

Long ago the good people of Brier Hill had decided that Mrs. Archer, the most competent dressmaker in the place, was a very peculiar woman.

She had lived among them since Elaine was a little child, but so reticent was she that none knew aught of her past life. She professed no religious belief, and never entered a church, but she had reared her daughter in the Catholic faith, and though it cost her days and nights of extra toil she had Elaine educated at the Convent of the Holy Angels, a beautiful spot some miles distant.

When Elaine returned home, with the mien of a gracious princess, her mother would not permit her to share her oftentimes arduous tasks.

But the greatest wonder was her objection to Gerald Neville, the gifted young artist who aspired to Elaine's hand. The widow was criticised, of course, but few ventured to penetrate behind the barrier of reserve with which she met all proffers of advice.

When Elaine entered the room after parting with Gerald she found her mother at the window bending over a dainty garment designed for an Easter bride. Her pale face brightened at her daughter's approach.

'How tired you look, mother!' said Elaine. 'Please let me finish that work,' and she took it gently from the half-reluctant hands. For once, Mrs. Archer sat in perfect idleness, leaning back in her chair and looking at her child's exquisite profile, silhouetted against the window in the fast waning light, and watching the slender white hands moving swiftly over the silken fabric.

'Elaine.'

'Yes, mother.'

'Mother!' A spasm of pain crossed the pale face, as Mrs. Archer repeated the word. 'Child—to hear your lips pronounce that name I have lived for eighteen years with my soul in jeopardy!'

'Mother!' ejaculated Elaine, and this time the sweet voice was tremulous. 'Are you ill? Why do you speak so strangely?'

'Not ill in body, but I saw you and Gerald standing at the gate, and I feel that it is time to speak. Besides, I cannot live this way any longer. I must right the wrong I have done, if indeed it is not too late. Elaine, I am not your mother.'

The dainty garment slipped from Elaine's hands. Her pale lips spoke the words mechanically, then she sat like a marble image.

'No, only your foster mother. Your mother was thought to be in a decline when I took you, a feeble infant only a few months old. I had a child, a little girl a month your senior. The physician who attended your mother recommended a sea voyage for her, and the country for you. Your father took her to Italy. As soon as possible, my husband, who was a nurseryman, secured a good position and we moved to the country. There we lived, a secluded but pleasant life until you were nearly two years old. I grew to love you very dearly, and no one where we lived knew that you were not my own child. In the meantime your mother's health continued delicate, and your parents remained abroad. A great grief came suddenly upon me. In one week I was widowed and childless. My husband was killed in a railway accident and my little Ellen died of diphtheria. You, too, had the disease, but recovered. Almost heartbroken, for I knew that when your parents returned they would claim you, I yielded to temptation, and wrote, telling them their child was dead. The little grave beside the waters of the Potomac in your native State is marked by a stone on which is inscribed, "Elaine Norwood; aged two years." I did wrong, and I have repented bitterly, but I loved you so I could not give you up.'

'Mrs. Archer was sobbing, but Elaine sat with bright, dry eyes.

'Are my parents still living?' she asked in a hollow voice.

'I don't know. They sold their old Virginia home soon after their return from abroad. But for many years I have had no news of them.'

'And what will you do?'

'I have decided to see Father Curran and ask him to make inquiries.'

'Were my parents members of the Catholic Church?'

'No,' Mrs. Archer answered. 'Your father was not a member of any church, and your mother, I believe, was an Episcopalian.'

'It seems strange then,' said Elaine, 'that you reared me a Catholic.'

A deep flush rose to Mrs. Archer's face. 'I was once a Catholic, and when you were very ill I had you baptised. It was perhaps unwise, for I know that your parents would have objected if they had known. But you don't regret it, do you, Elaine?'

'Regret it?' Elaine's voice had lost its cold constraint. She rose and went to where Mrs. Archer sat still weeping. She knelt beside her and took one trembling hand in both her own.

'No, indeed, and on my knees I thank you. You have done wrong, but you erred through love, and you have been to me the best of mothers. You have bestowed upon me a priceless heritage, and my earnest prayer is that God may restore to you peace of conscience.'

'Heaven will bless you, my child. Now you know the reason of my struggle to give you the best educational advantages. Your parents, with all their wealth, could not have done better. You know, too, why I did not wish your affections to become engaged. It was not because I objected to Gerald Neville, for I esteem him highly. It was for your own good. I wanted to give you back heart whole to your parents, if ever I found them.'

'I fear you have spoken too late,' said Elaine, the flush of suddenly realising tragedy dyeing her face as she rose to her feet. 'God! it is so dear to me that his image seems stamped upon my heart!'

It was nearly a year later; and 'inconstant April, with its smiles and tears' was ushering in another Easter. In a pleasant city in the North, some miles from the quiet village of Brier Hill, three strangers, a gentleman, his wife and daughter, were engaged in sight-seeing. Among the places of interest they visited the art exhibition. Passing from one picture to another they admired and criticised, until they came to a painting, before which they stood in breathless silence. It was called 'An Easter Lily.' The dark background gradually gave place as it extended upward, until a light resembling that of an approaching sunrise brightened the scene. Against it, clearly outlined, stood a beautiful girl. Classic folds of snowy white fell from the graceful shoulders, and a cluster of Easter lilies rested in the embrace of one arm. The fair face was slightly turned. Golden hair waved back from a broad, low forehead, and the eyes, blue as the fringed gentian, were filled with expectancy.

'Beautiful, isn't it, mamma?' said the young girl, at last breaking the silence.

'Why, Edith,' said the lady, 'it is wonderfully like you. The same shaped face, the same eyes, hair of the same color. But the expression is different. This face is almost angelic yet full of nobility and dignity.' She turned to her husband. 'Is it not marvellous, Herbert?'

'It is very beautiful,' he answered.

'We must find out the artist's name, then we must find him, if it is possible. This picture shall be mine if money can purchase it,' said the lady.

They found the artist's studio in a large, gloomy building, and over the door was the name 'Gerald Neville.'

Gerald's face paled as he read on the card presented by the gentleman, 'Herbert Clifton Norwood.'

'Mrs. Norwood and my daughter, Mr. Neville,' he said pleasantly. 'We have seen your painting, "An Easter Lily," and wish to know if it is for sale?'

It seemed to Gerald, as he looked from one eager face to the other, that all he held dear in life was receding from him. What a labor of love had been the painting of 'An Easter Lily,' but then hope was high