

ONE OLD MAID.

[After Collins in "The Current"]

A lowering morning which made one wish for the sunny south or for any place which would make one feel happier than could this dismal morning in Wisconsin. And then to think that this train could not make connection with the eastward bound train! It is hard enough to stop at such a miserable little junction at any time, but to spend three hours here this dark morning must prove the very refinement of torture. There are a dozen passengers who must wait and who prepare to make the best of their stay here. One couple evidently just married, find the clouds of a very rosy color, and they walk out of the smoky old depot to make a tour of the little town, talking eagerly about, reading all the old tattered posters, glowing inducements to go west, and ancient time-tables, which invariably decorate the stained walls of the country depot. These young fellows finally utter exclamations of impatience at the dreary monotony, and go across the street to the hotel, hoping to find something more congenial to them.

Two ladies at once take their departure for the hotel, and other people stroll out about the depot, and there are left two persons, a man and woman, who, after a little time, settle themselves to reading to pass away the weary moments. He reads his paper, and she her book, and occasionally, woman-like, she cast a glance at her silent companion, wondering what loved ones are awaiting his arrival, and whether he is impatient to greet them, or if he feels a man's stoicism in regard to it; wondering, too, how it is that each woman thinks the masculine lives connected with hers so full of manly graces and beauty, and who could find manly beauty in those rugged features? Then she turned her gentle eyes toward the dirty window and looked out at the dreary landscape, looked with eyes which saw not outward objects, but were introspective solely. An old maid commonly supposed to be the type of discontent and unrest, but here, evidently the type failed, for this face expressed the utmost of content. Life had been filled with much sorrow for her, all her bright plans had failed of fruition; one after another she had bidden good-bye to them and had turned bravely again to face the coming of a new future, a future to be peopled again by her bright fancies—the old fancies all dead and gone from her except as they lingered in memory.

An old maid she is, as far as her years go, but no home is happier than her little ideal home. She had filled its rooms with bright little froes, eagerly calling to mother, and the dream father is strong, earnest, helpful and loving. Her dream home is happier far than many a fine lady's real home although she had not pictured any grandeur about it. Oh, no, she dreams that the carpets are faded from much sunlight, and worn from the tread of many little feet, that there is much planning to "make both ends meet," but she had imagined unselfishness in this ideal home, and loving unselfishness can make all trials in regard to ways and means seem very slight, indeed. Her companion in this depot is an elderly person, a stout, large man, with keen eyes and a mouth at complete odds with the eyes, not belonging to them, apparently. Often eyes do not harmonize in coloring with the rest of the face, but generally expressions are strongly akin. This man had a sensitive mouth, one with a mournful droop to it. Those who looked at him caught themselves wondering which would conquer—keen, hard eyes, or sensitive mouth. He read for some time, then gave a quick look at the thoughtful face near him, and said abruptly: "Not a very pleasant arrangement, this."

A quick flush passed over the gentle face before him, a flush which his keen eyes noted instantly and understood, a flush which told of the girl's youth yet left to this lonely woman. "Not that it matters much to me where I am," he continued. "Life can't give me anything harder than I have had."

"That's a sad thing to say," she said in her timid way.

"A true thing, though," he responded, and the corners of his sensitive

mouth drooped a little more. "I feel as if I had nothing left to live for. My wife died a year ago and—" here the voice broke. Distress ever calls some souls out from their reserve, and hers was such an one, and she said, quickly: "Ah but you have all those vanished days and months and years to remember, all the loveliness of her life to think of now."

"How did you know her life was lovely," he queried, a little sharply. She hesitated a moment, then simply: "It must have been, or you would not miss her from your living so much, a tribute to the manly worth in the face she saw before her which was relished by the owner of the face. He sighed and then looked for a time out of the smoky window, then said: "After all, life is a strange muddle," and receiving a look of understanding, in response to this sentiment, he went on: "We don't know what is right to do, and yet we are punished by fixed laws if we don't do the right. That doesn't seem just to me."

"Oh but it will come out straight in the next life," she cried, eagerly. "I don't know whether it will or not," he responded. "I haven't seen the next life yet and I don't know what it is like, don't even know if there will be a next life; I only know that we are hedged in and around in this life."

"But surely the next life will take away all the rough places of this," she said; "it will make us understand all that seems so strange about this and—there must be a future life; God surely would not put us into this life and let us go out of it incomplete. That seems to me the strongest reason for a future, and so many die with their life-work only just begun. "Is that a reason or a hope with you?" he asked. She hesitated and did not answer, and just then one of the restless young men who had been a fellow passenger of theirs came in and glanced casually at the two.

That glance made her self-conscious and a blush dyed the delicate face and she turned, in a decided way the pages of her book, as if she were determined not to let this stranger get possession of her wandering thoughts again. The young man passed out of the station and the elderly one rose and walked restlessly about the room, knitting the shaggy brows occasionally at some troubled thought. The three hours passed and 1 o'clock came and a train came.

"Can I assist you?" he asked, gently reaching out a hand toward her for some of the numerous bundles she was carrying. She handed some to him and followed his sturdy footsteps to the train. They wondered a little why their fellow passengers of the morning were not in greater haste, but forgot them presently in the bustle of departure. He secured a pleasant seat for her, and then one for himself at some distance from her. A few minutes of waiting, of the idle watching of the dark landscape, so soon to be among remembered things, and the train moved slowly out of the town and as it moved away another train steamed in.

She looked curiously at the second train, but remembered that this was a junction and did not obey her first nervous impulse, which was to go to her whilom protector and ask if he were sure they were on the right train. She forgot the train soon and watched his stern, set face and felt sorry for him, and wished he might feel as sure of the future as did she. Soon the conductor came and she watched him as he made his way toward her. When he reached her protector, as she already called him in her inner consciousness, that individual gave a quick start, at some words uttered by the conductor, after examination of his ticket. A troubled look settled upon the resolute face, and he conversed earnestly with the conductor for a few moments, then glanced at her and rose and came to her. "I told you," he said, "that we don't know what is right and then we get punished by unutterable laws, and here is a speedy illustration of the fact, only that I feel now that I might have known the right, if I had taken pains to inquire. We are on the wrong train." She looked deeply troubled, but said, after a moment: "How can we get back?"

"It is of no use to go back to that junction. We might as well go on to Chicago now and go from there; it will

really take not much longer, and, as you trusted to my leading in the first place, I will, if you will let me, see you safe out of this trouble."

"I am used to taking care of myself," she said, but her lips trembled a little. "Where are you going?" he asked, and upon receiving his reply, added: "I am going beyond there, so it will be no trouble to me to see you safe. I will telegraph your dilemma to your friend at the next station; we shall reach Chicago in two hours, and the conductor tells me we can immediately take another train back, so that really the worst of it will be the extra four or five hours in the train."

He remained sitting with her, and chatted lightly for a time, till her mind was somewhat diverted from the unpleasantness of her situation. Gradually they wandered to deeper waters, and talked again, as they had earlier in the day, of the problems of life, and into those queries and answers of theirs crept ever and anon a bit of the personal history of each. He learned what a desolate life hers had seemed to be; he learned, too, what a sweet, cheery courage must underlie her whole being, that the desolateness should have been so ignored, and he grew ashamed of his own repining over a lot which had so much brightness in it.

When the train drew into the great depot in Chicago, he felt that he had learned to know a pure soul, and she felt a deep pity for the lonely life opened to her view. And as they took the other train, which was to take them rapidly to their destination each felt a regret that a few hours more would part them.

She sat silent for a long time after this, wondering if he dared do the thing he wished. He was lonely, set adrift in the great world by the death of his wife, and he wanted a true, womanly heart to sympathize with his. Could he do better than ask this lonely woman, who had no kith or kin in the world, to share his lot with him? Could she do better than take him, she who evidently had sun-merland in her heart, and could make a bit of brightness wherever she was. Each surely needed the other. He asked her if she knew any one in his town, and finding she did know a person residing a few miles from him, he took his resolution quickly.

"I have a good farm out there," he said; "160 acres under fine improvement, house and outbuildings all in fine shape. You can find out all about me from Mr. —." A moment he hesitated as he saw that she did not realize what he meant; then he continued earnestly, looking down into the clear eyes lifted so fearlessly to his. "I feel as if I were looking into the eyes of my future wife. Am I mistaken?" The last words were breathed rather than uttered, and then she understood, and the flame color mounted over the delicate features once more, and she said quietly, "Do I look so much like your wife?"

He was baffled, and for a moment knew not what to say, then rallied and said: "She has gone on into the future. I don't know what or where that life may be, and I am lost and lonely without her. I want that which has gone out of my life, and I believe you can supply that want. You are alone in the world, and I can make your life pleasanter, I am sure." It was a temptation, such as only homeless ones can understand; but, after a moment, she shook her head, and then, reading the questioning look in those keen eyes, she said, while the color deepened in her face:

"I loved once, and have loved ever since, and it would not be right for me to marry anyone, feeling as I do."

The door opened and the brakeman called the name of this place where she was to stop, and the next moments were spent in gathering together her belongings. He helped her off the train, and grasped her hand heartily as he stood one instance there:

"I shall always remember you and your happy way of looking at life, and your faith will help me," and then he swung on to the slowly moving train and she walked away into the gloaming, a tear or two falling as she thought of the lonely days to come."

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