ONE AUGUST NIGHT IN '61.

WILKIE COLLINS' LAST STORY PLOT.

WRITTEN FROM HIS ORIGINAL SKETCH
-FOR-
THE DISPATCH.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROPHECY.

THE War of the Rebellion had begun. Missouri was about evenly balanced between secession with the Southern States and loyalty with the Northern States. The time was August in 1861. There had been struggles of legislation over the question whether Missouri should go to the South or stay with the North. Every city, every town, and many a family, was distracted and divided. All was turbulence. General Fremont was in command of the Unionist military department, and he had sent General Lyon with a small army to drive out the Confederate troops, who had entered the State from Indian Territory under command of General Ben McCulloch. The movements of both commanders were for awhile as chaotic as the diverse sentiments of the people, for the Governments of the United States and the Confederate States were alike indecisive in their policy concerning the uncertain territory. The battle of Wilson's Creek was not far off, and the immediate region was loosely possessed by Confederate troops.

But peaceful quite was the yard of a farmhouse which overlooked the stream at sundown of a summer day. Four persons were unconsciously grouped in a way that made a fair picture. They were two men and two women, not one of whom had gone further in life than a few years beyond maturity. One woman sat negligently on a bench, with one arm hanging over its back and the other swinging at her side. Her face was so perfectly regular and proportionate in its features that it might have been expressionless but for large black and wonderfully lustrous eyes. He who stood behind her leaning on the back of the seat was a very manly fellow. A tendency to clouchiness in his clothing was in keeping with free and careless ways, and indicated his rural rearing as certainly as the woman's nicety of dress showed her acquaintance with the exactions of a fashionable life in the city.

The other couple were in a swing that hung from the limb of a tree, the brawny man clasping the ropes with his hands, and the slender woman clinging to him with more energy than her position seemed to require. She jumped down of a sudden, and perverted the fact by saying: "You were hugging me, Tudor Bowne." She ran out of the yard, he following, and clumsily protesting his innocence of intentional impropriety.

The pair that remained had listened with the air of being still diverted by something that was by no means new to them; and the woman said: "They are amusing, Mr. Willett." Her tone was lazy, like her attitude and her manner. Whether she was affected by the listlessness that comes of summer lounging in the country, or whether her calmness of surface was a careful covering of activity underneath, young Oliver Willett had been trying to discern. He courageously determined on a more direct way to the desired knowledge than guessing, and precipitately began, in thoughtlessly chosen, but ardent words, an avowal of his passion.

A woman came to the open window of the house and stood eaves-dropping. This was May Willett—Oliver's sister, and older than he. She waited only long enough to comprehend what her brother was doing and then interrupted by presenting herself before them. Oliver walked into the house without saying another word. May took the place that he had left at the back of the seat, and said quietly, but with a firm modulation: "Mrs. Armytage, I have been listening. I heard what my brother said, and I know what he was going to say. I am going to speak frankly—it is my duty. You and Mrs. Dimmock—married women—came here to spend a few weeks. I welcomed you as a school-day friend, and her as your friend. You asked me not to tell anybody that you were wives."

"That was her freak, not mine," Mrs. Armytage replied; "I was ashamed of it from the start."

"You acquiesced, at least, and I gave you my word not to let even Oliver know. I did not foresee that you would so quickly become lovers. He has been commissioned an officer in the Confederate army, yet he lingers here, away from his duty, and in dangerous proximity to the Unionists' advance."

Mrs. Armytage's manner was placid as she said: "Am I to blame? I have not undertaken to control his conduct or his heart. I am the wife of a United States army officer, and who can say that I am unfaithful? I have tried to discourage your brother, and it is not my fault if I have not succeeded. But if you order me away, I will not hesitate about going."

Mrs. Armytage arose with stately dignity, but May drew her back to the seat, saying: "Forgive me."

"I impose only one condition," Mrs. Armytage said. "Promise never to undeceive your brother. Let him continue to think of me with respect."

"I promise," May said.

Tudor Bowne and Mrs. Dimmock returned to the yard, and saw nothing in Mrs. Armytage's beautifully immobile face to show that a gust of feeling had swept over it. Mrs. Dimmock was clinging to Tudor's arm with a clever mockery of affection, and he was exhibiting an exaltation of delight. They were bringing along an aged negress, whose gaudily turbaned head and tatterdemalion garments made her a singular figure. That was old Judee, of familiar repute in the county as a witch, but an engrossing novelty to the guests. A wandering vagabond she was, and she told fortunes with all the weirdness of which she was capable. She was regarded as a voodoo necromancer, and among the blacks she was feared, if not quite reverenced; while the whites were not free of superstition regarding her charms, spells and prophecies, although at the Willett homestead there was an intelligent disposition to treat her jocosely whenever she visited the place.

But she was quickly the center of a group comprising all the persons of the premises, and she shrewdly chose the two strange ladies to especially impress herself upon. The account which is here to be given of her prediction and what ensued, is to be construed as the reader pleases—either as a narrative or something occult, or of something altogether explainable as matters of chance coincidence. The writer is merely a historian, with no disposition to theorize upon the incidents which he sets forth.

Old Judee was formal in her method as a prophetess. She proffered her services to Mrs. Armytage first, and then to Mrs. Dimmock; but those ladies, conscious of their roguery in having figured before their two wooers as maidens, were scared by the negress' offers of divination, and refused to have their fortunes told.

"Den yo', Mass'r Oliver," old Judee said, "lemme tole yo' fortin'. Dah's fo'tellin' in yo' case—sah—impo'tent fo'tellin'. I kia see dangah, Mass'r Oliver—dangah right ahead o' yo'."

"That's not hard to foretell in these war times," Oliver laughingly responded.

"Ax' me, Mass'r Oliver—ax' me," she droned.

"Tell me what you see," he said, aiming only to satisfy the curiosity of the ladies.

"I see yo' in de middle ob a soldier comp'ny—marchin'—marchin'."

"Well, I trust they're Confederates in gray, Aunt Judee. And can't you put me at their head? I am to be a captain, you know."

"Dey yan't in gray. Dey's in blue, sah. Dey's Union soldiers—marchin'—marchin," and she swayed her body, and held up her head, as though in unison with the tread of the troop which she saw. "An' yo' yan't in de command. Yo's wearin' de same clothes yo' got on now. Oh! I see dat yo's a pris'ner, fo' yo' arms is tied, an' de comp'ny guards yo' close." Her eyes turned slowly away from Oliver, and she seemed to be watching something that was moving steadily away. "Marchin'—marchin'—marchin'," she repeated over and over, but in a lower and lower tone, until she finally whispered: "Dey's gone out'n sight, sah, an' I don't see no moah."

"But I'd really like to know what becomes of me," Oliver remarked carelessly. "I trust that you," and he covertly addressed Mrs. Armytage, "have some regard as to that."

Old Judee turned her gaze on that lady, and stared steadily, yet vacantly.

"Well, well," Mrs. Armytage asked; "and what are you seeing now?"

"I see yo' on horseback, lady—ridin' hard—ridin' fast. Great trouble in yo' face—great trouble." Suddenly she ceased to speak, and spread one hand to her ear in the attitude of listening. "I heah's yo' say somefing. 'I must sabe him—I must sabe him!' Dat's what you' sayin'. An' now yo' rides into de woods." She had seemed to follow with her eyes the course of the equestrienne, making recognizable the movement of a person in the saddle of a running horse. "Dah—yo's gone. I doan see no moah."

"Try again."

"No, missy—I doan' see no moah."

Even those who had seen Old Judee before in similar exhibitions were soberly impressed. There was martial excitement in the air, and the woman's rude yet moving description of Oliver a captive in the hands of a company of soldiers stirred them.

"I'm afraid, Aunt Judee," said Oliver, half jesting and half in earnest, "that you're indulging your Northern sentiments. We're old, old friends, yet you make the Yankees capture me."

"But she sends a rescuer after you," Mrs. Dimmock suggested.

Had the negress merely indulged her wish and fancy in describing the Confederate officer as a prisoner? And had she, taking an easy cue from his manner and words to Mrs. Armytage, sought to mollify him by representing the lady as seeking his deliverance? She had the cunning of the Southern voodoo votaries, whether she possessed any of their supposed supernaturalism or not.

"Look again," Oliver insisted. "You've put me into a predicament—now see me through it."

Old Judee took his hand, and reached for one of Mrs. Armytage's, too. Still kneeling, and with the hands tightly clasped, she gazed steadfastly at the young couple, and then beyond them into the distance.

"I see yo both," she said. "Yo', Mass'r Oliver, is in front ob de soldiers."

"Ah! at last you've put me in command," he interjected.

"Dey am de Union soldiers—standin' still—standin' solemn. Yo' am facin' dem. Dey lifts dar guns. Dey fires at yo' an' yo' falls. De lady am dar, too; pale as death. She am faintin'. She drops on de groun'. De smoke ob de guns gets thick. It hides yo' both. I can't see. Dat am all."

Old Judee arose to her feet, rubbed her eyes, had a minute of apparent bewilderment, and then was sufficiently wide awake to take the coin which Oliver handed to her.

"All humbug," he said.

"Of course," Mrs. Armytage assented.

But they gazed in silence after the black woman, as she walked away, and nobody was prompt to ridicule her prophecy. It had made, at least momentarily, a serious impression on all who heard it.

Aunt Judee's Prophecy.

CHAPTER II.

LOVE AND WAR.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Armytage and Mrs. Dimmock were alone in the garden when a lumbering carriage rolled to the gate. Colonel Armytage, of the Union army, was the man who alighted. His hair was white enough for 70 years, but his skin was sufficiently ruddy and smooth for 50; and his age was a fair compromise betwixt the two—that is, 60. He kissed his wife, and said, "Your color indicates some sort of emotion, and that is unusual in you." She replied with perfect equanimity that a wife ought to be pleasurably agitated on meeting her husband after a separation.

"I have come to take you back to Springfield," said he.

Mrs. Armytage was frightened, and she furtively scanned his face for information of the reason; but there was no anxiety betrayed in her tone when she asked if they were to go soon. There was more feeling in the exclamation, "I am glad," after he had said, "Immediately."

"I'm not," said Mrs. Dimmock.

The arrival of a carriage was not so common an event as to be uninteresting, and from the house emerged several servants. As they came toward the Colonel, he hastily said to his wife and Mrs. Dimmock: "General Lyon has arrived at Springfield. There is to be a forward movement. We can't leave you any longer in a rebel household. Hush—they must not hear."

May Willett came out, and Colonel Armytage was presented to her. She welcomed him gracefully; and being told that her visitors were about to go away, said that she was very sorry, which was a lie that politeness required of her.

Mrs. Armytage hurried the preparations for departure with all her might, because she hoped to avoid a meeting between her husband and Oliver or Tudor. She whispered her purpose to May, who gave aid to its accomplishment.

Colonel Armytage went into the house for a glass of water before starting. May accompanied him. The two wives were waiting impatiently in the yard, when Oliver Willett and Tudor Bowne sauntered into it together. Mrs. Armytage fled like a coward into the house. Oliver attributed her withdrawal to displeasure at his recent half-made avowal of love. From Mrs. Dimmock he learned of the intended sudden departure, and he connected it instantly with his previous guess that his love-making had given offense. Mrs. Dimmock made a bold stroke by saying:

"Colonel Armytage is in the house—her father," repeating the latter words so as to fix them in Oliver's mind, "and he will take us away within five minutes. Now, listen to me," and she put her arms carelessly through those of the men. "He says the condition of this section is dangerous. He is a Union officer, and the folks around here are rebels. Now, if his identity became known he might be treated roughly. So please avoid mentioning his name, or his relation to Miss Armytage."

Oliver did not answer, but Tudor said: "When you command I obey," and went into the house with the able young falsifier.

Mrs. Armytage soon came out, wearing a hat and a light cloak, in readiness for the ride. On seeing Oliver alone she would have retired, had he not detained her.

"Here in Missouri," he said very earnestly, "our ways are blunter than yours of the Eastern cities. I love you—you know it." She endeavored to get past him, but he stopped her by a clasp of her wrist. "A second, I beg. I recall the avowal. I do not wish to violate usage or propriety—I will ask your father's consent to woo you. He is here, and will speak to him frankly."

Mrs. Armytage perceived the error into which Oliver had been led as to Colonel Armytage's relationship to her. She said entreatingly: "No, no—don't speak to him!"

"Why not? My love is honorable."

"Mine is not.

This was her hasty thought, uttered before she had considered how much of confession it conveyed.

"Then you do love me?" said Oliver, catching only at one phase of her meaning.

He would have clasped her, but she drew back, saying: "Hush! He is coming. In heaven's name, Oliver, do not say anything to him. I will tell you why—some time. I have written a message to you. It is behind the mirror in my room. Look for it after I am gone."

He seized her hand, and was about to kiss it, when Colonel Armytage and the rest came out of the house. He stepped back into a shadow, from which, unseen, he heard them bid adieu to his sisters and saw them ride away.

"Drive fast," said Colonel Armytage to the negro who held the reins. He added to the women, "This neighborhood is not over safe for us."

"It is full of peril," said Mrs. Armytage.

The journey of ten miles to Springfield was made in the early evening, and it conveyed Colonel Armytage and the two ladies direct to the house where he had for a week been provisionally quartered. The town was a hubbub of military occupation. General Lyon meant to advance upon the Confederates next day, and the preparations were confused, for in those early days of the war the operations had little of the precision and orderliness subsequently achieved. Colonel Armytage's absence, though brief, had left his duties to accumulate, and he had no time to devote to his regained wife.

Frivolous Mrs. Dimmock, interested by the hurly-burly, had no thought of the farmhouse that she had so recently quitted; but Mrs. Armytage wandered away into the garden. She sat on a bench, leaned against the tree that made a back for it, and turned her face toward the bright moon, which had risen just high enough to shine over the wall that lined the garden on that side. Externally she was the placid, cool, young beauty. In her mind, so well hidden by her characteristic self-control, was being formed, and not without a struggle, a firm resolution to think no more of Oliver Willett. A noise at the wall startled her, and Oliver leaped over. He stood before her, took off his hat and bowed low. His entrance to the garden had been rapid and resolute; but now he was hesitant, as though a little confounded by his situation. Mrs. Armytage rose, and looked at him with wonder in her lustrous eyes as she said:

"What brings you here?"

"You," he answered.

"You are reckless."

"A lover knows no fear."

"But he should not let his own fearlessness be the destruction of the woman he loves."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you get the message that I left for you?"

"Yes; and came with it to its author."

They had spoken so rapidly that their dialogue thus far had been as inconsiderate as it was exciting to them; yet she maintained by for the most composure, and when he would have grasped her hands she stepped back with a show of displeasure.

"My letter told you," she said, "that you must never see me again—that there was a sufficient reason why we must not meet."

"It told me, too," he said, uncooled by her repellent manner, "what your lips had refused to tell. I had begun to believe that you were heartless, and the sudden knowledge of the truth—that you loved me—was like stimulant to an invalid—potent to make the blood tingle, the heart bound and the brain whirl. What could I do but come to you?"

"Forget it if I wrote anything to encourage your madness. I was thoughtless—I scrawled hurriedly to escape observation. Remember only that I said we must not even think of each other."

"I know the letter word for word."

He took from a pocket a crumpled sheet of paper that looked like a page torn from a diary; but he scarcely glanced at it as he recited what was penciled on it.

"It says: 'The past two weeks were to me like a brief existence in another life than my own. I had never loved any man. My situation forbade me to entertain such a sentiment, except for one who was powerless to excite it. You made me love you.'" He held the writing before her, and added triumphantly, "they are your words."

"Blot them out and read the rest."

She stood with folded arms as passive as a statue. He read, aided by his recollection and the bright light of the moon:

"I am free to confess it because I also tell you that I must abjure the passion that makes me irresolute, while I write out my own sentence. I cannot bear to explain to you the reason why we must be strangers, but it is absolute, irresistible, final."

"Why do you come here after that?" she said, still calm.

"I come to learn what the thing is that can part us."

"I will not tell you."

"Is it that you are a Unionist and I an officer in the Confederate army?"

"No; that is not the reason."

He argued no more, but said, "You puzzle me," as he thrust the paper into a breast pocket. She looked toward the house, with a thought for the first time of being observed, so absorbed had she been, despite her self-possession.

"Somebody will come," she said. "Go at once. If you were recognized here you might be put under arrest."

He instantly concluded that her repulse of him had been caused by her fear for his safety. That was pleasing to his vanity, and allaying to the doubts that had been taking shape in his mind as to whether she did love, after all. He clasped her passionately. She did not struggle to escape, but resolved instead on the course that she well knew would be more effectual, and which she was convinced she could not now avoid. She said:

"Oh, must I abase myself before you? I desired you to forget me, or remember me respectfully. You compel me to tell you what it is that must keep us apart. I am a wife."

She was freed instantly. Not that he, with intention recoiled from her; but his arms relaxed involuntarily, and he stood with the limpness of a man who had received a terrible physical as well as mental shock. He gasped out, after a pause: "A wife, did you say?"

"Yes; wife of the man you thought was my father."

The first definite sentiment that was formed out of the jumbling of ideas in his mind was resentment; and he began: "Your deceit—"

"You will forgive me," she pleaded, in tone as well as in words, "when you know that at the first, I had no deliberate thought of seriously deceiving you, when you consider the self-condemnation I have suffered, when I tell you that the determination to be an honorable wife is made at the cost of a breaking heart."

Her attitude of supplication, her eyes, that he had never before seen hold tears, her voice, that he had never before heard to express passion—these drove the resentment out of his thoughts, and left only the overmastering knowledge of the reality of her love. Therefore, it is not surprising that he said: "Struggle no more, but go with me now. I will take you away from your unloved husband."

He again put his arms around her, and partly through an effort to free herself and partly through an unconsidered impulse, slid down to her knees. She clung to his hands while she said:

"Don't break my good resolution! Don't use your influence for evil, but sustain me in my honor!"

He lifted her tenderly to her feet and said: "Your rebuke makes me ashamed of myself. Good-by."

"Farewell; and remember that my good repute is in your keeping."

He took her hand respectfully. "I swear!" he said, with all the solemnity that could attend a more formal oath-taking, "by the hand that I may never hold again, by my unalterable love, that I will sooner give up my life than this secret."

He started toward the wall, but turned back as though to say something more. He saw her standing rigid and white in the moonlight, and people hurriedly approaching. Colonel Armytage was at the front of the party, but they were led by a man in the uniform of a sergeant, who pointed and said: "This is an officer in the rebel army. He is a spy."

"He is Mr. Willett, at whose home I have been a guest," said Mrs. Armytage, with wonderful calmness; but, while she spoke with a steady voice, she leaned against the seat for support.

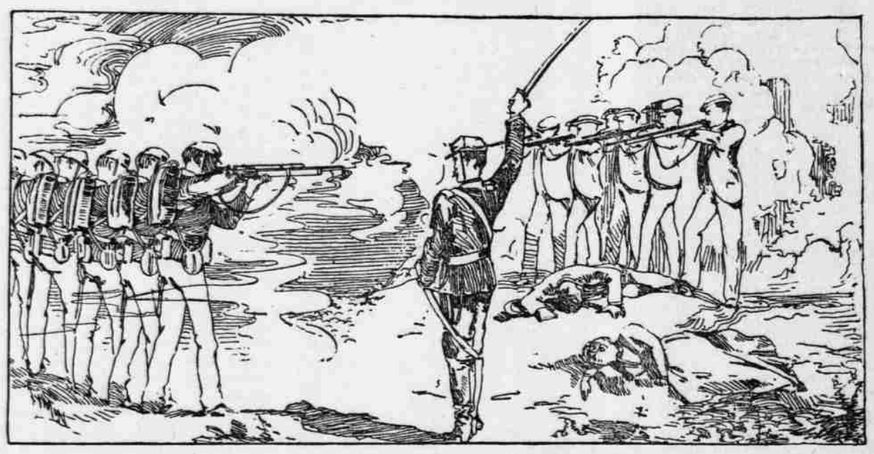
"Young man," said Colonel Armytage, "it will be necessary for you under the circumstances to explain your presence here, at the headquarters of the Union commander. I hope you can do so satisfactorily."

Oliver said firmly: "I have no explanation to make."

"General Lyon has been warned," Colonel Armytage continued, "that a spy would visit these premises to-night, to get information as to our plans for to-morrow. I sincerely regret that my wife's friend has rendered himself liable to detention, and I trust that he has not endeavored to use knowledge that he may have gained in social intercourse. Guards, conduct this gentleman to the General!

Oliver thought vaguely of trying to escape, but the grasp of soldiers was upon him. Then he recollected Mrs. Armytage's letter, and his hands went involuntarily to his breast. She saw the gesture and knew what it meant. She clung to the seat, only by a hard resistance preventing herself from falling into it.

Colonel Armytage also saw the movement, and said as Oliver was marched away, "Search him for documents that he may be carrying."



OLIVER'S SUCCESSFUL RUSE.

CHAPTER III.

TWO OF OLD JUDEE'S VISIONS REALIZED.

At midnight Mrs. Armytage was the sole occupant of a room in the second story of the spacious house which Colonel Armytage and his staff occupied. The windows looking out on the same large garden from which Oliver Willett had been taken as a spy not long before, were wide open, for the atmosphere was sultry. Mrs. Armytage sat by a table. During an hour she had scarcely stirred from one position. Slowly she had come to a clear appreciation of what had happened, and she was waiting, as one strapped to a guillotine might, with awful dread—awaiting the fall of the blade—for her husband to come with the letter that she felt must ere this have been taken from Oliver. The 12 strokes of a clock at midnight sounded to her unreasonably like a knell; and from that she went into a daze of wondering why the bell's familiar noise suggested such an idea to her. As persons in dreams condense hours into seconds, so her thoughts had wandered far and wide before the twelfth stroke; and then, looking up, she saw her husband standing before her.

"Not abed yet?" he said.

That was not like what she expected, and she thought it was a trivial preface for the real matter; but he seemed to expect a reply, and so she said: "How could I sleep?"

"True," he answered, while she listened with every fiber strained to meet an accusation; "the sad event of to-night has shaken my nerves, and they are stronger than yours."

He kissed her on the forehead. She took the endearment with a heart-bound, as an indication that somehow the calamity had been averted, and hesitatingly asked, "What—what was the result? He explained that—"

"He explained nothing. It was not possible for him to clear himself. He was caught at the enemy's headquarters on the night before an important movement. Probably he supposed that his acquaintance with you would be a plausible excuse for his presence, and he was brave enough to take the chance. His bold plan might have been successful had he not carried a paper that condemned him."

"Condemned him?"

"Yes; for although he managed to destroy the paper before anybody read it—"

"He destroyed it?"

"The careless guards gave him the opportunity. Doubtless it contained memoranda of what he had learned."

Mrs. Armytage understood full well that Oliver had kept his vow to protect her reputation, although in doing so he had destroyed the proof that he was not a spy. In the first warmth of her gratitude she glowed with a blind desire to save him in return. Hence she exclaimed, "The paper contained no such thing."

"How do you know?"

The question brought her to the point of confession, if she intended to make one; but instead she shrank from it. "Who knows that it did?"

"Well, he refused to deny it when a reasonable account of the paper's contents might have saved his life."

"Is his life in danger?"

"He has only a few hours to live. He is sentenced to be shot at daybreak."

Once more the woman forgot herself in her appreciation of the sacrifice that had been made for her, and she exclaimed: "Oh, it will be murder! He is not a spy."

"I would like to think so, but he will not plead not guilty," he added, as she sank back in her chair, covered her face and wept. "I know it is shocking to you to know that the man who was your host yesterday is to be shot this morning, and that your husband is in a sense his executioner. War necessities are brutal."

Mrs. Armytage stood up and put her arms around her husband's neck. "You never denied me anything I asked, reasonable or unreasonable. Save this man's life. Help him to escape, if it can be done in no other way."

Her impulsive action was astonishing to him, and he was by it distracted from her words; but when he comprehended them he said: "Your proposition is dishonorable."

"Would you be a murderer?" She was as vehement now as she had just been wheedling; and she took her arms from around his neck. "He is not a spy—I know it. By saving him you would keep yourself clear of an innocent man's blood."

"Proof that he is not a spy would save him. Can you furnish that?" and he gazed searchingly into her face.

"Yes," she answered quickly and somewhat defiantly; but, being thus brought to the point of confession, she again fell short of heroism. "No, no!" she said; "I mean that a woman's discernment is sometimes better than a man's. I have seen him in his home, and have become acquainted with his qualities. He is honorable, brave—"

"Those are qualities that would fit him for a mission of peril."

Angered by her arguments for Oliver being turned against him, she broke out, petulantly: "You are heartless."

"You know I am not," said the old man, kindly, but chidingly. "My affection for you, scarcely requited, is proof to the contrary. Were not naturally jealous, your plea for this young man might arouse suspicion in my mind as to your motive."

She crouched down at his side as he took a seat, and put her arms around him in a caressing way that was not common to her. He saw that she was weeping. In spite of an exertion of the will, such as was wont to steady her nerves under any circumstances, she trembled like a coward. At length she said: "You love me very dearly. Would it disturb you to know that some other man loved me, too?"

"And that you loved him?"

He said that with a quickness that startled her. She leaned on his knees, as she responded: "Why need you come so readily to that supposition?"

"Who is the man?"

"Oliver Willett."

He stood up so hastily that she was prostrated on the floor. He did not help her up, and she arose unaided. This rebuff at the outset of a confession made her waver in her purpose. She asked herself why a partial revelation of the facts would not do as well; and, hoping rather than believing that it would, she said: "He made me a proffer of his love. I repulsed him. I told him that he must never see me again. He followed me to the city and then asked me to fly with him. Then he was arrested. That is the truth, as I live. He is no spy. Now you will save him—will you not? There must be some way of doing it, when you are convinced that he did not come here on the errand imputed to him."

"Is that all you wish to say?"

"Is that not enough?" she replied, a little bewildered, and feeling that her determination was melting away.

"You are trying to deceive me. Your motive I do not condemn, but the device fails. Your pity for him has impelled you to a desperate effort to save his life. You have exceeded what duty to your friend required."

"I have told you the truth, as there is a heaven above us!"

"Stop!" Could this cold, stern old man be the petting husband she had known? She looked at him in wonder and fear. "You have forgotten one point—the document that he destroyed."

She felt that this was the time and the last to tell all that she had left untold. She raised her eyes to his face, and saw that he was iron. Again she resorted to a fragment of the truth.

"That was a letter from me to him, commanding him not to seek me."

"If that be so, why should he have destroyed it? There is nothing in such a letter the hiding of which would be worth a man's life.

She could have met this objection with the little that remained unconfessed—that the letter contained her confession of love for Oliver Willett. She had intended to tell that, and to trust to her husband's indulgent love for forgiveness; but now she was convinced that he would not forgive that one fault. She was silent, and ere she knew it he had quitted the room.

The Colonel went at once to the improvised guardhouse, where Oliver Willett was awaiting the execution of the sentence of death. The young man had repeatedly asked himself why he had destroyed the proof that he was not a spy, and as often he vividly remembered his promise to Mrs. Armytage, made in the solemn nature of an oath, that he would sooner die than reveal the secret of her love. Then the idea would get uppermost in his mind that he was throwing his life away in an unworthy cause. Swayed by these opposing considerations and oppressed by physical dread, he was fast settling into apathy—something that was beyond his previous agitation, and a relief from it, when Colonel Armytage entered.

"Mr. Willett," he said, "you have but a few hours to live, unless you can yet prove that your errand was not that of a spy."

Oliver guessed that the Colonel suspected the truth, and, on the quick impulse of shielding the woman of his worship he exclaimed: "I cannot do it. I expect to die."

"Have you no desire to live?"

"No man a stronger; but I voluntarily took upon myself a solemn obligation, and I must not be a coward because the worst has come of it."

"Yes, you might have had some other errand—that of a lover meeting his sweetheart, for example. Was that it in your case?"

Oliver was certain now that his surmise was correct. He said as conscientiously as any man ever lied, "No."

"If it were so, and you could prove it, your life would be spared."

"I can prove no such thing."

"That removes a sorrow from me, and seals your fate. Within an hour my wife has told me that you were her lover—that you came to see her, and not as a spy from the rebels."

Believing that she had confessed the whole truth instead of only an ineffectual part of it, Oliver's only sentiment for the instant was pride in his own sacrifice.

The Colonel left him to himself.

An hour later a muffled woman was in his presence. When she showed her face it was so close that he felt her breath fall hot on his cheek, and it was Mrs. Armytage who spoke: "I could not let you die with the thought that I, safe in your sacrifice, had not tried to save you. I told my husband why you came to the city, but he would not believe me. I conjure you to convince him that I told the truth."

It is not always true that men are braver in premeditating heroism than when the time of action comes. Oliver had, even since his interview with Colonel Armytage, wavered from his determination to die possessed of this woman's secret. He had balanced his obligation to her against his family's grief and his own dread of death, and which was weightiest he had scarcely been able to determine. But now, under the powerful influence of her presence, and in the knowledge that she appreciated and loved him, he felt steeled in his purpose of keeping his vow. He said very quietly: "Your husband has been here?"

"And you told what I said?"

"Yes."

"You assured him that it was true? They will believe it, and you will be saved?" She waited with affright for his answer. She honestly believed that she hoped he would say "Yes;" but in her mind was a shadowy, awful fear of what might be the consequences to herself.

"It is too late to alter my purpose if I would," he said, taking her hands in his, and feeling that they were hot and nervous. "Your letter is destroyed. If I were to tell its contents now, I should not be believed. I have thought it all over. My life is very precious to me; but mine or yours must go—for what would be left of yours worth retaining if the world regarded you as a faithless wife? I will die in the flush of a high resolve. You would linger, if I had proved cowardly, in years of death. No; I have kept my oath and your secret."

When Mrs. Armytage was once again in her room, the first gray light of dawn shone into the window where she sat. Her husband had not returned. The horrible duty of the execution of the court martial's sentence devolved on him, and, although he assigned its details to a staff officer, it added to his other activities of the night and kept him away from her. Soon she heard the beat of a muffled drum, marking the tread of marching feet. Looking out through the shutters, she saw a company of 50 soldiers coming down the street.

In their midst was Oliver Willett.

The first vision of Old Judee was realized. The prophecies of the negress had not been recalled by the distracted woman, but now she felt that Oliver's march to death had been foretold. With a dumb, still sense of despair for her lover, she watched the dreadful procession until it passed beyond her sight and hearing.

"What was it that Old Judee told next?" she exclaimed. "I remember. She saw me riding on horseback toward a wood. She heard me say that I must save him. How? I can't conceive a way."

She was in a condition now in which quietude was not possible. Her saddle-horse was in a stable near by. She did not consider what she meant to do, nor hardly realize what she was doing. Old Judee's prophecy impelled her. She hastily dressed, herself in her riding habit, and reached the stable unobserved. There she saddled and bridled the horse, impetuously mounted him, and rode in the direction that the detail of executioners had gone. Once beyond the limit of the town, she discerned at a distance the company just entering a grove. Urging her horse into a run she dashed after them—disappearing into a wood just as the prophetess had professed to see her do in the second vision.

CHAPTER IV.

SHOOTING THE SUPPOSED SPY.

The place selected for the execution of the death sentence on Oliver Willett was in a grove two miles from the town. The motive in the selection was to have the spot as near as possible to the section inhabited by Southern sympathizers, that the fate of the supposed spy might readily become known among them. The first of those directly interested in the event to arrive on the ground was Mrs. Armytage. She knew the spot chosen, and she reached it by a detour on her fleet horse ahead of the soldiers afoot. She sat still on her horse, and, hearing the birds sing, fell to marveling that they sang at such a dreadful time. Pleasant sounds seemed to her shamefully out of keeping with the occasion. She tried to devise a plan of action on behalf of her lover. One thing alone she had not confessed to her husband—that Oliver's love of her had been reciprocated by her. Should she publicly avow it? What good would it do?

"You here, ma'am?"

She turned and saw Sergeant Brickson. He was a soldier of the regular army, and had for several years been in her husband's regiment. He continued: "You will be seen if you stay. The prisoner and the squad—the firing squad, ma'am—are't more'n five minutes away. Your husband's coming too. I beg pardon, but I didn't suppose you wanted him to find you here."

"I do not care," she said impassively.

"Well, ma'am, you said—at least I know young Willett's your lover, and I—"

"You are ready enough to ascribe the worst to my interest in him. I wish my husband would be as uncharitable."

She was speaking meditatively, but seeing that her words puzzled the Sergeant, she added, "I would at this instant give all I possess for proof of what you are so ready to believe."

"I can give it to you," and the Sergeant displayed the letter that had drawn Oliver to the city, that had been partly burned and hidden, and that he had given to Major Dimmock. He held it up so that Mrs. Armytage could see it, and asked, "Isn't this your letter to your lover?"

"Yes, yes," she eagerly answered. "How did you get it?"

"I got it where he hid it after he tried to burn it."

"Give it to me." She reached for it but he drew it away.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm a man that sees an unexpected chance before him to rise in the world. I did a service for you last night, and you're under promise to pay me—to pay me with a promotion in the army. I let you get to the prisoner, who was in my charge, and you agreed to have your husband make a captain of me."

Mrs. Armytage Pleads for Forgiveness.

"And I will keep my promise."

"I've got no right to doubt you, ma'am, but a man's first duty's to look out for his own interest. That mayn't be scripture, but it's sense. To put it plain," and here he rested his hand on his horse's mane, and went closer to her, "it seems to me as if this letter's a kind of a written note, payable on demand—payable in promotion on demand. Of course I don't understand it all, but I do know this is a love letter from Colonel Armytage's wife to this young man that's going to be shot. Before I got it I had your bare word that I'd be made a captain. Now I hold something that'll compel you to keep your promise."

"Sergeant, hear me." There was not a trace of discomposure in her manner; but her brilliant eyes seemed to the soldier to be blazing at him. "You reason shrewdly, yet you are at fault. You think I dread your showing that letter to my husband. You are mistaken. If I had it, I would put it in his hands myself. The man they are going to shoot is not a spy. He came to meet me, and he is going to die because he has suppressed this evidence. That letter is proof of the truth, and I would use it, if I could, for his salvation and my destruction."

"Your destruction?"

"Yes; but what of that?"

"I'll tell you what of it, ma'am, as far's it concerns me." The Sergeant had been dumfounded at first by her avowal, but he had, nevertheless, comprehended the new bearing of the letter. "If your husband discarded you, how could you pay me what you owe me? Where'd be your power to have me promoted?"

She still sat calmly on her horse; but her eyes were so burning in their gaze that the Sergeant no longer dared to meet them.

"Will you let an innocent man be shot when you can save him?" she asked.

"He deserves it, doesn't he?" and the Sergeant's lack of confidence in his argument was shown by his retreating a step. "It's not for me to go betwixt him and his resolution."

"Give me the letter I implore. You see that it will give no power over me, for I only desire to make it public."

"You do now; ma'am," and the Sergeant's tone gained boldness as his argument grew logical, "but you will not after your lover is dead—when no good to him could come of your disgrace. Then it will be worth to me—"

"How much? Name the sum, and I will pay it."

"You haven't enough money about you, ma'am."

"I can obtain it. You shall be paid to-morrow."

"What would be your to-morrow if this letter came to light? You'd be homeless, penniless, for Colonel Armytage would turn you into the street. We in the ranks know his hard side—you don't." The sound of drums in the distance was heard, "They are coming—you must not be seen."

"I will not go away," she said, firmly.

"Hide yourself, then."

"No."

The Sergeant looked at her face, and saw by it that no entreaty or command of his would move her. His hope of advancement was fading away. The beating of the drums came nearer and nearer; and even the measured tramp of feet was audible. In sheer desperation he caught hold of the horse's bridle. The spirited beast reared. The movement was quick and violent. Mrs. Armytage was thrown heavily to the ground. The Sergeant had only time to see that the smooth white of her forehead was flecked with red, and that she was unconscious, before the soldiers came conducting Willett. His terror and dread were increasing as he felt that death was close; but his face, ashen from its whiteness and rigidity of resolute expression did not disclose his mental agony. He with the rest saw Mrs. Armytage lying on the ground. The blood was trickling over her face from a cut near her temple, and there was no sign of returning consciousness. He went to her so quickly that the soldiers thought it was an attempt to escape, and muskets were leveled at him in a twinkling; but no hindrance was made to his gently lifting her.

She lay on his breast with her head on his shoulder and his arms sustainingly around her—an instant so, and then Colonel Armytage was there, looking on in astonishment. But the brief time had been sufficient for a strong effect on Oliver. The helplessness of the unconscious woman; the face so close that he might have kissed the parted lips; the belief that she had come to the place of execution to save him if she could—these things aroused him out of the awful fear of death into which he had been sinking, and made his heart burn with heroic resolution.

Colonel Armytage stood mute at the sight of his wife in Oliver's arms, and, in a mistaken feeling of anger, he muttered a curse. The wound on her forehead, however, partly explained, and the Sergeant only added that she had been thrown from her horse. She was gently put on the ground again and a drummer was hurried off for water.

It was only natural that the accident to Mrs. Armytage should seem, even to the Colonel, of small comparative consequence. The deliberate shooting of a human being was a horror that was not to be crowded out of minds by an event that at a time less fraught with thrilling interest would have been exciting in itself.

The Colonel dispatched a messenger for a physician, saw for himself that his wife's hurt was not very serious, and then turned to Oliver.

"I would not have come here," he said in a tone too low for anybody but Oliver to understand, "but that I wanted to give you a last opportunity to prove your innocence if you could. I will take on myself the responsibility of delaying this execution on your assurance that you are not a spy." He pointed to the woman at their feet, and continued: "Perhaps it is her persistent friendship that moves me to make this offer."

Her friendship! Oliver knew it was her love. His thoughts ran fast like those of a drowning man, leading him like a flash through his terror of death, through his adoration of her, through his following of her after she had forbidden him, and so to his own promise. "I will sooner part with life than your secret."

"You hesitate," said Colonel Armytage.

Mrs. Armytage uttered a low moaning—the first indication of returning consciousness.

"I must, not hesitate!" Oliver exclaimed, with some impetuousness of manner. "The cause that I serve will not permit me to waver in my duty."

"Is there nothing I can do for you—no message I can bear to your family?"

"My poor sister—she will be left alone. Her heart will be broken. Where is she?"

"The sad news was sent to her several hours ago."

Oliver thought it was strange, knowing her strength of resolution and love, that she did not come to bid him farewell. He gave to Colonel Armytage a goodby message for her, and the two men shook hands.

Preparations for the killing of Oliver Willett were swift and simple. Much of the celerity was due to the sergeant, who glanced often uneasily at Mrs. Armytage, fearing she would become conscious before the deadly volley had been fired. The 20 musket bearers were ranged, and Oliver was made to stand in readiness. He requested to face the executioners, with eyes unbandaged, and was indulged. At the same time, under Colonel Armytage's direction, Mrs. Armytage was lifted by two of the drummers to be carried a short distance away. The Colonel was glad of a reason for avoiding the death sight; and the excuse was good, for his wife was fast coming to consciousness. He had barely turned his back, however, before he heard a new voice, that of Tudor Bowne, who did not go to Oliver at first, but addressed Colonel Armytage.

"I come to ask a favor," he said. "Friends of Oliver desire to secure his body. They await your permission."

"You have permission."

Tudor waved his hat as a signal to