

was too tired to spend otherwise than in dreaming. His weekly letters became fortnightly, monthly, occasional, sporadic, lost tone and color, though never fervor nor warm reiteration of his love and allegiance. The girl, busier, more home devoted than ever, yet, woman-like, easily able to serve two masters, noticed the change and smiled sadly, sorrowful prescience having warned her of this all but certain danger. Woman like, again, however, she loved, but did not judge him even when the severing silence fell.

For Davis, his starved nature suddenly rebelling against the deadly grind and monotony, unrewarded save by growing reputation as a gold gatherer, one night accepted the kindly invitation of an associate's wife and in her house met a glowing flame of a woman who almost literally consumed him with the fierce passion that both mistook for something higher. Within a month he found himself her husband—and the victim of a mistake pitiful and far-reaching in its consequences. And so the years slipped by until they numbered seventeen—twenty since he had dared the Western chance.

In all that time, though his increasing reputation as an eccentric furnished much food for gossip among his old neighbors, he had no direct word from the old village. An orphan boy, shy and sensitive, his only youthful comrade had been Mary, and after the marital spasm she seemed to belong to a former existence. Married, he could not write to her, and even when, not long after their meteoric contract and separation, the fervid flame that had been his wife burned itself out and left him an honest widower, he still shrank from acquainting the girl's pure soul with his pitiful story.

Then, one day business chance took him to a small Western town and marooned him there over night in one of the ill-managed 'hotels' he so specially hated. But the pouring rain on the low roof brought him sound slumber, and he awoke next morning with a strange thrill.

The weather had changed, and the patch of blue sky visible through the open window was clear and sunny. A fleecy, rose-tinted cloud drifted across its azure. In the distance robins called and a passing breeze brought in its train an odor of blossoming lilac, moist and entrancing. And suddenly the far sky had given place to the shadowy staircase on which he had last seen Mary—and she was coming down!

She was in simple white, just as he had last seen her, and in her arms she cradled a small white bundle. Her glance held all the sweetness of womanhood in it, but the wide eyes above were mistful, and what was this they bore behind her?

The vision faded, and almost before the white cloud had dispersed the man was out of bed dressing, ordering a hack to take him to the station. He had no idea what the vision meant, but a long-hushed something was stirring within him, and he felt that he had received a psychic summons. Out of the past long silent voices called him, and in obedience he was hastening 'home.'

The train drew into the shabby, well-remembered station, and he swung off and made his way into Main street, which showed but few changes. Nobody recognised him, of course, but he saw one or two faces familiar, despite Time's relentless markings, and he heard a couple of drug store loafers speak of 'the Lewes funeral.' After that he dared not voice the intended question. He could only push on straight to Mary's old dwelling. His heart leaped to find it apparently just as when he went away.

The lilacs, old but still thrifty, were abloom in the dooryard. It had rained that morning, and the soft air seemed bathed in their glorious perfume. The same huge bush still leaned over the porch rail as in welcome, and when, trembling a little, he rang the bell, Mary herself answered the door a moment later. At sight of her Davis felt a thrill that told him how thorough was this strange resurrection of his long-atrophied soul. He could have worshipped her as she stood there, amazed but smiling, with her simple white gown falling softly about her, and a little downy head cuddled into the 'divine hollow' of her slender throat.

'Mary!' he cried, and found his voice no more than a whisper. 'I thought—'

'No,' she told him, seeing that he could not finish; 'that was Sheila. We buried her yesterday.'

This time it was he who would have lingered in the sunshine, but she led the way, just as of old, to the cool, dim parlor, uncannily haunted by lingering scent of yesterday's flowers. Again, as of old, she sank into the low rocker and deftly mothered the stirring baby. While she crooned it back to sleep David studied her eagerly. She was paler than he remembered, and the red lips curved to unwonted pathos, but otherwise the years that had left him grey and lined seemed to have made slight impression upon her.

She looked up presently, calm and sweet as ever, and he began to ask questions.

'Your father, Mary?'

'Oh, father is well,' smiling brightly. 'He is an old man now—you remember, he was always the kind of man to grow old early—but he has good health and is happy. He married again the year after you went West.'

'The children?'

'The children!' The smile was infinitely sad now, and the wide eyes darkened. 'They haven't been children for some time, Stanley, though they seemed a long while growing up. My father's wife didn't care to have them in the same house with her, so father went to her home and we stayed on here together. Billy's practising law in New York now; married and doing fine. The first break came when he went to college. The baby died in its second summer. And Sheila,' her voice breaking, 'was married early last year. Her husband died suddenly two weeks ago, and the shock killed her. This is her baby. History repeats itself, Stanley—a tear fell on the baby's head suddenly—' Sheila, dying, gave her baby to me.'

A long moment of silence, then on the man's part a burst of passionate self-reproach.

'And to think that we might have had twenty years together! I could have made a home for you and the children almost from the beginning. But I was money mad at first, and then I got entangled. And when freedom came I paid the price in having my soul die by inches. I thought of nothing but business success for years, until the day before yesterday. And now—'

Her eyes, deep and still with the wisdom of long and loving patience, bade him continue, but instead of finishing the broken sentence he leaned forward to grasp her unoccupied hand.

'Mary,' and the starvation of a cheated lifetime gave tenseness to face and tone, 'God knows I've little enough to offer you now—nothing but uncertain health and the money for which I've bartered everything worth while—but I've always loved you! And you're too sweet and good to judge harshly. Forgive me all my sins, dear, and be my wife now, even though I don't deserve it.'

She was silent so long, her eyes closed, her mouth quivering, that his soul shivered with fear of what might have happened during his twenty years of absence. She wore no wedding ring, but this might mean nothing. Perhaps she was no longer free to love him; perhaps some more decent fellow had won her these many moons back.

'Mary!' he cried again, and at sound of his breaking voice the aura of remote and impersonal sweetness that held him aloof was flushed to wonder by the message of her lifted eyelids. Without conscious movement he found himself on his knees by her chair, his eager arms enfolding both herself and the sleeping baby, her head on his shoulder.

His joyous exclamation of 'Mary!' snapped the last shred of ice film between them. Her long, curling eyelashes modestly veiled a bliss too ineffable for common daylight.

'I—I suppose they'll say I have no spirit,' she whispered. 'But—I've always loved you, Stanley; always remembered you, even when you seemed to have forgotten me utterly. And, if you'll let me bring Sheila's baby, I'll marry you whenever you like, my dear.'

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