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Select Story.

RECOMPENSE.

"Is that Oldtown Church yonder, if you please sir?"

A girl spoke to me. I turned round and looked at her. She wore the scantiest of cotton dresses belted at the waist, a pair of leather boots, and a white apron. In her hand she carried a sun-bonnet, and her hair cropped close, in black rings about her head. The face was a study in sweetness and innocence; the little brown hands, the little hands of toil. No young lady this, yet there was nothing rough or vulgar about her unless it was her hands.

"That is Oldtown Church, my dear," I said: "are you going there?"

"Yes sir, to see the wedding. Are you?"

I was, more fool I, though I did not say so to this child. The bride for whom the bell was ringing was to be mine once, would have been but for the accident that crippled me and changed her heart. She had done nothing treacherously; but I saw the truth and set her free. She took her freedom gladly, and we were two. She had quite forgotten me, no doubt. I believed then I never could forget.

I knew exactly how she would look in snow silk and lace, and coronet of pearls. I had dreamed of her so often in her bridal robes.

I nodded to the little thing that beside me, trudging over the meadow path, with the tall grass almost to her waist, and looking at me so wistfully.

"I never saw a wedding," said she.

"No?"

"No sir. Grandfather said I might come, he didn't care himself. It's a long way too, from the tavern, and he is very old."

"Does your grandfather keep the tavern?" I asked.

"No sir—I wished he did," said the child. "He has only his fiddle, and people half the time do not care for tunes. What else can he do, though? To-night there is a dance, and he's to play for them. That's why we stopped."

A poor fiddler's untaught child—as poor as untaught poverty can be—yet her presence somehow cheered me.—Half child, half woman, and all a child's heart. Innocent, and beautiful and kindly. I encouraged her to linger at my side. I said to her:

"I will show you a place where you can see the bride well. It is in the gallery. Would you like that?"

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't often been to church. We pray together in lonely places, grandfather and I. Will you be there, sir?"

"Yes."

"I know I should like it."

"Come with me then," I said, and she followed me.

I had meant to hide myself in the gallery, and see my last love quite unseen. This companionship had not been in my role at all. But I liked it. No friend or relation, not my own sister, would I have had beside me; but this unselfish thing was too innocent to fear.

I led the way up the dark old stairs, and towards a spot quite unsheltered from general view. Then I sat down and she stood leaning over the balustrade.

The church was full of bonnets.—Here and there only a masculine head. The minister was in his seat reading, in a position taken for effect. He was a handsome man and he knew it perfectly well.

Girls whispered and giggled, matrons fanned themselves, men yawned. Soon the soft roll of carriages on the gravel path was heard, and bridal party entered. I saw her at last; Aletta.

"Is that the bride?" half sopped the girl's voice at my side. "Is it a real lady? She looks like wax. Oh, how pretty, how beautiful! Look! Look! She touched me with her little brown hands, and looked at me, her eyes sparkling."

"Did you ever see her before?" she asked. "Is she like that in every day clothes? O how pretty! how pretty!"

Men have no right to weep. I put

down my head on the cushion of the pew and hid my eyes. I felt the child creep close beside me.

"Poor thing he's tired!" I heard her whisper and put her little hand and pat. ted me softly by stealth.

Soon I looked down into the church again, and saw Grant Seranton kiss the bride.

"It is all over!" said the girl.

"Yes child," I said, "all over."

"Then I must go," she said. "Thank you for being so kind to me, sir. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," I said, and her little leather shoes pattered over the aisle, and down the stairs, and I had seen, as I thought the last of her. When she had gone, I missed her strongly.

I went home when the church was quite empty. It had not been as hard to bear as I had feared, and, odd enough I found myself thinking of that child's gipsy head, and those beautiful long-fringed eyes. I wondered at myself but it was so.

"I should like to see that child again," I said, and as I spoke I spied a crowd about a tavern upon the road.

It was a poor place, and poor, rough people made up the group. But it was plainly no common quarrel or drinking about had brought them there, for their faces were grave and their voices suppressed. I crossed the road.

"What has happened, friend?" I inquired of a tinker.

"Only a blind fiddler dropped dead," he said. "But there is a gal there wild about it."

And then I passed him and went in. An old man lay upon the floor, and across his body a girl had flung herself. I knew the gipsy hair and brown neck, the scant cotton dress and the sun-bonnet flung with a handful of wild flowers upon the floor, and I bent over her little despairing head.

"My child," I said, "he is happier than we are."

And she looked up.

"He was all I had," she said, "all."

So had I thought when Aletta gave me back our betrothal ring. My heart ached for her. I said no other word, but led her to an inner room, while two men bore the dead up stairs. She wept wildly, but my presence seemed to comfort her.

After a while she drew closer to me, and sitting on a low stool leaned her forehead on my knee. Soon my hand rested on it, and in an hour she had sobbed herself to sleep.

I said a few words to the landlady when I arose to leave; and she promised to attend to my orders enforced by the contents of my pocket-book.

"The girl shan't go until I hear from you sir," she said. "Indeed I don't know where she would go. She seems friendless, and such a child for her age.—Thank you sir!"

And I went on my way again, thinking not of Aletta, but of the dead fiddler's grandchild. This sun-browned waif, so simple, so ignorant, so friendless and alone.

I was young yet—not five-and-twenty—a bachelor, and likely to be my life long. I had no proper home to take her to, and no friend to aid me. At last, in my extremity, I thought of Betty, old Betty who had once been my nurse, and who loved me as she might her own son—and in the gloaming, made my way to her poor home. I found her trimming her vines in the bit of garden ground, and had my usual kiss across the garden fence even before the gate was opened.

"I've been thinking of you," she said. "I know it was you as soon as I heard some one coming. Tisn't every young gentleman would weary himself to see an old body like me. Sit down honey and rest."

"I came to ask a favor, Betty," I said.

"Just name it, Master Bertie."

"Will you take a boarder, Betty?"

"Bless me in my two rooms?"

"Only a child, Betty?"

"A child! Master Albert?"

"I told her of the fiddler's death, and of the girl."

"I have money enough," I said, "but

no female relatives. I can only come to you."

"You were always kind-hearted from a boy. I'll take care of the little girl," she said.

She then put both her hands on my shoulders.

"You haven't fretted; have you?" she asked.

"Fretted? Why?"

"Nay, why, indeed? Better fish in the sea than were ever caught yet," said old Betty. Then in a moment more she added, "I have been to see the wedding."

I felt my face flush. "Shall I bring her to-morrow after the grandfather's funeral?" I asked.

"When you please. But, Master Albert, what do you mean to do with her? You are doing all this in a hurry. Just think a bit," said Betty.

"I am going to adopt the child. It will make me happy to have a young thing to care for," I said.

Betty laughed. "You will have young things of your own, please God, someday. Why, at your age life is before you," she said.

"I shall never marry, Betty," said I. She caught my fingers in a close grasp with her horny, hardworking hand.

"I wish you was a baby back again on my knee," she said. "I would like to sing you to sleep as I did then. Ah! it is a grief to us old women to see the young we have nursed grow up so tall and old, with their troubles to shut up in their own heart that we can't comfort them. Going? Well, then, good night. I am ready for the child whenever you will. I am ready for anything that will cheer you, Master Bertie."

I left her leaning over the gate, looking wistfully at me, knowing as a mother might the grief which had been buried in my heart. And if her words had given me a pang, it was like some ointment which makes the wound smart in its very healing. It was something to be loved so, even by the old nurse.

Late the next day I led my young charge from her grandfather's grave to Betty's cot. She kept my hand upon the road as a little child might. I had no thought but that she was gone, until old Betty's cry of Goodness, Master Albert, I thought you said a young child! Why, this is a grown girl!" startled me into consciousness.

"It does not matter, does it, Betty?" I asked. She turned to the girl.

"Take off your bonnet," she said a little grimly. "I want to look at you. What is your name?"

The girl obeyed. "I am only Nellie Hay," she said, and stood to be looked at. Betty looked sternly at first, and then pityingly.

"La, no! Master Albert, it don't matter," she said. "I don't see any harm in her. There's a peg behind the door, child. You can hang your bonnet on that." And I left the two together.

Not long, though; every day found some new errand to take me to the cottage. I put on elderly airs, and gave advice. I had sent her to school, and went through grave examinations on Saturday afternoons. I told old Betty that when I was a man of middle age, I would take my little daughter home, and she should keep house for us. And I began to fancy very soon that there could be no such happiness as that a parent felt. The girl was growing tall, it is true, and I was only ten years older than she was; but when she checked her light tread to keep pace with me, when the childish laugh bubbled and rippled at something which could only make me smile, I felt that years are not the only things which age us.

I was working hard at my profession, too. I had hand and heart full. In a year more I wondered whether she had really changed or whether I fancied black curls more than I did golden bands, for I found myself thinking my little daughter much the prettiest.

In the sultry summer evening, I used to leave red tape and parchment, and go out to Betty's cottage to have tea with her and my adopted child. Then, while she polished up the cups, Nellie Hay and I used to walk down to the river side. Tall as she was growing I

had a way of holding her hands still; and we had such a pleasant talk! such unwordly chatter! Those walks and simple tea drinkings rested the brain wearied with law business, quarrels and stratagems, more than I can tell.

The rough hands had grown softer now, the waist taper, the bust full. The sweep of woman's robes, the tread of woman's light shod feet had taken the place of clumping leather boots and scant cotton skirts.

I knew this, but Nellie was a child to me all the same. Was I not by adoption her father? Had not my early grief and stuff upon which I leaned aged me before any time? Of course she would always be young to me; and why I felt so angry if by chance some gay farmer chatted over the fence, or some neighbor saw her home from church I could not tell. "An old man's temper I suppose," I said, and sighed like a young one.

So three years passed. At the end of that time Aletta's husband died: They had quarrelled, and she had made him wofully jealous, it was said, and all his property, save a mere pittance, was willed to strangers.

One day a lady in black walked into my office; when she lifted her veil I saw Aletta Stanton's face, closer to mine than it had been since we parted. My heart gave no wild throbs. I felt as though I were a mere stranger.

Courteously and quite calmly I heard her business. She intended to contest the will and needed advice. I gave her what I could. I referred her to a brother lawyer as the one who would best espouse her cause. As for myself I told her truly that my time was too much occupied to undertake anything more, and wished her success.

She looked at me wistfully, with her great blue eyes full of tears, as she rose to leave.

"It was cruel of him," she said, to leave me so poor, but he was never kind, never—not in the honeymoon even."

"I regret to hear it," I said.

"I could expect nothing more," she said; "I did not love him—I never loved but once—and that once—"

She paused and looked at me.

"That one I love still."

And heaven knows no feeling of revenge or petty triumph was in my heart when I looked in Aletta Stanton's eyes as if I did not understand her, and courteously bowed her out.

"Did I care for that woman," I thought, "or is it all a dream?"

I took my adopted daughter to the theatre that night, and we saw the Lady of Lyons together. It was her first play going experience, and she enjoyed it immensely. She wore a white dress and a bonnet, and the coral drops I had fastened a few days before in her pretty little ears. I was very proud of her. I could not help looking in her eyes, and touched her hand with mine. When I left her I kissed her.

And she answered "Good night" with a check dyed on the instant a deep scarlet and ran away as Betty came out to chat with me.

From that day I dated an odd change. My adopted child seemed shy of letting me keep her hand—shy even of chatting as she did. She answered grave, more womanly. I fancied she did not care for me as she did. Perhaps some of those farmers who leaned over the gate at sunset, some of those young fellows who had so often escorted her home from church had won her from me. I grew a little moody. I found myself in brown studies when I should have been at work. At last I determined to discover whether I was really going to lose my child, and went down to the cottage. I found her sitting there at work with Betty.

After all it was no easy task. I could not do as I had hoped. I tried jesting, and spoke of one and another of the young fellows near. "We shall have Nellie stolen from us I suppose?" I said.

"There is nothing so easily lost from a family as a pretty daughter. But who is to have you, Nellie?"

She looked at me as children look before they burst into tears—her chin quivering, her throat swelling—then she dropped her work and stole from

the room without answering me.

"What ails the child, Betty?" I asked.

"Have I offended her?"

Old Betty stood before me sturdy and sad—a look in her face that I had never before seen.

"Master Albert," she said, "whatever she was when she came here, Nellie is no child now. Oh, Master Albert, I can't believe you have done it on purpose! You couldn't—such a sweet innocent chick!—but it's done. All I can say is, go away, or let her go, and may be the wound will heal. I was an old fool. Oh, how could you, Master Albert—how could you?"

"What have I done?" I cried. "I would rather die than harm her."

"And yet you have made her love you," said Betty sternly. "You, who knew you would never love her. You have been very selfish, Master Albert."

A new light dawned upon me, and a radiance brilliant beyond my hopes.

"Betty," said I, "you are dreaming. She must think me old enough to be a grandfather, with my long face and bald crown and this crutch. I've had one dream broken; don't, don't set me dreaming again for heaven's sake!"

Old Betty looked at me, and then caught my face in both her hands and kissed me.

"Master Bertie," she said, "I shan't tell you a word more; go and find out what you want to know yourself. You silly, handsome, good-for-nothing fellow!"

I found my child under the grape vine, her face wet with tears. I sat down by her and put my arms round her waist.

"Nellie," said I, "don't shrink from me, I am your true friend. Your friend whatever answer you may give me now. I am older than you. I am not vain enough to think myself a young girl's beau ideal. Can you love me enough to be my wife? If you cannot, if another claims your heart, don't say yes from gratitude. Tell me the truth, and still retain a father's, a brother's, a friend's affection, Nellie?"

I bent over her, and my life seemed in her keeping. Until that moment I had not known myself. I loved her madly, I felt it now—better, far better, than in my youth I had loved Aletta Stanton.

She spoke no word.

"Nelly?" I said. "Nelly?" and a brown hand was laid of its own accord in mine, and her eyes beneath my gaze did not dare lift themselves, but hid their sweetness on my breast. Nellie was mine.

I sat with her beating heart near my own, and thought it all over. I remembered the child in her cotton gown standing in the gallery of the church that wedding day. I remembered the child whom I had taught; the girl with whom I had spent such happy hours. And I felt this living, life sprung phoenix-like from the ashes of the dead, was the purest feeling of my life.

So my old fancy of keeping house with my child came true at last; only when she crossed the threshold of my home with me, I called her wife. And still the touch of her brown hand brings comfort with it still her sweet voice is better to me than all the music in the world. And as in my youth I fancied myself old, surely in my old age I shall be loved myself young; for while we are loving and being loved you can never die, and while I live, I and my Nellie must love each other.

—A Hanover letter says the importation of Chinamen is increasing. At least 10,000 are expected during the coming season. Most planters prefer them to negroes, as they are more intelligent and industrious.

—Sonny, does your father take a paper? "Yes sir, two of 'em. One of 'em belongs to Mr. Smith and the other to Mr. Thompson. I look 'em both off the steps as regular as can be."

—M Bismarck, by the advice of his physicians, has relinquished the Presidency of the Conference of the North German States in favor of Savigny.

—When is a dead body not a dead body? "When it's a gal on a bier."

—It is not swearing to say the sea was once made to stand still by Jack.