

THE RETURN

The lilacs bloomed in the dooryard when Stanley Davis went in to say good-bye to Mary Lewes. It had rained that morning, and the soft spring air, now warm and sunny, seemed bathed in the clean, sweet perfume of the flowers. One specially fine bush leaned over the porch rail as in welcome, and when Mary answered the door a spray of lilac, tucked in her bright hair to please the baby, nodded down to the little head cradled in the 'divine hollow' of her neck.

Stanley, who thought Mary like a flower herself, felt his heart leap at sight of her blue eyes, her pink cheeks, her rosy lips, and the frame of wavy gold that set off her white throat and forehead. And for smiles such as that which crowned her beauty kingdoms have been lost and won.

Mary, charmed by the beckoning sunshine, would have sat on the porch, but Stanley mutely waved her into the dim, cool parlor.

'Put down the youngster, Mary,' he said when they were seated, 'and talk to me a little. I've something to say, and I can't stop long. Grew's sent for me, and I'm going West to-night.'

The pink cheeks paled a little, but the red lips smiled on bravely. 'I can't put the baby down,' the girl answered softly. 'He's teething and fretful. The only way I can keep him quiet is to hold him. But I can talk just as well with him in my arms, Stanley, and I want to hear all about your trip.'

'It isn't going to be a trip, Mary.' The boy's voice was low and a trifle unsteady. 'Grew says that the chance he offers will be permanent if I want to work hard, and I—I'll have to stay out there for some years at least. That's why I want to talk to you, Mary. You know how I love you. Marry me and go with me, or, anyway, tell me when I can come back to get you as my wife.'

The blue eyes reflected Paradise briefly, but the little head was shaken in denial. 'I can't, Stanley,' and her tone in turn trembled. 'How can I leave home now? Sheila's only five and Billy eleven, and then there's the baby. You know how they and father need me. What would they do if I went away just now?'

'Some one else could take care of them,' the lad demurred, even while his heart recognised the truth of her plea. 'Why should our happiness be sacrificed for your brothers and sisters? Why—'

'There isn't any one else,' Mary interrupted. 'You know how few relatives we have, scarcely a woman among them. You know how helpless a man is with little children, especially when he's got to work all day and can't even be home every evening. And mother gave the baby to me when she was dying. I do love you, Stanley—perhaps you'll know how much—but it wouldn't mean happiness to run away from my clear duty to marry you. And—and I love you too much to ask you to wait until I am free.'

'Oh, look here, Mary,' the speaker's eager youth strong in every word, 'that's talking nonsense. If you love me, of course, you'll let me go away engaged to you. We may not be able to marry now, but later your father,' with hopeful recollection of certain whispered rumors, 'will marry again, pretty sure, and then the children won't be in your charge any more. Let me—'

'That's looking rather far ahead, Stanley,' her smile a little sad. 'And even if father did marry again, it by no means follows that my responsibilities would be ended. Some women—the smile growing sadder—' might not care to take charge of the children, and, anyway, I'd have to love and trust any one pretty much before I'd be willing to turn over Sheila and Billy and the baby to her, even if she wished it. No, Stanley,' as he showed signs of argumentative rebellion, 'we mustn't think of getting married or engaged at present. We'll—we'll just be good friends.'

The boy talked on, but the quiet firmness that underlay Mary's tenderness of nature won in the end, as both knew that it must. At last they rose, still talking, and walked to the front door. The lilac-scented

breeze was wafted in like a wave of purest affection, and Stanley's eyes grew longingly dim as it stirred the little ringlets about Mary's ears and temples. Just inside the door he detained her to utter a last beseeching word.

'Well, Mary, if you won't give me your promise, I'm going to give you mine, anyway. You may not consider yourself engaged to me, but I shall be engaged to you always. I'm your promised husband, sweetheart, no matter where I am nor how long we have to wait.'

Again the wide eyes reflected Paradise over the firm lips that for duty's sake refused it. 'No, dear'—and Mary's voice was hardly more than a whisper, 'I can't have it so. It wouldn't be fair to you. I can't think of marriage until the children no longer need me,' with a brave if tremulous smile, 'and you may have met any number of more charming ladies before that time. No, Stanley, just because I love you so I'm going to insist that you're free.'

A moment of tense silence, the warm air playing sweetly about them; then the boy leaned to the girl with a look that could not be denied.

'Kiss me just once, Mary,' he whispered, and she pressed a fervent caress on the lips that met hers. The baby's head interfered somewhat, but the lad's arms enclosed the girlish figure, baby and all, in an embrace that almost crushed it. Then Mary drew herself away quietly, hushed the stirring, fretful infant and slipped her cold little right hand, roughened by household cares, into his own.

'Good-bye, Stanley,' she murmured. 'Good-bye, good luck, and God bless you. Write me as often as you like.'

'You'll be faithful, Mary? You'll wait for me until you're ready to marry me?' he swiftly responded. 'You won't marry any other fellow because he can come and live here with the children and your father? You won't stop loving me because I'm not here?'

He was halfway down the steps now, and the girl's smile followed him like a benediction. 'I shan't forget, and I shall be always faithful, Stanley,' she assured him. 'It's for your own sake that I leave you free.'

'But you don't leave me free,' was his impulsive protestation. 'I'm not free, Mary, and you know it. My heart's all yours, and always shall be. Haven't I told you that I'm engaged to you, whether you're engaged to me or not? I'm your promised husband, even if you're not my promised wife.'

Her smile was still more like a benediction, but she made no reply other than to wave her hand as he passed down the walk between the wonderful lilacs. Tears stood in her eyes as she watched him, but the smile never wavered. When the lavender glories guarding the gate had swept into place behind him she turned, suddenly sobbing, and went within.

The boy turned, too, on the instant, and dashed noiselessly back for a final glimpse of his vanishing sweetheart. The door stood open, and he carried away a final memory of her slender figure mounting the shadowy staircase, swaying a little with the weight of the baby. Some slight sound caused her to look back as she reached the top, and over her shoulder she gave him a last smile, half glad, half wistful, wholly sweet and tender. Then she disappeared, still smiling, into the darkness of the upper hall.

So he often recalled her in the days that followed, but never, somehow, could he complete the picture with the desired vision of her swift return.

The Western chance proved good, and so absorbing that Davis, working almost day and night, speedily was transformed from a light-hearted boy to a prematurely serious seeker after the success that is reckoned in dollars. He toiled at first to justify Grew's kindness by 'making good,' then in the hope of acquiring enough money to send for Mary, children, shiftless father and all to share the home he dreamed of building; then because the passion for work claimed him, body and soul.

He never forgot Mary, but the thought of her, at first unceasing, ever present, gradually asserted itself only on Sundays or the rare evenings 'off' that he

Ken. Mayo

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