

The Storyteller

HER LEGACY

I.

The room was illuminated only by the glow from the open door of the stove. She sat on a low stool full in the cone of ruddy light, her fingers interlocked across her knees, her face grave and meditative, its paleness intensified by contrast with her dress of black. At her side, but a little further back, he was leaning forward in his rocking-chair, elbows planted on its arms, hands clasped at the level of his chin, his face just within the line of radiance, its expression, like hers, set in the fixity of silent reverie. Both were young—on the debatable borderland between youth and maturity. Sounds of the outside night crept into the stillness of the room—the intermittent swish of gust-driven rain against the window panes, the continuous drowsy hum of trolley cars a block or two away, the vague murmurs of a great city borne from the highways of traffic into the seclusion of a by-street.

'I can picture the whole scene,' he said at last, summing up the thoughts that had given pause to their conversation.

'Yes,' she responded, her eyes still fixed on the embers. 'You know those three uncles of mine well enough to understand my shame and indignation. And Aunt Mary, too—she kept talking about her husband's store, about bad debts and the latest rise in coal oil, while her brother lay dead in the next room. Poor Uncle Henry!—the only gentle and refined nature among them all—the only one whose life had not been given to sordid grubbing for cents and dollars.'

'I used to enjoy a chat with him when I went along for a book, and invariably ended by buying some old print as well. What a quaint and interesting shop, too, with the stacks of volumes climbing up the stairs! Book-lovers' Corner!—it was happily named.'

'He was devotedly attached to the place—the books among which he lived, the people who came to rummage through his treasure heaps, the daily intercourse with scholarly men and women who sought his advice. It was a pathetic little life story, Uncle Henry's. Do you know it?'

'Only so much as his surroundings suggested. I often wondered at the contrast between him and his brothers.'

'My mother told me a good many things last year, before she died. She was younger than her brother Henry—the youngest of all, although the first to go.' The girl paused, and breathed a little sigh. 'Henry was struggling, by teaching and in other ways, to enter college life long after his three elder brothers had become comfortably established in business. Dry goods, hardware, butchering—that was the bent of their minds. And Aunt Mary, too, had married the most prosperous groceryman of the district. Only Henry and my mother inclined to other things. My mother taught school before she married, just as I am doing now.'

Her voice had dropped, till the last words came but as an echo, soft and low, of saddened musing.

'Not for long now, sweetheart,' he interposed, with a gentle hand touch of sympathy upon her shoulder.

She started, roused in the instant from her lapse into dreaminess.

'Oh, I was not thinking of myself,' she replied brightly and resolutely. 'I was thinking of my dear mother, and of my father, whom I can just remember and nothing more. But we were speaking of Uncle Henry, weren't we?'

'Yes; he wanted to get to college.'

'Well, not one of his brothers offered a helping hand, and at last his health broke down. At first he was acutely ill—in a hospital for several months. Then he was discharged, in better state, able to crawl around, but with the verdict of "incurable" hanging over his head. His was a chronic case now—one of those insidious internal troubles that kill a man slowly but surely during a year or two of increasing misery and suffering. One doctor, however, declared that there was still hope—still the reasonable chance of recovery. But the invalid would have to leave New York at once—to go to a hot, dry climate, like that of Arizona or Egypt, and live there for quite a spell. To have advice was one thing; to act on it was quite another. Henry had no money. His father and mother were dead. He was alone in the struggles of the world.'

'But his brothers?'

'They were a handicap to him. The duty was so obviously theirs that others who might have helped naturally stood aside. My mother pleaded with Ebenezer, Hiram, James—not one had a single dollar that

could be spared from his business. Aunt Mary wouldn't even put the question to her husband; she wrote to Henry before he left the hospital, telling him that change of climate was useless, that she knew a young lady who went abroad afflicted just the same as he, but, after spending no end of money, returned home, only able to walk from her bedroom to her parlor for months, until she died.'

'Well, I'm blowed! That was cheerful for a sick man.'

'So, with plentiful words of affection, she counselled resignation, and sent him a little book about religion that perhaps cost her a dime.'

'Pshaw!'

'My mother read that letter, and she never forgave Mary her callous cruelty—never spoke an intimate word to her again so long as she lived. Well, the doctor, it seems, guessing at the truth, mentioned the case to Boone, of Booklovers' Corner. And it was he who sent the invalid to Arizona, kept him there for two whole years, and when he returned, cured and well, gave him a place in the book store. That is how Uncle Henry came in time to be a partner, and at last the only active member of the firm.'

'Mr. Boone is still alive?'

'Yes, the dear old gentleman has come north from his home in Florida to bury his dead friend. Now you will understand a great deal better what I am going to tell you next. Mr. Boone is Uncle Henry's executor, and it was in accordance with the latter's instructions that all relatives were called together the day before the funeral. That was how I came to meet my Uncles Ebenezer, Hiram, and James and Aunt Mary and her husband this morning in the dining-room above the book store.'

The young man sat up with quickened interest.

'But your Uncle Henry didn't die rich, did he?'

'No, not as the world counts men rich nowadays. But he had a little to divide. When we were all assembled, Mr. Boone read the will. There are legacies of a thousand dollars to each of my uncles, to Aunt Mary, and to me as his other sister's child.'

'You say he forgave them their contemptible meanness?—that he left a single dollar to the woman who had written him such a letter in the old days?'

'It was just like Uncle Henry's sweet forgiveness to treat everybody the same—to forget all that had happened. The rest of his estate he has left to the charities in which he was long interested—the Young Folks' Summer Holiday Association and the Hospital for Incurables.'

'And what do these bequests amount to?'

'That is what Uncle Ebenezer asked. But Mr. Boone replied that nothing would be known until the estate was realised. Uncle Hiram laughed at his share—a thousand dollars, he said, wasn't worth the trouble of his coming out of the house on such a rainy day. Then they all fell to discussing the reason of the condition attached to the legacies.'

Again the listener pricked up his ears.

'What was that?'

'That no one should attend the funeral—the legacy in each case was to be forfeited if the beneficiary followed the body to the grave.'

'By Jove, I don't wonder. It was a subtle little stroke. Your uncle wished no mockery of mourning before the world.'

'But my legacy is in exactly the same terms,' said the girl, glancing up at her lover. 'And Uncle Henry and I were always the best of friends.'

'Well, he treated you pretty shabbily in the end, ran'ing you merely with people who had used him so ill.'

'You must not speak like that,' was the firm rejoinder. 'Such a thought would be only worthy of those others, who went down their dead brother's stairs grumbling and disputing about the meaning of the will. It was a shameful, pitiful display. I shall never forget it—never, never!'

She shivered in the intensity of her anger and disgust.

'Like the greedy, thankless crew,' muttered the young man below his breath. 'Will they go to the funeral to-morrow?' he asked aloud.

'I think it hardly probable,' she answered.

'Well, there is no use quarrelling with the terms of a legacy,' he commented, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'A thousand dollars isn't much—but it is a thousand dollars all the same.'

The girl watched his face, in her own eyes an expression of mingled wonder and disappointment. But the young man was not looking at her. He got up from his chair, flung a shovelful of small coal into the stove, then stood erect, his form outlined against the leaping, gleaming flames that instantly filled the iron cavity.