

The Storyteller

LARRY'S GRANDMOTHER

I.

Old Mrs. Doherty's eyes had looked on sorrow, but always dauntlessly. Thus it happened that their humor was as undimmed, their friendliness as unquenched, at seventy as half a century earlier. Out of a network of wrinkles they sparkled cheerfully, their blue lustre heightened by the parchment brownness of her weather-beaten skin. And whenever they dwelt upon her grandson, Larry Doherty, they took a new depth of kindness and brightness.

She accounted herself a very lucky woman, she was wont to tell her neighbors. To be sure, her husband, when they had been married a little over a year, had been killed in an explosion, but he had left her Larry, her own son Larry, the baby in arms, who had grown to be the best and most stalwart of sons. She dwelt upon Larry's memory with great tenderness, for he was only a memory those many years now. The ship that was bearing him to America with his mother, his pretty wife, and their rosy children, had been wrecked off the Banks. Only one of the life-boats had ever been heard of again. That one a schooner from Falmouth Cape had sighted and saved; and on it were old Mrs. Doherty with her youngest grandchild, the baby Larry, in her arms.

To some the chronicle would now have seemed one of good fortune; but Mrs. Doherty translated calamity to blessing in her own fashion.

'Since 'twas God's will I should lose him an' be cast up alone here in a strange land, think what a blessing it was I had the baby wid me—somethin' to be workin' for, somethin' to be carin' about! And to land here of all places in the says—sure niver were people so kind! An' me boy's son growin' up all that could be wished. When me own time comes for goin' sure 'twill be the happy life I'll have to account for!'

She was a busy creature even after the dreadful struggle of her early years in the new country was past. Her cabin on the hill shone with cleanliness, matching that of her New England neighbors. She was a dairywoman of note, albeit but two cows composed her stock. She had a chicken-yard screened from her small vegetable patch and flower-bed. In the old days she had trodged across the windy half-mile of bridge that connected the cape with Falmouth Town on the mainland to the east, selling her eggs and butter. Now, adays the new railroad and Larry, proud incumbent of a position in the town, conspired to carry them for her.

Larry, of course, had no conception of the fact that she was a miracle among grandmothers, but he loved her and depended upon her and imposed upon her and took her as an every-day matter—until the Downings came to Falmouth Cape. Then his eyes were opened to the fact that his relative was not as other women are. Myrtle Downing, blonde, given to giggling, and admitting twenty-three years, enlightened him.

'My!' she said, when their acquaintance had progressed to the point of personalities, 'ain't your grandmother funny?'

'What's funny about her?' demanded Larry, startled as if it had been suggested to him that some fact of nature was out of the natural order.

'Now, who did you ever see dress like that?' retorted Myrtle unanswerably.

Whereupon Larry, recalling the difference between the customary dress of the community and the neat peasant garb which his grandmother had never discarded, blushed for her. Later he sought with gifts to beguile her into a fashion which Miss Downing assured him was correct—Miss Downing, whose mother wore curl-papers during the greater part of the day and read the fashion journals by her untrimmed lamp in the evenings!

Mrs. Doherty was outwardly grateful, though unbeguiled. To herself she said shrewdly and sadly:

'He niver found out for himself what I was wearin'. No! An' it's little he'd have cared for annywan's tellin' him, unless—unless—' she sighed heavily. 'Well, I could have wished it another!'

And the more Larry's grandmother saw of Miss Myrtle Downing, the more she wished that it might have been another. She saw Myrtle reading at the kitchen table, with only enough space cleared on it for her foolish book and her foolish elbows. She saw crimping irons on the mantel-shelf above the fireplace. She beheld shawls of pale pink and blue looped over Myrtle's slender shoulders, bangles on Myrtle's bare forearms, and buckles on Myrtle's run-down slippers. And she groaned and shook her head.

She was much alone in her cabin during the days of Larry's wooing; and the light went out of her eyes as it had never gone in all the years of her labor and sorrow.

'It's not his leavin' me for another,' she used to assure some inward accuser. 'Lord save us, didn't I see me own do that, an' have joy wid him? But this girl—this baggage—what does she know about carin'? He'll niver be happy wid her—her an' her curls!'

It was Myrtle's obviously artificial ringlets to which the old woman took the most violent objection, making them the scapegoat, as it were, for all the girl's shallowness and shams.

Once, in a desperate moment, she made the mistake that wiser ones than she have made. She spoke contemptuously of her grandson's sweetheart; she besought him to give Myrtle up. And she accomplished nothing but the erecting of a wall of silence and antagonism between herself and the boy for whom she lived.

And so it finally came about that she heard from the neighbors and not from himself of his contemplated marriage. Mrs. Downing, it was reported, had bewailed the approaching nuptials. 'The Dohertys were to match for the Downings,' she lamented. And she 'had looked for Myrtle to do better; with a face like Myrtle's' a most churlish mate might have been reasonably expected. But the child was romantic, like her mamma, who had rejected heaven only knew what splendor to follow where her heart led!

'But it's its goin' to be awful hard on Myrtle,' the fond mother was quoted as ending, 'if she has to live with that old woman. Indeed, I don't believe she'll do it. It ain't that Myrtle would grudge her what she eats an' all that; but a young bride, she naturally wants her home to herself.'

Now, though she knew that love would do strange things to the young, blinding them to the beauty of old ways and bidding them shut the windows upon peaceful old outlooks, still the stricken grandmother never doubted Larry's intentions towards herself. Never, she knew, would it occur to him to turn her adrift in her old age. But she herself, could she stay where alien eyes looked coldly upon her?

'But if I go and live by meself,' she said, 'they'll say he turned me out, they'll misjudge the poor, foolish boy. An' if I go, who is to take care of him?—for that baggage hasn't it in her. 'Deed, an' she doesn't make him happy even now'—which was true enough, as the most casual could observe.

Myrtle, aiming at the witcheries of coquetry, achieved pertness and a habit of nagging, and kept her lover in a state of irritation far enough removed both from the blissful uncertainty which she intended and the comfortable assurance which he regarded as his right.

II.

By and by the March gales began to beat along the coast. The waters of the bay rose and lashed themselves with oceanic fury. The winds threatened the houses, the piers, the railroad. One morning there came a telephone report to the station that the train from the region west of Falmouth Cape would be unable to reach the Cape station and to go on to Falmouth Town on the other side of the bay. Floods had washed away bridges and roadbeds in the interior, and for forty-eight hours at least there would be no train. Falmouth Cape settled itself to the excited security of a mere watcher of calamities, but in two hours it ceased even to watch, for the storm had wrought havoc with the telephone wires, and it was cut off from the world.

Two things drove Larry stubbornly to town that morning. One was a boyish pride in the fact that he had never missed a day's work since he obtained a position; the other was that Myrtle had been uncommonly trying the night before with her weak coquetties and her bad temper, and he wished to escape her neighborhood for a while. He harnessed the old horse, wrapped himself well, and drove across the road bridge that paralleled the railroad bridge across the bay and into Falmouth Town.

In the afternoon the section of the road bridge next to Falmouth Cape succumbed to the strain of the winds and the rising billows. Cracking and crashing, it was swept away, and the mooring of the structure terminated abruptly over the seething, tar-black waters an eighth of a mile from the Cape shore. The arch still stood, and the wooden girders on which the flooring had been laid.

All that afternoon Mrs. Doherty rushed about beseeching someone to go and save her boy. Everyone answered that her boy would not attempt to make the journey home that evening. In the morning, perhaps, the wires would be working again, and the town end of the bridge could be warned of the damage at the Cape end. Anyway, they said, there was no practicable way of reaching her grandson.