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R. A. BUMILLER, Editor.

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LOIS.

THE PATHETIC STORY OF A LIFE OF SELF-SACRIFICE.

An old red farm-house, with its roof sloping toward the road, and rambling off at the back in an undecided way until stopped by the great barn, whose open doors showed full mows and made a dark setting for the vista of blue hills beyond.

South of the house the orchard stretched away, the pyramids of gathered fruit making vivid spots of yellow and red against the brown grass. Through the still air came now and then the mellow thud of a falling apple or the sound of distant chopping.

There had been tears and vehement pleadings, but they were over now, and the two stood gravely regarding each other across the old rail fence. The girl's clasped hands rested on the fence and young man covered them with his strong brown hands and made a final appeal.

"Lois, think what you have chosen; think what it will be to be shut up there with your grandmother." "I know what it will be better than you can tell me; but that doesn't alter my duty," answered the girl steadily.

"But is it your duty?" urged the young, eager voice. "Your father is well able to hire a housekeeper to look after things and take care of your grandmother. There's Sam Johnson's widow, she'd jump at the chance of such a home."

"Well, then, couldn't grandma go to your uncle 'Bijah's'?" "No, David," was the answer. "You know she tried that once and couldn't stand the children; besides she was born in the old house and says she shall die there. It's no use talking; nobody except father and me will bear with her, and we must look after her as long as she lives."

"And the Dunns live to be ninety," said the young man. "Yes," he replied. "O, Lois," he burst forth, "don't do it! It will be a living death. Come with me. Now that I have this splendid chance, I want you to share my success, for I know I shall succeed."

"I'm sure of it," said the girl, with simple faith looking up to the sunburned face with loving eyes. "Those sweet eyes! As he looked down at them and thought how soon he should be beyond their light, he leaped the fence, and, throwing his arms about her, drew her closely to him.

But even the sweet sorrow of parting was to be shortened, for while the girl clung to him there came a shrill call of "Lois! Lois!" followed by a weak, impatient blast on the dinner-horn.

"Was ye alone? I thought once or twice I heard voices." And the old woman looked suspiciously at her. "David Price was there," said the girl, quietly.

"David Price was there, was he?" echoed the shrill voice. "Well, if David Price wants to see ye he'd better come to yer father's house. In my day young men didn't expect gells to go philandering 'cross lots to meet 'em; and I shall tell him so the next time he comes here."

"He won't come again," Lois answered (oh, with what a heavy heart!) "He's going away." "Where's he goin' now?" demanded Grandma Dunn, as though the young man's life had been one round of travel, whereas he had never been forty miles from his native town.

"Out to his Uncle Micah's in Ohio. His uncle is going to take him into business," answered Lois. "Hum!" said grandma Dunn: "a rollin' stun gethers no moss." Then with a thought of her own comfort: "Are ye ever goin' to set the table? I'm jest a famishin' for my supper."

Joshua Dunn, coming in just then, looked from his mother to his daughter and said, in his grave way: "Seems to me, Lois, you might look after your grandmother a little closer." Poor Lois! She had the feelings, so common to all of us, that the conscious acceptance of a burden must somehow lighten it, and the secret self-sacrifice must in some mysterious way be felt and appreciated; but here in the first hour of her cross-bearing had come not praise, but blame.

She made no answer; her face flushed, then paled, and with close-shut lips she walked quickly from the room. "Joshua," quavered Grandma Dunn, "ye ought to take that gell in hand. She's gettin' more high-headed every day. She's goin' to be the very pattern of her mother."

"There, there, 'mother!'" answered the farmer. "Let the girl alone. She's well enough; and the more she pleases like her mother the better it'll grow me." For Joshua Dunn held in very tender remembrance the young wife who had given her life for her baby's.

Lois did not come down to supper, but when her father brought in the milk she came and took care of it in her deft, quiet way. He stood and watched her, his one eye-lamb, his motherless child. How dear she was to him, from her shining brown head to her willing feet! He was a man of few caresses, but by and by he went over to her and laid his rough hand gently on her head, and said: "Father's good little girl."

Then, as though frightened at this unwonted exhibition of affection, he gathered the milk-pails together and hurried out. The touch and the words eased the heart-ache a little, but that night, lying with wide wakeful eyes fixed on the square of moonlight on the floor, Lois said over and over, "The Dunns live to be ninety." "The Dunns live to be ninety." And she was only twenty. How could she bear this for seventy years?

But nature is kind to the young, and Lois had forgotten her trouble long before another pair of eyes closed in the old farm house. Joshua Dunn pondered long and sorrowfully. He had not been father and mother both for twenty years without having his preceptions sharpened where his child was concerned, and remembering David Price's frequent visits, and certain loiterings in the old porch, and sundry tender glances, it was not difficult to connect Lois' sober face with the young man's going away. In his inmost heart he was thankful that he was not called upon to give her up; but something must be done to cheer her. If only her mother were alive! But he must do his best alone.

She should have some new dresses; she must have young company; he would take her up to the village often. But alas for the tender planning! The next time Joshua Dunn went to the village he was carried there and laid beside his young wife.

It had happened very suddenly. He had gone out to the barn in the morning, and not coming in to breakfast, Lois had gone in search of him, and found him lying under the feet of a horse he had lately bought, the good, kind face trampled out of recognition.

Well, we can live through a great deal, and after the first bewilderment was over Lois took up her old duties again. Joshua Dunn had been a well-to-do man, and everything was left to Lois. There was to be no anxiety about ways and means; there was nothing to do, except to live, with all the brightness of life zone. Grandma Dunn, in the face of a real sorrow, stopped fretting for awhile, and Lois had a faint hope that their mutual loss might bring them nearer together; but after a few weeks things fell back in their old course, her grandmother repining and upbraiding, and Lois caring for her in a cold, mechanical way.

Then the keen New England conscience awoke. Was this the spirit of self-sacrifice? Had she given up her love merely to do the work a hired servant might do, and with the same feelings? Was she not cheapening her sacrifice by withholding a part of the price?

So the lonely girl gazed herself until by prayers and tears she drew unto a softer frame of mind, and the silent indifference with which she had borne her grandmother's sharp speeches changed to pity for the poor cross-grained nature. If Grandma Dunn noticed the change she gave no sign; but it made life more tolerable to Lois. At the best time dragged very slowly at the old farm-house. The mornings were bearable, for the care of the house kept her busy; but in the long summer afternoons, when her grandmother dozed in her chair, and in the long winter evenings, when she sat alone by the fire, she grew to have the feeling that they had lived in the same way for a hundred years, and would live on and on indefinitely.

But after ten years had worn away a new interest came into her life. One day a paper from Boston strayed up to the red house on the hill. Lois did not know that the paper held a high rank in the literature of the day, but she felt the difference between it and their county weekly. One little story pleased her especially. It did not abound in elopements, murders and highly-wrought situations, like the weekly stories, but ran along as naturally as one friend might talk to another, and the thought came to her, why couldn't she write a story?

So one afternoon, when Grandma Dunn was safely off in her nap, Lois sat down in the shady porch and wrote her first story. It was only the story of a life which had been lived in her own village. There was no attempt at fine writing, no romance, no tragedy—unless the story of a broken heart is always a tragedy—but the story was told so simply and tenderly that it seemed like a quiet brook running at twilight between banks of fern and alder, until it is lost in shadow.

With many misgivings she sent it to the Boston paper, and the editor, a man of quiet tastes, read it himself, then took it home and read it to his invalid wife; and the result was that in a few weeks Lois received a paper addressed in a strange handwriting, and in it her little story; and not only that, but a letter came containing a check and a few words of praise. With a heart lighter than it had been since her father's death, she took the paper and letter to her room. She turned the check over and over—her own money, the first she had ever earned, and earned in such a delightful way! Then she read and re-read her story, and wondered how it sounded to others. She looked the paper over to compare it with other stories, and a familiar name caught her eye, and there, among the marriage notices, she read this: "In this city, on the 10th inst., by Rev. Daniel Simpson, Mary, only daughter of Roger Leonard, of this city, to David Price, of Cleveland, Ohio."

She held the paper a few minutes, then folded it smoothly and laid it away. Her brief sunshine had clouded over. After awhile, urged by her loneliness, she took up her pen again; and in all the years that followed she found it a refuge and comfort, not only to herself, but to others; for her writings, though often crude, had a simplicity and naturalness which touched other hearts; and besides the modest money return there came to her once in awhile a letter from some stranger with words of kindly appreciation.

One day, when her grandmother was unusually restless, Lois, to entertain her, brought down her first story and read it to her. Grandma Dunn had often listened to her stories without suspecting the author, and her blunt criticisms were amusing and sometimes helpful. "Hum!" she said, at the end of this one; "that woman had sorter the same life as M'Issy Peters—she that was a Shepley; only nobody would think of puttin' M'Issy in a story—a poor, shif'less thing. If she'd 'a' had less book-larin' and more common sense, Job Peters's folks would 'a' liked her a deal better, and she wouldn't 'a' been badgered to death by 'em." Then, with sudden irrelevancy: "Ye ought to hev married, Lois. There ought to be children about the house. Ye'd 'a' done better to be taken that David Price that used to bang round here. Somebody was a-tellin' of 'e the other day that he was reel forehanded out to Ohio. But gells never know what's best for 'em." And she went off into an inarticulate muttering.

For a moment Lois felt a wild impulse to tell her grandmother why she had not married David Price, to lay open before her the long years of loneliness, the starvation of heart, which had been endured for her sake; but the lifelong habit of reticence was not easily broken, and the words died away without utterance.

Afterward she was glad of this silence—for that night the querulous voice stopped suddenly, and the chain that had bound Lois for twenty years was broken. She was free. But what was freedom worth to her? The "zest" was gone out of life; she had grown away from her old friend and made no new ones; there was no tie to bind her to Hillsborough, and she felt the full extent of her loneliness when she realized the fact that she had no ties in any place in the wide world, and she could not stay in her old home; so after awhile she sold the farm and moved away to a small town near Boston, guided in her choice only by the fact that from this town had come some of the friendly stranger letters. Here she settled herself in a comfortable home, and faced resolutely the thirty or forty years which in all human probability lay before her. The people about her proved kindly and intelligent; she found more congenial society than she had ever known before; her pleasant house became a center of quiet sociability, and she enjoyed a kind of autumnal happiness.

One afternoon, some eight years after her coming to Springvale, Miss Lois, sitting in her chamber, writing, heard the gate creak, and looking out, saw a peddler coming up the walk. He walked feebly, and she noticed that as he neared the steps he straightened himself with an effort. Her little maid was out, so she laid down her pen and went down to him. The man stood looking through the open door into the wide old-fashioned hall. It looked very cool and inviting after his hot tramp, and Miss Lois, coming down the stairs, fair and sweet in her soft gray dress and lavender ribbons, seemed a part of the peace and quiet of the house.

She saw that he looked hot and tired, and asked him in setting the large hall-chair for him. He dropped into it wearily, and opening his stock without the volubility common to his kind. It consisted of the usual small wares, and Miss Lois made her selection of pins, needles and tape with the careful deliberation of a New England housekeeper.

Suddenly she turned very white, and laid her hand on the stair-rail as though for support. It was over in a moment; and when the peddler looked at her again she wore her usual calm face, though the hands counting the money trembled a little. As he was gathering his wares together she asked him, "Have you been long at this business?" "No, ma'am," he answered, rising stiffly; "only a year or two. I used to do a good business in Cleveland, Ohio, and had a house as pleasant as this, and a wife and a child; but I failed in business; then my wife and child died, and I had a long sickness. After I got up from it I tried several different things, but finally came to this. Thank you, ma'am," putting the money in his thin pocket-book. "You look like somebody I used to know in Hillsborough, where I was raised."

But Miss Lois made no answer, except "Good afternoon," as he went down the steps. When the gate closed behind him, she went up to her chamber, unlocked a drawer in her bureau, and taking from it a thin package of letters, sat down with them in her hand. There was no need to read them; she knew every word in them. They had come at long intervals during the first nine years of waiting; she could tell the very day the last one came. She sat there very quietly until her little maid called her to tea; then she put the letters back in their place smoothed her hair, and went down. And neither Polly nor the friends who came in the evening suspected that Miss Lois had seen a ghost that afternoon.

The next morning Polly returned from the grocery in great excitement. A peddler had a bleeding-spell there the night before; they had made him a bed in the back room, and that afternoon the select men were going to take him to the poor house. Polly had seen with her open eyes. Miss Lois finished pasting the paper over the last tumbler of current jelly, then washed her hands calmly, took off her apron, and went up-stairs. In a few minutes she came down with her hat on. "I'm going out for a little while, Polly," she said; "and while I'm gone you may make up the bed in the east chamber."

Polly was amazed. Of course nobody in the town would come to stay all night; and Miss Lois had had no letters for a few days; besides, there had been no extra cooking. What could it mean? But, being an obedient little maid, she did as she was bid. Bed-making was an extra science with Polly, who had been carefully trained in it by Miss Lois; so the feather-bed was rolled and thumped until it stood up a great fluffy mound to be laboriously and critically leveled with the broom-handle, Polly's arms being far too short for the purpose. Then the lavender-scented sheets were carefully laid on, with due regard to wide hem and narrow hem, the homespun blanket, with its herring-bone border, was spread without a wrinkle and tucked under the smoothly-rounded edges, and over all went the big white counterpane. It was a sight to do your eyes good. Polly was standing with the end of a pillow between her teeth, her head very far back, trying to slip the pillow case on, when there was a sound of wheels at the door. Without letting go the pillow she managed to apply one eye to the shutter. It was the public carriage, and, wonder of wonders, the doctor got out, then Miss Lois, and, with the help of the driver, a man was taken out and carried up the walk.

But other eyes than Polly's had been busy and within forty-eight hours everybody in Springvale knew that Miss Lois had recognized an old friend in the peddler and had taken him home to nurse. And I think that it is to the credit of human nature that, while a few said: "Did you ever?" and "How it looks?" the majority approved of the act and only hoped Miss Lois wouldn't get sick herself. But Miss Lois' kindness was not to be taxed long. The man failed rapidly, and another hemorrhage made the end certain. He was delicious most of the time, and talked much of "Mary" and "Willie" and names strange to Miss Lois; but as the end drew near he ceased muttering, and lay apparently unconscious. That night, as she sat beside him, he looked up suddenly, his eyes bright and clear. "Why, Lois!" he said. "He made an effort to speak, his eyelids quivered, a breath—and a second time he had gone on a long journey, leaving her behind him.

When the town authorities came to make arrangements for the funeral, Miss Lois asked that he be buried in her own lot, for in the months of her homesickness she had had the remains of her father and mother brought from their bleak hillside graves to rest near her. So he was laid beside his old townsman, and a few months after a plain marble slab was placed at his head, bearing only the name "David Price," with the date of death, and his age, "52 years."

When Miss Lois wore the gray dress again Polly noticed that the lavender ribbons were gone, and about this time people said to each other that Miss Lois was beginning to show her age. Not that she grew gray and wrinkled suddenly; but there was a change. It was not her heart that was changed, for her friends found her more and more delightful, and her house was the favorite stopping-place for young and old. She seemed to have a special tenderness for young girls, and many confidences, blushing or tearful were poured into the sympathetic ear, and many were the lovers' quarrels healed by her gentle counsels. She used to say sometimes in a wistful way: "I want them to have all the happiness I have missed." But her sympathies were not confined to the young; they overflowed on all who needed them. Discouraged men and women slouched into her gate at nightfall, and came out with their faces lifted and fresh hope in their hearts. Naughty boys, who deserved and dreaded the rod, knocked meekly at her back door for help, which was always given, given, mingled with such wholesome reproof that a boy seldom came twice on the same errand. Even hurt and homeless animals seemed to know by instinct where to find an asylum, and took the shortest route to Miss Lois' door, and not one was turned away unhelped.

So the peaceful years slipped away, until one day her friends gathered to keep her eightieth birthday; and they said, to each other how well Miss Lois was looking, and that they hoped to keep her for another ten years; and the house was gay with flowers and little children, and Miss Lois beamed on them until her face seemed transfused.

That night, as Polly, now grown staid and elderly, went up to her room, she stopped to see if her mistress was comfortable for the night. She found her sitting in her great arm-chair, her head resting lightly against the cushions, and her eyes closed as though in quiet sleep. But it was the long sleep. One hand rested upon a package of yellow letters, and the thin forefinger of the other had stopped at a verse in the open Bible in her lap; and when they raised the stiffening hands they read the words: "Even Christ pleased not Himself."

Old and faithful friends gathered up her treasures, and when in looking over her papers they came to the package of yellow letters and read the signatures, they suddenly remembered the name on the stone in the graveyard, and looked at each other with pitying eyes, half guessing the story; but the story was ended.

"I am surprised, John," said the old lady when she found the butler helping himself to some of the finest old port. "So am I, ma'am," he replied. "I thought you had gone out," was the reply.