

'It will mean a lot to us, Nettie dear,' he went on. 'You needn't go back to the schoolhouse. Why can't we marry now, right away?'

She, too, rose to her feet, her lips compressed, her face paler than ever, her look of concern growing to one of real pain. But still her emotion passed unseen by him; she had turned aside and was resting an elbow on the piano.

'This is no time to talk of such a thing,' she said coldly. 'Only a few hours ago I gazed on my dead uncle's face, when the others had gone. For many a long day there will be sadness in my heart. Now leave me, Norman. This evening I wish to be alone.'

Her eyes sought his now, and at last their reproachfulness smote him.

'Oh, of course there will be the usual period of mourning,' he murmured, abashed and confused. 'I didn't mean anything else, Nettie. You know that, don't you?'

'Go, please, go.' She held out her hand; there was a sob in her voice, the shine of tears in her eyes.

Then he went his way into the rainstorm and the darkness, and she was alone with the fire glow, her chastened grief for the dead, the dull awakening consciousness that something in her golden dream of love had been changed to dross.

II.

On the following evening he found himself again in her rooms. She had been out all day, but it could not be long now before she would be home. So the landlady, who knew the relation in which the young people stood, had meantime made him comfortable, turning on the electric light and replenishing the stove. Heavy rain, unrelenting during several days, was still splashing dismally outside.

He was a handsome young fellow, square built and strong, comely of feature, with ability, self-reliance, and correct living written on every line of his face—such a man, by outward seeming, as any maiden might have deemed herself happy to have won. He paced the room disturbed and nervous, pausing every now and then to examine some trifle, aimlessly, half unconsciously—a photograph on the mantel, a book on the table, the broad-leaved pot-plant in the window recess.

At last he heard the outer door open, and he came to a halt. A minute later she entered the room. As he closed the door behind her he caught a glimpse of the dripping cloak, umbrella, and rubbers that had been surrendered to the landlady in the hall. But, disencumbered from her panoply of waterproofing, the girl was dry and warm, rosy with the cold and exercise. She gave him her hand.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

'Where would you think?' she answered.

He gazed at her black gown, her black hat—watched her drawing the black kid gloves from her fingers.

'You don't mean to tell me that you went to the funeral?' His voice vibrated with the restraint he was imposing upon himself.

'Yes, I have been to poor Uncle Henry's funeral.' With grave self-possession she unpinned her hat, and laid it by her side on the table.

He took a step forward, and looked down at her.

'What foolishness! What utter foolishness!' he exclaimed bitterly. 'When I didn't find you at home I began to fear it. So you have sacrificed common sense to sentiment. You have deliberately thrown away that legacy.'

Her face paled. She beckoned him to a chair at a little distance.

'Yes, I threw away that legacy. Sit down, Norman. When you left me last night I weighed every question involved. Was I to allow the uncle who had always been kind to me and my mother to go to his grave unwept and unhonored—no one of kin to him giving sign of regret for his loss or of respect for his memory? Would you have asked me to do that, Norman, for the sake of a thousand dollars or ten times a thousand?'

'His own deliberate act imposed the condition,' was the sullen rejoinder. 'I bet that not one of the others turned up at the graveside—they stuck close to their legacies.'

'Yes, his brothers Ebenezer, Hiram, James, his sister Mary, all were absent. It was the more fitting, therefore, that I should be there.'

'And you never thought of me—of our future? You know my struggle to get a start—my helplessness in the law business without some capital. You know quite well that that money would have got me the partnership with Kingston. I went to see him this morning; we talked it over; everything was settled. And now I come here to find that all my efforts are undone.'

In his agitation he had risen from his seat, taken but a moment before at her bidding. She surveyed him calmly; she spoke with gentle sadness, but with none of the trembling irresolution of the night before.

'Two days ago, Norman, I should have deemed it impossible that you would have spoken like this to me—that you would have counselled me to wrong my conscience, to go contrary to my sense of right, for the sake of money. You say I have thrown away my legacy. But I lose much more than that—I lose the faith I had in you. My dream of happiness is over.'

He moved uncomfortably and his face flushed.

'Oh, it needn't amount to that,' he murmured. 'I suppose we'll get over the loss of the money.'

'But the loss of faith?'

'Sentiment again,' he protested.

'Then sentiment shall rule my life,' she replied, drawing a ring from her finger and placing it upon the table. 'I begin to think that sentiment may be a better guide to one's conduct than reasoned judgment. Everything is ended. But I want you to learn the lesson that the instinct of right is always the wisest one to follow. Let me tell you what happened to-day, Norman. Please sit down again.'

Mechanically and without a word he obeyed her.

'Uncle Henry was laid in the grave by his old friend, Mr. Boone and myself. When all was over we returned to Booklovers' Corner. There, to my surprise, I found my three uncles and my aunt once more assembled. They had been sent for by Mr. Boone's instructions. For there was a codicil to the will to be read after the funeral.'

The glimmer of dawning intelligence was in the listener's eyes now. The girl continued:

'The first legacies were revoked, and 10,000 dollars were left to each brother or sister who had forfeited his or her benefit under the will by taking part in the funeral. An equal sum was left to me, but with no condition attached, doubtless for my dear mother's sake. However, the will further provided that if I had attended at the graveside I was to be sole residuary legatee after certain large charitable bequests had been paid out of the estate.'

'So he was rich after all?'

'In the old days of youthful ailing, it appears that he had gained the friendship of a miner in Arizona. Through this connection there came the chance, later on, to take a financial interest in a prospecting venture. For ten long years Uncle Henry paid contributions to a doubtful mine. Only two years ago it turned out to be a bonanza. But he would never leave the old shop—the Booklovers' Corner he loved so well—the business he was managing for his aged benefactor.'

'His brothers will fight that will.'

'That is what they at once threatened. But Uncle Henry had provided for this very contingency. A year before he died he had deeded all his property to Mr. Boone. So there was no real will—just an honorable understanding between two friends, sealed now by death. Why I am so late to-night is that Mr. Boone and I have been to a trust company's office, where everything has been transferred into my name.'

The young lawyer drew a deep breath. He stood erect and began buttoning his coat.

'You are right, Nettie. This ends our dream. If you had remained poor, some day I would have owned my fault, and begged your forgiveness for my ill-humor to-night. For even while I was blaming, in my heart I was admiring you. But, of course, my self-respect forbids apology now. Good-night.'

She made no move, uttered no word to detain him.

When he was gone, when the click of the closing front door had reached her ear, she rose, turned off the electric light, threw open the stove, and nestled down on the rug amid the warmth and the softened radiance. Thus for a long time she remained, searching her heart and weighing the life issues.

The fire had burned low, the room was almost in darkness. But at last she stirred, and, rising to her knees, reached forth a hand for the engagement ring still lying on the table. As she stooped towards the dull red of the ashes to gaze upon the discarded trinket, there was the shimmer of brilliants—and the gleam of love-light in her eyes as well.

Had the manliness with which he had taken his lesson redeemed him? Had her woman's heart been touched with new tenderness by his very need for her forgiveness? Had reflection brought realisation that love may not claim perfection, but can only hope to help toward it?

She did not restore the hoop of gold to its accustomed finger. But she looped it on a bit of ribbon at her breast, and, after a long, lingering kiss, slipped it within the folds of her dress.—Exchange.