship and receive her into your family, to be brought up under the influence of your lovely wife and mother-in-law, I shall die happy. Would it be asking too much, my dear brother?"

"You could not ask too much of me, Eric," Lester said with emotion; "and if my Elsie is willing, it shall be as you wish."

Eric expressed his thanks, and his hope that Elsie would not object.

"My darling will not be a troublesome charge," he said; "she has her faults, of course, but they are not of a kind to make her a disagreeable inmate of your family; and her admiration for her Aunt Elsie is so great that, doubtless, she will yield readily to her wishes and study to be like her in her loveliness of character and manners."

"Yes; Evelyn is a child any father might be proud of," assented Lester. "Surely her mother cannot help being fond of her, and you would not separate them, Eric?"

Eric looked much disturbed. For a moment he seemed lost in thought; then said, "I cannot tell just what Laura will do; she certainly must have some affection for our child, but not enough, I fear, to make her willing to resign any pleasure for her sake. I think she will not care for a settled home when I am gone, but will spend her time in flitting about from one fashionable resort to another; and in that case Evelyn would be only a burden and care to her: one she will probably be glad to get rid of. I see plainly that it could be for neither your happiness nor Laura's to attempt to live together; but perhaps you would be willing to receive her as a guest occasionally, and for a short time?"

"Certainly," Lester said; "and to assist her pecuniarily, if necessary."

"Thank you for the generous offer," returned Eric, gratefully; "but there will be no need to trespass upon your kindness in that way. Laura has some money of her own, and her proportion of mine will make her very comfortable; while the remainder will be sufficient to clothe and educate

Evelyn, and give her a moderate income afterward for the rest of her life, if it is not lost in any way; and that she will not be robbed of it in her minority I feel certain, having been so fortunate as to secure you for my executor," he added, with an affectionate glance and smile.

"I shall certainly do the best I can to take care of it for her," Lester said, his voice a little unsteady with the thought that these were his brother's dying wishes to which he was listening; "but I am not a business man, and – "

"I am quite willing to trust to your good sense, honesty, and love for your niece," interrupted Eric, hearing the approaching footsteps of Elsie and his daughter.

Evelyn's wish that she might sometimes have her father to herself was gratified. Lester and Elsie were thoroughly considerate, and almost every day went out together for an hour or more, leaving the little girl to perform the duties of nurse.

Then there was an interchange of confidences and endearments such as was not indulged in the presence of any third person, and Eric improved the occasion to give his darling much tender and wise fatherly counsel which he thought might be of use to her in the coming years when he would no longer be at her side.

He did not tell her of the trial that was drawing so near – the parting that would rend her heart – but she more than half suspected it, as she saw him day by day grow weaker, paler, and thinner.

But the very idea was so terrible that she put it resolutely from her, and thought and talked hopefully of the time when he would be well again.

And he could not bear to crush the hope that made her so bright and happy; but he spoke often to her of the blessedness of those who sleep in Jesus, and made her read to him the passage of Scripture which tells of the glories and bliss of heaven – of the inheritance of the saints in light – the things which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither the heart of man conceived" – the things that God hath prepared for them that love him, for them "who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

CHAPTER IV

"Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break."

TENNYSON.

Laura lingered at Newport for several weeks after the arrival of Lester and Elsie at Crag Cottage; so that the brothers had abundance of time and opportunity for private talks and business arrangements, and Evelyn to practise the rôle of hostess.

When at last she did reach home, she was greatly shocked at the change in her husband; and she heaped reproaches upon poor Evelyn for not giving her more faithful reports of his condition.

"Mamma," said the little girl, "I did write you that he was getting weaker and weaker; that he was no longer able to walk, or even drive out, and had wakeful, restless nights. I thought you would certainly want to come to him when you heard that. But don't worry; Dr. Taylor has changed the medicine, and I hope he will soon be better now."

"No, he wont; he'll not live a month!" she exclaimed half angrily; then glancing at Evelyn's pale, terror-stricken face, "Pshaw, child! don't be frightened," she said; "I did not really mean it; I dare say we shall have him about again in a few weeks."

"Mamma, what *do* you *really* think?" asked the little girl, clasping her hands and gazing into her mother's face with a look of agonized entreaty. "I know you believe in deceiving people sometimes when you think it for their good, for I have heard you say so; but I want to know the truth, even if it breaks my heart."

"I'm not a doctor, Evelyn," returned her mother coldly; "I can judge only from appearances, which are as visible to you as to me. Besides, what is the use of my giving my opinion, since you choose to believe I am capable of intentionally deceiving you?"

With the last word she sailed from the room, leaving Evelyn alone in the parlor, where the conversation had taken place.

Evelyn sat like one stunned by a heavy blow. Could it be that her father was dying – the dear father who was all the world to her? Oh, what would life be worth without him? how could she go on living? How soon would the dread parting come? how many more days or hours might she spend in his dear companionship? Ah, those precious hours were fast slipping away; every moment spent away from his side was a great loss; she would go to him at once.

She started up, but dropped into her seat again; "mamma" was with him, and just now she would rather avoid her society.

Covering her face with her hands, she sat silently thinking, – going over again in imagination all that had passed between her father and herself during the last few weeks, recalling their conversations, especially every word he had addressed to her bearing upon her future; all his loving counsels; his exhortations to lean upon God in every time of trial and perplexity; to carry every sorrow, anxiety, and care to the Lord Jesus in unwavering confidence that there she would find never-failing sympathy, comfort, and help.

And now for the first time it struck her that thus he was trying to prepare her to do without him – the earthly parent who had been hitherto the confidant of all her childish griefs, perplexities, hopes, joys, and fears; and with the thought the conviction deepened that he was indeed passing away to that bourne whence no traveler returns.

Tears were stealing between the slender fingers, low, deep sobs shaking her slight frame, when a hand was gently laid upon her shoulder, and a sweet-toned voice asked in tender accents, "What is it, Evelyn, dear?"

"O Aunt Elsie," cried the little girl, lifting a tear-stained face, "you will tell me the truth! Is my dear papa – No, no, I can't say it! but oh, do you think we may hope he will soon be well again?"

"Dear child," Elsie said, in quivering tones, as she seated herself and, putting an arm about the little girl's waist, drew her close with a tender caress, "he is very ill, but 'while there is life there is hope,' for with God all things are possible."

"Oh I know – I understand what that means!" cried Evelyn in anguished accents, "he is dying! – my dear, dear father!"

"My poor child, my poor, dear child!" Elsie said, her tears falling fast, "I can feel for you, for it is not very long since I stood by the deathbed of a dear father. Flesh and heart fail in such a trial; but look to Jesus for help and strength to endure, and he will sustain and comfort you, as he did me."

"I can never, never bear it!" sobbed Evelyn, hiding her face on Elsie's shoulder. "And papa – oh, how dreadful for him to have to go away all alone! I wish I could go with him."

"That can not be, dear; but he will not go alone. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.' Jesus will be with him and he will need no one else."

"Yes; I know, and I am glad for him; but oh, who will be with me when he is gone? Mamma is seldom at home, and cares nothing for having me with her."

"God will raise up friends and companions for you, dear, and if you seek the Lord Jesus, he will be to you a Friend indeed; One who sticketh closer than a brother or father, or any earthly creature; a Friend who will never die, never leave or forsake you."

For some moments there was silence in the room, broken only by Evelyn's low sobs; but at length she spoke in trembling, tearful tones, "Will the angels come and carry him to heaven, Aunt Elsie, as they did the poor beggar, Lazarus, the Bible tells about?"

"Yes, dear, I believe they will," Elsie answered, tenderly smoothing the child's hair. "And I think they will be full of joy for him, because he will be done with all the pains, the troubles and trials of earth, and going to be forever with the Lord. I believe they will carry him home, with songs of gladness; and oh what a welcome he will receive when he enters the gates of the Celestial City! for the Bible tells us 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints;' and that 'He shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.' It tells us that His love for his people exceeds in depth and tenderness that of a mother for her child. Then how must he rejoice over each one of his ransomed ones as he takes them in his arms and bids them welcome to the blissful mansions he has prepared for them."

"Yes; I shall be glad for papa; but O Aunt Elsie, what can I do without him?"

"God will help and comfort you, dear child; he will be your father," Elsie said with emotion. "A Father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation."

"It is a very sweet promise," said Evelyn. "Aunt Elsie, I wish I knew that was a true, a real occurrence – that story of Dives and Lazarus; for then I should be quite sure that angels do come to carry home Christians when they die, and that they would come for papa; but some people say it is only a parable."

"But the Bible does not say so," returned Elsie. "Jesus narrates it as a real occurrence, and I believe it was. Nothing has ever happened in any world that he has not seen and known, therefore he was perfectly competent to tell about the life and death of any man, and also of his experiences after death. So I think, dear child, you may take all the comfort you can find in believing it a narrative of actual occurrence."

"Ah, now I remember something that may perhaps give you comfort as additional proof that angels do carry home the souls of God's children. I heard an old minister – a man whose word I should credit as entirely as the evidence of my own senses – tell it to my mother."

"He said that when he was a boy, at home on his father's farm, he and his brother were one evening out in a meadow attending to their horses. Some short distance from them was the dwelling

of an old elder, a remarkably devoted Christian man, who always had family worship morning and evening, and always, on those occasions, sang a hymn to either Mear or Old Hundred.

"On this particular evening the lads, while busy there in the meadow, were surprised by hearing sounds as of a number of voices singing one of the elder's two tunes – I have forgotten now which it was – but the sounds came nearer and nearer, from the direction of the elder's house – and, to the great wonder and astonishment of the lads, passed above their heads.

"They heard the voices in the air, but saw nothing of the singers. Afterward they learned that the good old man had died just at that time." [A]

[Footnote A: Given the author as a fact, by a Christian lady who had it from the good minister's own lips.]

"How strange," said Evelyn, in an awestruck tone. "O Aunt Elsie, if I could hear their song of joy over papa, I should not grieve quite so much." The door opened and Laura looked in.

"Evelyn," she said, in a piqued tone, "your father wants you. It actually seems that you, a mere child, are more necessary to him than his own wife. He would see you alone for a few minutes."

Silently, for her heart was too full for speech, Evelyn withdrew herself from Elsie's arms and hastened to obey the summons.

CHAPTER V

"Gone before
To that unknown and silent shore."

CHARLES LAMB.

Mr. Leland, lying pale and languid on his couch, was listening intently for the approaching footsteps of his child.

As she stole softly in, fearful of disturbing him, he lifted his head slightly and greeted her with a tender, pitying smile and a feebly outstretched hand.

"My darling," he whispered, drawing her to him, "my poor darling; so they have told you? I have tried to spare you the bitter truth as long as I could; bitter to you, love, and to me for your sake; yet the will of God be done; He knows and will do what is best for us both."

Evelyn was making a determined effort at self-control for his dear sake, that she might not disturb him with the knowledge that her very heart was breaking.

"Papa," she said, with a vain endeavor to steady her tones, "dear, dearest papa, you will surely get well; for I will pray day and night to God to cure you; and have you not taught me that He is the hearer and answerer of prayer, that He loves us, and that He is able to do everything?"

"Yes, dear daughter; and it is all true, but His thoughts are not as our thoughts; He may see best to take me now to the heavenly home toward which you too, I hope, are traveling; best for you as well as for me."

"O papa, how can it be best for me, when you are such a help to me in going that road; the only help I have?"

"He is able to raise up other and better helpers for you, dearest, and He Himself will be the best of all. Perhaps it is to draw you nearer to Himself that He is taking away the earthly father upon whom you have been accustomed to lean."

Mr. Leland's voice faltered with the last words; the exertion of talking so much had exhausted his feeble frame, and closing his eyes, he lay lifting up silent petitions for his child.

Evelyn thought he slept, and lest she should disturb him, forcibly repressed her inclination to relieve her over-burdened heart by sobs and sighs.

She remained close at his side, gently fanning him, for the day was oppressively hot.

But presently he opened his eyes, and fixed them upon her face with a long look of tenderest love and sympathy – a look that impressed itself indelibly upon her memory and was often, in after years, dwelt upon with feelings of strangely mingled joy and grief.

"My darling," he murmured at length, so low that her quick ear scarce caught the words, "my precious child, I leave you to the care of Him who is a Father of the fatherless. I have been pleading with Him for you; pleading His promise to those who trust in Him – 'I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee.' It is an everlasting covenant, and shall never fail. Seek Him, my darling, seek Him with all your heart, and He will be your God forever and ever: your Guide even unto death."

"I will, papa, I will," she whispered, pressing her quivering lips to his cheek.

The end did not come that day; for another week the loved sufferer lingered in pain and weakness, borne with Christian fortitude and resignation.

For the most part his mind was clear and calm, the joy of the Lord his strength and stay; yet were there moments when doubts and fears assailed him.

"What is it, dear brother?" Elsie asked one day, seeing a troubled look upon his face.

"How many are mine iniquities and sins," he answered; "mine iniquities are gone over mine head; as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me."

"But 'He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed,'" quoted Elsie.

"Oh, bless the Lord 'who forgiveth all thine iniquities.'"

"Yes," he said, "but I am so vile, so sinful – it seems utterly impossible that I ever can be pure in His sight who is 'of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity.'"

"The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin," quoted Elsie in low tones of deepest sympathy.

"Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.'

"This Man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.'

"Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity.'

"Let Israel hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

"Blessed words!" he ejaculated, the cloud lifting from his brow, "blessed, blessed words! I will doubt and fear no more; I will trust His power to save; His imputed righteousness is mine, and covered with that spotless robe I need not fear to enter the presence of the King of kings."

Some hours later the messenger came, and whispering, "All is peace, peace, unclouded peace," the dying saint fell asleep in Jesus.

Gently, tenderly Lester closed the sightless eyes, saying in moved tones, "Farewell, brother beloved! Thank God the battle's fought, the victory won!"

And now Evelyn, who had been for hours close at her father's side, waiting upon him, smoothing his pillow, moistening his lips, gazing with yearning tenderness into his eyes, drinking in his every word and look while displaying a power of self-control wonderful to see in a child of her years, burst into a passion of tears and sobs, pressing her lips again and again to the brow, the cheek, the lips of the dead – those pale lips that for the first time failed to respond to her loving caresses.

But with a wild shriek the new-made widow went into strong hysterics; and, resuming her self-control, the little girl left the dead to wait upon and console the living parent.

"Mamma, dearest mamma," she said, in quivering tones, putting her arms about her mother, "think how blest he is; the angels are even now carrying him home with songs of gladness to be forever with the Lord; and he will never be sick or in pain any more."

"But what is to become of me?" sobbed her mother. "I cannot do without him, if you can. You couldn't have loved him half so well as I did or you would never take his loss so quietly."

"O Mamma!" cried the child, her tone speaking deeply wounded feeling, "if you could know *how* I loved him! – my dear, dear father! Oh, why am I left behind? why could I not go with him?"

"And leave your mother all alone!" was the reproachful rejoinder. "But you always loved him best; never cared particularly for me; and never will I suppose," she added, going into a stronger paroxysm than before.

"O mamma, don't!" cried Evelyn, in sore distress. "I love you dearly too; and you are all I have left." She threw an arm about her mother's neck as she spoke, but was thrust impatiently aside.

"You are suffocating me; can't you see it? Help me to bed in the next room, and call Hannah. She perhaps will have sense enough to apply restoratives."

But both Lester and Elsie had come to her aid, and the former, taking her in his arms, carried her to the bed, while Evelyn hastened to call the nurse who had for the past week or two assisted in the care of him who now no longer needed anything but the last sad offices.

Laura's grief continued to be very violent in its manifestations, yet did not hinder her from taking an absorbing interest in the preparation of her own and Evelyn's mourning garments. She was

careful that they should be of the deepest black, the finest quality, the most fashionable cut; to all of which the bereaved child – a silent undemonstrative mourner – was supremely indifferent. Her mother noted it with surprise, for Evelyn was a child of decided opinions and wont to be fastidious about her attire.

"Flounces on this skirt, I suppose, Miss? how many?" asked the dressmaker.

"Just as mamma pleases; I do not care in the least," returned Evelyn.

"Why Eva, what has come over you?" queried her mother. "It is something new for you to be so indifferent in regard to your dress."

"You are the only one I care to please now, mamma," replied the little girl in tremulous tones. "I think there is no one else likely to be interested in the matter."

Laura was touched. "You are a good child," she said; "and I think you may well trust everything to my taste; it is considered excellent by my friends and acquaintance."

With thoughtfulness beyond her years Evelyn presently drew her mother aside, out of earshot of the dressmaker, and whispered, "Mamma dear, don't put too much expense on me; you know there is no one to earn money for us now."

"No, but he cannot have left us poor," rejoined the mother; "for I know his business has paid very well indeed for years past. And of course his wife and child inherit all he has left."

"I do not know! I do not care!" cried Evelyn, hot tears streaming from her eyes. "What is money without papa to help us enjoy it?"

"Something that it is very convenient, indeed absolutely necessary, to have in this practical world, as you will know when you are older and wiser," returned her mother, with some severity of tone; for Evelyn's words had seemed to her like a reproach, and an insinuation that Eric's daughter was a deeper and more sincere mourner for him than his widow.

Such was the fact, but she was by no means ready to admit it. And she had loved him, perhaps, as well as she was capable of loving any one but herself. Since her return home she had been too much occupied with his critical condition, and then his death, to give a thought to the state of his affairs or the disposition to be made of his property.

True, she had little cause for anxiety in regard to these things, knowing that he had no financial entanglements, and having heard him say on more than one occasion, that whatever he might possess at the time of his death would be left to his wife and child; yet had she been an unloving wife, queries, hopes and fears in regard to the amount he was leaving her would have found some place in her thoughts.

And now that Evelyn had in a manner opened the subject, they did so; she was no longer absorbed in her grief; it was present with her still, but her thoughts were divided between it on the one hand and her mourning and future prospects on the other.

It now occurred to her that Evelyn, being under age and heir to some property, must have a guardian.

"That should be left to me," she said to herself. "I am quite capable – her natural guardian too; and I trust he has not associated any one else with me. It would be too provoking, for he would be forever interfering in my plans and wishes for the child."

She waited till the day after that on which the body was laid away in its last resting-place, then finding herself alone with her brother-in-law, said to him, "I want a little talk with you, Lester, for it is time for me to be arranging my plans. As you were with your brother for some weeks before his death, I presume you can tell me all about his affairs. Did he make a will?"

"He did; leaving his entire estate to his wife and child," replied

Lester, in a grave but kindly tone.

"One third to me and two to her, I suppose?"

"Yes; but I think he said you would be the richer of the two, having some property of your own."

"That is quite correct. I am appointed executrix, and guardian to Evelyn of course?"

"No," Lester replied, with some hesitation, for he saw that she would be ill-pleased with the arrangements Eric had made; "at the earnest solicitation of my brother, I consented to become his executor and the guardian of his child."

Laura did not speak for a moment, but her eyes flashed and her cheek paled with anger. "Ah, I might have known it," she hissed at length; "had I not been the most innocent and unsuspecting of women I should have known better than to leave him for weeks to the wiles of designing relatives; when, too, his mind was weakened by disease."

"His mind was perfectly clear and strong from first to last, Laura," returned Lester mildly, "and you greatly mistake in supposing I had anything to gain by agreeing to his wishes or that I was at all covetous of either office."

"Pardon me," she sneered, "but if you do not receive a percentage for your trouble, you will be the first executor I ever heard of who did not."

"I shall not accept a cent," he retorted, with some slight indignation in his tones.

"We shall see; men can change their minds as well as women. But surely I am associated with you in the guardianship of Evelyn?"

"According to her father's will I am sole guardian," said Lester.

"It is too much; I am the child's natural guardian, and shall contest my rights if necessary," returned Laura, defiantly; and with the last word she rose and left the room.

Elsie, entering the parlor a moment later, found her husband pacing to and fro with a very disturbed and anxious air.

"What is the matter?" she asked, and he answered with an account of his interview with Laura.

"How strange!" she exclaimed. "Her love for her husband cannot have been very deep and strong, if she is so ready to oppose the carrying out of his dying wishes. But do not let it trouble you, Lester; she is venting her anger in idle threats, and will never proceed to the length of contesting the will in a court of law."

"I trust not," he said sighing. "Ah me! if my poor brother had but made a wiser choice."

In the library, whither Mrs. Laura Leland bent her steps on her sudden exit from the parlor, Evelyn was sitting in her father's vacant chair, her elbow resting on the table, her cheek in her hand, her eyes on the carpet at her feet, while her sad thoughts travelled back over many an hour spent there in the loved companionship of the dear departed.

She looked up inquiringly on her mother's abrupt entrance, and noted with surprise the flush on her cheek and the angry light in her eyes.

"Ah, here you are!" said Laura. "Pray, were you let into the secret of the arrangements made in my absence?"

"What arrangements, mamma?" asked the little girl wonderingly.

"In regard to your guardianship, and the care of the property left by your father."

"No, mamma, I never knew or thought anything about those things. Must I have a guardian? Why should I be under the control of anyone but you?"

"Yes, why indeed? I would not have believed it of your father! but he has actually left you to the sole guardianship of your Uncle Lester. You may well look astonished," she added, noting the expression of Evelyn's face. "I feel that I am robbed of my natural right in my child."

"You need not, mamma; I shall obey you just the same of course, for nothing can release me from the obligation to keep the fifth commandment. So do not, I beg of you, blame papa."

With what a quiver of pain the young voice pronounced that loved name!

"No; I blame your uncle; for no doubt he used undue influence with Eric while his mind was enfeebled by illness. And I blame myself also for leaving my husband to that influence; but I little thought he was so ill – so near his end; nor did I suspect his brother of being so designing a man."

"Mamma, you quite mistake in regard to both," exclaimed Evelyn, in a pained, indignant tone; "Uncle Lester is not a designing person, and papa's mind was not in the least enfeebled by his illness."

"No, of course not; it can not be doubted that a child of your age is far more capable of judging than a woman of mine," was the sarcastic rejoinder.

"Mamma, please do not speak so unkindly to me," entreated the little girl, unbidden tears springing to her eyes; "you know you are all I have now."

"No, you have your dear Uncle Lester and Aunt Elsie, and I foresee that they will soon steal your heart entirely away from your mother."

"Mamma, how can you speak such cruel words to me?" cried Evelyn. "I would not hurt you so for all the world."

CHAPTER VI

"Farewell; God knows when we shall meet again."

SHAKSPEARE.

Laura said no more about breaking the will, but her manner toward Lester and Elsie was so cold and repellent that they were not sorry that she shut herself up in her own room during the greater part of each day while they and she remained at Crag Cottage.

Had they consulted only their own inclination, they would have taken their own departure immediately after seeing Eric laid in his grave; but Lester's duties as executor and guardian made it necessary for them to stay on for some weeks.

The cottage was a part of Evelyn's portion of the estate, but Laura was given the right to make it her home so long as she remained Eric's widow.

Laura knew this, having read the will, but as that instrument made no mention of Eric's desire that his daughter should reside with her guardian, she was not aware of that fact; and feeling well nigh certain that it would rouse her anger and opposition, Lester dreaded making the disclosure.

But while perplexing himself with the question how best to approach her on the subject, he found among his brother's papers, a sealed letter addressed to her.

Calling Evelyn, he put it into her hand, bidding her carry it to her mother.

Half an hour later the little girl was again at his side, asking in tearful tones, "Uncle Lester, must mamma and I be separated?"

He was in the library, seated before a table, and seemed very busy over a pile of papers laid thereon; but pushing back his chair, he threw his arm round her waist and drew her to his knee.

"No, my dear child, not necessarily," he said, softly caressing her hair and cheek; "your mother will be made welcome at Fairview if she sees fit to go with us."

"But she wants to stay here and keep me with her; and it's my home, you know, the dear home where everything reminds me of – papa, Will you let me stay?"

"Do you really wish it, Evelyn? do you not desire to carry out the dying wishes of the father you loved so dearly?"

"Yes, uncle," she said, the tears stealing down her cheeks, "but – perhaps he wouldn't care now, and mamma is so sorely distressed at the thought of separation; and – and it hurts me too; for she is my mother, and I have no father now – or brother, or sister."

"You must let me be a father to you, my poor, dear child," he said in moved tones, and drawing her closer; "I will do my utmost to fill his place to you, and I hope you will come to me always with your troubles and perplexities, feeling the same assurance of finding sympathy and help that you did in carrying them to him."

"Oh, thank you!" she responded. "I think you are a dear, kind uncle, and very much like papa; you remind me of him very often in your looks, and words and ways."

"I am glad to hear you say so," he answered. "I had a great admiration for that dear brother, and for his sake as well as her own, I am very fond of his little daughter. And now about this question. I shall not compel your obedience to your father's wishes – at least not for the present – but shall leave the decision to your own heart and conscience. Take a day or two to think over the matter, and then let me hear your decision."

"In the meantime, if you can persuade your mamma to go with us to Fairview, that will make it all smooth and easy for you."

"Thank you, dear uncle," she said, as he released her and turned to his work again, "I will go now and try what I can do to induce mamma to accept your kind invitation. And please excuse me for interrupting you when you were so busy."

"I am never too busy to attend to you, Evelyn," he returned in a kindly tone; "come freely to me whenever you will."

Crossing the hall, Evelyn noticed the carriage of an intimate friend of her mother drawn up before the entrance.

"Mrs. Lang must be calling on mamma," she said to herself; and pausing near the half-open parlor door, she saw them sitting side by side on a sofa, conversing in earnest, through subdued tones.

The call proved a long one. Evelyn waited with what patience she might, vainly trying to interest herself in a book; her thoughts much too full of her own near future to admit of her doing so.

At last Mrs. Lang took her departure, and Evelyn, following her mother into her bedroom, gave a detailed account of her late interview with her uncle.

"Mamma dear, you will go with us, will you not?" she concluded persuasively.

"No, I shall not!" was the angry rejoinder. "Spend weeks and months in a dull country place, with no more enlivening society than that of your uncle and aunt? indeed, no! You will have to choose between them and me; if you love them better than you do your own mother, elect, by all means, to forsake me and go with them."

"Mamma," remonstrated poor Evelyn, tears of wounded feeling in her eyes, "it is not a question of loving you or them best, but of obeying my father's dying wish."

For a moment Mrs. Leland seemed to be silently musing; then she said, "I withdraw my request, Evelyn. I have decided upon new plans for myself, and should prefer to have you go with your uncle. You needn't look hurt, child; I'm sure it is what you have seemed to desire."

"Mamma," said the little girl, going up to her, standing by the side of her easy-chair, and gazing down beseechingly into her eyes, "why will you persist in speaking so doubtfully of my love for you? It hurts me, mamma; it almost breaks my heart; especially now that you are all I have left."

"Well there, you need not fret; of course I know you must have some natural affection for your mother," returned Laura carelessly.

"Here, sit down on this stool at my feet, and you shall hear about my change of plans.

"Mrs. Lang called to tell me they are going to Europe – will sail in a fortnight – and to ask me to accompany them; and I have accepted the invitation. You were included in it also, but I shall have less care if I leave you behind; and though I have always intended that you should have the trip some day, I think it much the wiser plan to defer it for a few years till you are old enough to appreciate and make the best use of all its advantages.

"Beside, your uncle being your guardian, his consent would have to be gained, and I have no mind to stoop to ask it."

"Mamma, I am satisfied to stay," said Evelyn; "I should be very loath to add to your cares, or lessen in any way your enjoyment."

It was with no slight feeling of relief that Lester and Elsie heard of this new determination on the part of their sister-in-law; for her behavior toward them thus far had been such as to make her presence in their home anything but desirable.

With an aching heart Evelyn watched and aided in the preparations for her mother's departure, which would take place some weeks earlier than her own and that of her uncle and aunt.

But naturally quiet and undemonstrative, she usually kept her feelings locked up within her own breast, and in consequence was sometimes accused by her mother of being cold-hearted and indifferent.

Yet, as the day of separation drew near, Laura grew more affectionate toward her child than she had ever been before.

That was joy to Evelyn, but made the parting more bitter when it came. Mother and child wept in each other's arms, and Evelyn whispered with a bursting sob, "O mamma, if you would only give it up and go with us!"

"Nonsense, child! it is quite too late for that now," returned Laura, giving her a last embrace and hurrying into the carriage which was to convey her to the depot; for she was to travel by rail to New York City, and there take the steamer for Europe.

Lester went with her to the city, to see her safe on board the vessel, leaving his wife and child behind. Elsie's tender heart was full of pity for Evelyn – robbed of both parents, and left lonely and forlorn.

"Dear child, be comforted," she said, embracing her tenderly, as the carriage disappeared from sight down the drive, "you have not departed from your best Friend. 'When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.'

"And be assured your uncle and I will do all in our power to make you happy. I am not old enough to be a mother to you, but let me be as an older sister.

"And I will share my dear mother with you," she added with a sweet, bright smile. "Everybody loves mamma, and she has a heart big enough to mother all the motherless children with whom she comes in contact."

"Thank you, dear Aunt Elsie," Evelyn responded, smiling through her tears, then hastily wiping them away; "I am sure I shall love your mamma and be very grateful if she will count me among her children while my own mamma is so far away. Sure too, that I shall be as happy with you and Uncle Lester as I could be anywhere without papa."

"I hope so, indeed," Elsie said; "and that you will find pleasant companions in the Ion young people. Both my sister Rose and Lulu Raymond must be near your age; you probably come in between them."

"And I suppose they are very nice girls?" remarked Evelyn, inquiringly."

"I think they are," said Elsie; "they have their faults like the rest of us, but many good qualities too."

Desirous to divert Evelyn's thoughts from her sorrows, Elsie went on to give a lively description of Ion, and a slight sketch of the character and appearance of each member of the family, doing full justice to every good trait and touching but lightly upon faults and failings. Evelyn proving an interested listener. Fairview and then Viamede came under a similar review, and Elsie told the story of her mother's birth and her infant years passed in that lovely spot. After that of her honeymoon and of the visits paid by the family in later days.

"What a very sweet lady your mamma must be, Aunt Elsie," Evelyn remarked in a pause in the narrative; "I am glad I shall see and know her."

"Yes, dear; you well may be," Elsie responded with a happy smile; "'none knew her but to love her,' none can live in her constant companionship without finding it one of the greatest blessings of their lives."

"I think you must resemble her, auntie," said Evelyn, with an affectionate, admiring look into Elsie's bright, sweet face."

"It is my desire to do so," she answered, flushing with pleasure. "My dear, precious mother! I could hardly bear to leave her, Eva, even for your uncle's sake."

"But I am very glad you did," quickly returned the little girl. "I am so glad to have you for my aunt."

"Thank you, dear," was the pleased rejoinder. "I have never regretted my choice, or felt ashamed of having gone all the way to Italy to join my sick and suffering betrothed and become his wife, that I might nurse him back to health."

"Oh, did you?" exclaimed Evelyn, looking full of interest and delight, "please tell me the whole story, won't you? I should so like to hear it."

Elsie willingly complied with the request, and it would be difficult to say which enjoyed the story most – she who told it, or she who listened.

"I think you were brave, and kind and good, Aunt Elsie," was Evelyn's comment when the tale was told.

"I had a strong motive – the saving of a life dearer to me than my own," Elsie responded, half absently, as if her thoughts were busy with the past.

Both were silent for a little, Evelyn gazing with mournful eyes upon the lovely grounds and beautiful scenery about her home.

"Aunt Elsie," she said at length, "do you know what is to be done with the house while mamma and I are away? If it should be left long unoccupied it will fall into decay, and the grounds become a wilderness of weeds."

"Your mother suggested having it rented just as it stands – ready furnished," replied Elsie; "but she feared – as do we also – that strangers might abuse the property; then, as I thought it over, it occurred to me that we might rent it ourselves for a summer residence; and when away from it, leave it in charge of Patrick and his wife, who have no children to do mischief, and who have lived so long in the family – so your mother told us – that their character for trustworthiness is well established."

"Yes, indeed it is!" said Evelyn; "and that seems to me the best plan that could possibly be devised except that –"

"Well dear, except what?" Elsie asked pleasantly, as the little girl paused without finishing her sentence.

"I fear it will be a great expense to you and Uncle," was the half-hesitating reply, "and that you will get but little good of it, being so far away nearly all the year."

"You are very thoughtful for one so young," said Elsie in surprise.

"It is because papa talked so much with me about his affairs, and the uses of money, the difficulty of earning and keeping it, and the best ways of economising. He said he wanted to teach me how to take care of myself, if ever I were left alone in the world."

"That was wise and kind," said Elsie; "and I think you must have paid good attention to his teachings. But about the expense we shall incur in making the proposed arrangement: there is a large family of us, and I do not doubt that we shall have help with both the use of the house and the paying of the rent."

"And your mamma is very rich I've heard," remarked Evelyn half inquiringly.

"Very rich and very generous," returned her aunt.

"Are we to leave soon? and to go directly to your home?" asked Evelyn.

"It will be probably several weeks before your uncle can get everything arranged, and then he wants to spend some time sketching the scenery about Lake George and among the Adirondacks," replied Elsie; "and we are to go with him. Shall you like it?"

"Oh, yes indeed!" Evelyn exclaimed, her face lighting up with pleasure, then with gathering tears and in low, tremulous tones, "Papa had promised to take me to both places some day," she said.

CHAPTER VII

FAIRVIEW AND ION.

It had been a cloudy afternoon and the rain began to fall as, shortly after sunset, the Lelands left the cars for the Fairview family carriage.

"A dismal home-coming for you, my love," remarked Lester, as the coachman closed the door on them and mounted to his perch again.

"Oh, no!" returned Elsie brightly, "the rain is needed, and we are well sheltered from it. Yet I fear it maybe dismal to Evelyn; but, my dear child, try to keep up your spirits; it does not always rain in this part of the country."

"Oh, no! of course not, auntie," said the little girl, with a low laugh of amusement; "and I should not want to live here if it did not rain sometimes."

"I should think not, indeed," said her uncle. "Well, Eva, we will hope the warmth of your welcome will atone to you for the inclemency of the weather."

"Yes," said Elsie, "we want you to feel that it is a home-coming to you as well as to us."

"Thank you both very much," murmured Evelyn, her voice a little broken with the thought of her orphaned condition; "I shall try to deserve your great kindness."

"We have done nothing yet to call for so strong an expression of gratitude, Eva," remarked her uncle in a lively tone.

In kitchen and dining-room at Fairview great preparations were going forward; in the one a table was laid, with the finest satin damask, glittering silver, cut-glass and china; in the other sounds and scents told of a coming "feast of fat things."

"Clar to goodness! ef it ain't a pourin' down like de clouds was a wantin' for to drownd Miss Elsie an' de rest!" exclaimed a young mulatto girl, coming in from a back veranda, whence she had been taking an observation of the weather; "an' its that dark, Aunt Kitty, yo' couldn't see yo' hand afo' yo' face."

"Hope Uncle Cuff keep de road and don't upset de kerridge," returned Aunt Kitty, the cook, opening her oven-door to glance at a fine young fowl browning beautifully there, and sending forth a most savory smell.

"He'd larf at de wery idear of upsettin' dat vehicle, he would, kase he tinks dar ain't nobody else knows de road ekal to hisself; but den 'taint always de folks what makes de biggest boastin' dat kin do de best; am it now, Lizzie?"

"No, I reckon 'taint, Aunt Kitty; but doan you be a prognosticatin' ob evil and skearin' folks out deir wits fo' de fac's am 'stablished."

"An' ain't gwine fo' to be 'stablished," put in another voice; "'spose de family been trabling roun' de worl' to come back an' git harm right afo' deir own do'? 'Co'se not."

"Hark! dere dey is dis bressed minit', I hear de soun' o' de wheels and de hosses' feet," exclaimed Aunt Kitty, slamming to her oven-door, laying down the spoon with which she had been basting her fowl, and hastily exchanging her dark cotton apron for a white one.

She brought up the rear of the train of servants gathering in the hall to welcome their master and mistress.

A glad welcome it was; for both Lester and Elsie were greatly beloved by their dependents; and Evelyn, too, came in for a share of the hand-shakings, the "God bless yous," and was assured again and again that she was welcome to Fairview.

"Well, Aunt Kitty, I suppose you have one of your excellent suppers ready for us hungry travelers?" remarked Mr. Leland interrogatively, as he divested himself of his duster.

"I'se done de wery bes' I knows, sah," she answered, dropping a courtesy and smiling all over her face. "Eberyting am done to a turn, an' I hopes you, sah, and de ladies mos' ready to eat afo' de tings get spoiled."

"We won't keep your supper waiting many minutes, Aunt Kitty," said her mistress pleasantly.

"Myra take the baby to the nursery. Evelyn, my dear, we will go up stairs and I will show you your room."

Reaching the second floor, Elsie led the way into a spacious, luxuriously-furnished apartment.

"This is your room, Eva," she said.

"It is just across the hall from your uncle's and mine; so I hope you will not feel lonely or timid. But if anything should alarm you at any time, come to our door and call to us."

"Thank you, dear Aunt Elsie. Such a beautiful room as it is!" exclaimed

Evelyn. "How very kind you and Uncle Lester are to me!"

There was a little tremble of emotion in the child's voice as she spoke.

Elsie put her arms lovingly about her. "Dear child," she said, "how could we be otherwise? We want you to feel that this is truly your own home, and to be very happy in it."

"I could not be so happy with any one else as with you and uncle," returned the little girl, with a sigh to the memory of the father she had loved so well.

"And to-morrow you shall see what a sweet home this is," Elsie said, releasing her with a kiss.

"Now we must hasten to make ourselves ready for supper. A change of dress will not be necessary. There will be no company tonight, and your uncle would prefer seeing us in our traveling dresses to having his meal spoiled by waiting."

Evelyn went to sleep that night to the music of the dashing of the rain upon the windows, but woke next morning to find the sun shining brightly in a deep blue sky wherein soft, fleecy white clouds were floating.

She drew aside the window curtain to take a peep at the surroundings of her new home. Lawn, shrubbery, flower garden, while larger than those at Crag Cottage, were quite as well kept; neatness and order, beauty and fragrance made them so attractive that Evelyn was tempted to a stroll while waiting for the call to breakfast.

She stole softly down the stairs, thinking her aunt and uncle might be still sleeping, but found the latter on the veranda, pacing to and fro with meditative air.

"Ah, good morning, little maid!" he said in a kindly tone. "I hope you slept well and feel refreshed?"

"Yes, uncle, thank you," she returned. "Don't you enjoy being at home again after your long absence?"

"I do, indeed!" he answered; "there is no place like home, is there? This is your home, too, now, Eva."

"Yes, sir," a little sadly. "You and Aunt Elsie are home to me now, almost as papa used to be in the dear old days; and perhaps I shall learn to love Fairview as well as I do Crag Cottage. May I go into the garden, uncle?"

"Yes, I will take you with pleasure. Your shoes are thick I see," glancing down at them, "and that is well; for the walks may be a little damp."

He led her about, calling her attention to one and another rare plant or flower in garden and green-house, and gathering a bouquet of beautiful and fragrant blossoms for her, then one for his wife.

Elsie joined them on the veranda as they came in at the summons to breakfast, and Lester presented his flowers, claiming a kiss in return.

"Help yourself," she said laughingly; "and many thanks for your flowers."

And now shall we go in to breakfast? we are a little late this morning."

"Ah, our mail is already here, I see," Lester remarked, as they entered the breakfast-room. "I will open the bag while you pour the coffee, my dear, hoping to find a letter for each of us."

"I think there should be one for me," remarked Evelyn, watching her uncle with wistful, longing eyes as he took out the letters and glanced over the addresses; "for I have heard but once from mamma since she went away."

"Twice now," her uncle said with a pleased smile, as he handed her the longed-for missive.

"You, too, hear from your mother this morning, my dear; and from several other friends. Here, Jane," to the servant girl in waiting, "hand these to your mistress."

"And here is a cup of coffee to reward you; mamma's letter alone is worth it," responded Elsie gaily, lifting the letters from the silver waiter on which they lay, and setting there, in their stead, a delicate china cup from whose steaming contents a delicious aroma greeted the nostrils.

"I must just peep into mamma's to see when we may expect them home," she added, breaking open its envelope; "the rest will keep till after breakfast."

"When was Aunt Wealthy's birthday?" queried her husband.

"Yesterday," she answered with her eyes on the letter. "Ah! Ned and Zoe start this morning for home. The rest will stay a week or so longer, and our cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Keith, and their daughter, Annis, will soon follow with the expectation of spending the winter as mamma's guests."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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