# The Bradford Reporter.

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## "With a Silver Lining."

CHAPTER I.

A girl came singing through a field of poppies as the sunset gilded the western sky.

Everywhere around her glowed the deep intense scarlet of the brilliant blossoms. Above her head were depths of purple shadow and amber light, and over all brooded the dreary stillness and tender hush that so often fills the day's last hour.

The girl made a fair living picture amid the glow and fervor of that sunset scene as she moved through it all with a certain deer-like grace peculiarly her own, while her lips sang for very gladness, as the bird carols its matin praises in the dawn of a spring day. The song rang out sweet and clear over the quiet fields; it reached the ears of a group of farm laborers returning home from their work, and made them pause and listen, saying, smiling, to one another as they stood: "'Tis Miss Vera, sure enough. God bless her."

It came in its fresh young melody to a man who stood on the white level road beyond the corn-fields—a man old and bent and withered with age, with a hard, cold face and dreary eyes, who leaned on his stick and shaded his eyes from the sun-rays, and watched the girl coming swiftly and joyously toward him as he seldom had watched any human thing.

As she saw him the music left her tongue. Her step grew slower, and as his keen eyes swept over her face, she half paused, apparently doubting whether to speak or not. She knew him well by sight, but hitherto he had always avoided her.

"Singing again!" he said, in a voice as harsh and cold as his face. "Are you so glad? One never sees you without a smile on your lips—a song on your tongue."

She flushed slightly.

"Yes, I am glad," she answered simply.

"And why—can you tell me that? have you so much to make you?"

"I have health, youth, love. Are they not life's fairest gifts?"

"So fools say."

"And wise men, too, I fancy," the girl said gently. "But whether or no, if they make one glad should they not be valued? the old seem so often to think that the light-heartedness of youth is a reproach to themselves. I wonder why?"

"Do you mean that I think so?" he asked with a contemptuous smile. "I envy none their youth—not even their gladness. I know how swiftly the one flies, the other fades. There is nothing good in life; the illusions of youth are the veriest vanity. Some day you will say with me: 'There is nothing left; let me curse heaven and die!'"

The girl's face grew very pale.

"Oh never that!" she said sorrowfully. "Never words so despairing or so—wrong!"

The last word was spoken gently and humbly. It was so daring of her, she felt, to upbraid one so far beyond her in years, in knowledge, in experience.

"Wrong!" he said bitterly, as he stood and looked across the flaming scarlet of the poppies to where the last sun's rays lingered in the west. "What do you know of wrong or right—of life—of the future; of any one of the things that lie hidden in the heart of unfolded years, as the color and fragrance of the flower in the closed bud. Listen!" and he laid his withered hand on her arm and turned her bright young face toward him. "Listen, child! I was young once, and glad and trustful as you are. To me, too, there seemed never a cloud on the sky; never a pain in the heart; never an evil or a sin that could turn life to hell, and love to hate, and joy to sorrow. But even as that cloud above us creeps over the sun's radiance and covers the sunset's gold, so surely did a cloud of suffering darken my fate, destroy my illusions. So surely will a like cloud throw its gloom over you, and every creature like who goes forth on life's journey with blind eyes and credulous heart, to learn as I have learned, that of all things life holds the only thing that lives, and enjoys, and prospers is—Evil!"

She looked at him sorrowfully. He was so old and sad and desolate. His words hurt her; their chill darkened her simple joyousness, even as the cloud to which he pointed darkened the glowing color of the sky. For a moment she was silent.

"To say such words, and believe them," she said gently, "one must have known great sorrow. I do not understand them quite. God is too good to let mankind suffer more than they can bear, more than He deems just. But for you I am sorry. It must be so terrible to know life has no joy left, to turn from the sunshine and dwell forever in the shadows."

A smile of terrible irony curved his lips.

"One would look for no worse hell hereafter. Do I frighten you? You look quite scared and white. I cannot help it. I don't know why I have broken my word and spoken even gently to a human being. I vowed once never to do it. I have seen you so often and almost hated you for your fair face and your light step, but your voice, that is always happy; and as you came across the fields just now some impulse prompted me to stay you. Is your gladness less?"

She smiled wistfully, and her eyes rested on his face with infinite pity.

"Not less," she said gently. "Only if I could but give you back yours—ever so little!"

"It lies in no man's power, still less in any woman's. The clouds are with me forever now. Go you forth with the sun; our paths lie wide apart; for you life begins—the joys it may hold are illimitable; for me it ends—the joys it has held are vanity and vexation of spirit. Farewell."

He turned abruptly away—a lean, bent, aged figure, leaning heavily on his stick, with the evening light touching his scanty silvered hair and brown trembling form. The girl, moved by some sudden impulse, followed him.

"Do not shun me again," she said imploringly. "I have seen you so often, and I live so near; and they say you are always alone. It must be so sad."

"It is my own wish," he said almost fiercely. "As for being sad one need not come to eighty years to find life that."

Half proudly, half regretfully, she turned away. As she did so, her eyes rested on the pale soft tints of the evening sky, from whence the glow and fervor of sunset had faded.

"Look!" she cried eagerly, as her outstretched hand pointed upward. "Look! the cloud is there, but it has a silver lining."

The old man went on his way. The girl moved silently and sadly along the quiet fields, and through a narrow, shady road, and across a wooden bridge which brought her to her home.

A very simple little place it was; a mere cottage, rented of a miller near by, and just large enough for her father and herself. He was an old and studious recluse, and she was his only child. He had lived here in this quiet world-forgotten vilage for a score of years, with only his books for companions since his wife died and left his married life like a dream-memory to him ever afterward—so short it was and sweet. She tiny home was very dear to him, and to his child also. She loved to think of the fair young mother who had gladdened it for those two brief years—to trace her footsteps in the garden paths, her presence in the dainty rooms, her taste in the arrangement of the interior, and her skill in the miniature garden which she had planned and cultured, and where pure white lily-cups and Gloire de Dijon roses, and the scarlet glow of geraniums, and the flush of flowering creepers, colored and embowered the tiny dwelling. To the girl the whole place was always beautiful in a simple, quiet, dreamy way, which had grown with her growth, and had altered itself to her fancies; whether it lay like a fairy bride-cake in winter, or a fragrant garden-world in summer, with azure and purple-winged butterflies sporting in the flower-bells and the velvet-coated bees humming their endless songs in the hearts of the honey blossoms.

She and her father were always together—always companions and friends to each other—always united in interest as in heart—always inseparable in pursuits both learned and simple.

As she crossed the wooden bridge now, she stood for an instant to listen to the rush and music of the deep mill water, and to watch it break over the rocks, and dash in a million foam-bells against the huge wheel; then, turning her eyes in the other direction, she saw a figure, sitting at some distance up the bank, fishing.

The sight was no uncommon one; tourists and anglers very often found their way here, and the deep river was full of pike and other small fish. Her eyes rested carelessly enough on this man, sitting motionless and attentively there, with his rod clasped in his hands and his gaze fixed on the river before him. While she watched she saw him suddenly rise, retreat a few steps, and then with a short, quick run take a flying leap to the rock in the middle of the water, evidently intending to take his seat there instead of fishing from the bank. Whether he had measured the distance falsely, or whether his foot slipped on the slippery rock, she could not tell, but in a second she saw him submerged in the rushing depths, and whirled like a straw in her own direction.

"Great heavens! the mill wheel!" she gasped, standing paralyzed for an instant by the intense horror of that thought.

The current set firm and strong in that direction. In a moment he would be beneath the bridge on which she stood, and whirled onward till the fierce waters would suck him into their whirlpool, and the cruel wheel would hold him in its grasp. The horror of the situation flashed thro' her brain like lightning. Without a moment's pause, a second's consideration, she stooped under the railing of the bridge, which was so low it was within two feet of the water.

Holding on to one of the beams for support she let herself drop, and as the water whirled him beneath she seized the collar of his coat and held it fast.

The strain on her power was terrible. Her wrists were wrenched like a pulley as they supported his weight below and her own weight above. The sound of the water in her ears was like the roar of a furious sea. She cried aloud for help, with an agonized prayer in her heart that it might reach the miller or some of his laborers returning home.

The man was quite stunned; she could see a deep red gash in his forehead, which must have struck against the rock in that fatal leap. A moment more and she feared her strength would fail—a moment more and the river would hold two victims instead of one! A moment—

"O, thank God! thank God!" A shout in her ear—a strong clasp—a helping hand which seized the stiff and lifeless weight in her numbed and straining grasp. A moment and she was drawn back on the bridge, with a face as white as death, and with limbs that trembled like a wind-tossed leaf.

"'Tis Miss Verta from the cottage, as I live," said a voice. "Bless us and save us, what a thing for a young weak thing like her to go and do. It's a mercy the two on 'em weren't drowned like kittens! together! Wasn't it plucky though, Bill?"

The girl opened her eyes, and nerved herself against the deadly sickness and faintness creeping over her.

"Thank you for your bravery," she said. "How fortunate that you were so near. Is he safe?"

"He looks bad—nigh dead, I should say, answered one of the men.

"Oh, do take him to the cottage," she cried eagerly, as she raised herself and staggered to her feet. "My father will reward you for your brave action. Where would we be now were it not for you?"

Her unconscious coupling of the man she had saved with her own self—her anxiaus, compassionate gaze at his white still voice—her shudder of terror at the river as its noise struck on her ear, all spoke of a new and vivid interest—a life roused from its quiet slumbers to an awakening, whose deeper import she had yet to learn.

The men touched their hats and bent down to the prostrate, senseless figure at their feet. They raised him in their arms, and bore him to the cottage, with its flush of summer bloom and its calm of summer peace.

As they entered, the girl looked up at the sky overhead. The cloud had floated onward, and stood directly over her own home. There was no silver lining to its sombre darkness now.

CHAPTER II.

All night in the summer stillness came the song of the nightingale from among the roses. All night with feverish restlessness a man tossed on his couch of pain. All night in the silver moon-rays a girl lay awake and uneasy, with throbbing veins, still strained and aching from that terrible weight, with sleepless eyes that would not close, and a strange dull foreboding in her heart that had never chilled its glad young beats before.

"Was life really so sad?" she wondered. "Did it hold pain so great and woe so deep that the heart turned to bitterness, and joy to grief, and love to hate? Would the cloud shadow her own life, too, since the old man had told her that none could escape?"

Through all her dreams this one thought ran, haunting her, saddening her, chilling her natural joyousness, disturbing her natural gayety, which had been hitherto the gayety of a child knowing naught of evil, dreading naught of pain.

With the morning her father sought the stranger's side, and dressed his wound with some of the old medical skill that he had not forgotten, though he had long ceased to practice as a physician. It was then that, for the first time, the young man learned the story of his danger and his rescue, and heard with mingled wonder and admiration of the heroism to which he owed his life.

"What can I say," he murmured as the story ended, and the old man's voice trembled with emotion over the recital of his darling's bravery and deadly peril. "No words, no acts can ever repay such a debt. I wonder you do not hate me, seeing in my foolhardiness such risk to the life you love so well!"

"She is my only child—my all," said the old man tenderly. "To have lost her—well, there lives me no word to paint the agony of that thought. And yet, I would not have had her do otherwise. In Heaven's sight are not all lives equal?"

"There would have been none to mourn me," said his companion sadly, "my existence is of small value in comparison with what hers seems to you."

"Ay, Heaven be praised, she was spared," was the fervent ejaculation. "But you are over young to talk of being so little missed or cared for!"

"Nevertheless it is quite true. I am utterly friendless. My life has been lard, loveless, toilsome; it is of small account to any one but myself."

"I hope you do not follow the cant of the day," rejoined the old man sternly, "and allow there is no good or desirable thing in life now, and therefore waste its fairest and freshest years in the exhaustion of folly—the lawlessness of sin!"

"No; I do not hold such views. But to exhaust the follies of life and to follow its lawlessness one must be rich enough to reckon no cost, or vicious enough to stay for no better impulse. I am certainly not the one, for I am a poor man, and live by my wits. I hope I am not the other, since, amid a life that has always been hard, and a youth that has always been lonely, I have still kept faith in heaven, and pity for man, and reverence for woman."

"Have you a mother?"

A dark shade clouded the frank young face.

"She is dead," he said. "As for other relatives, my father has disowned me. I do not even bear or know his name. Brother or sister I never possessed. I am quite alone. I believe I am entitled to be called a gentleman. I gain my bread by painting or doing illustrations for periodicals. I live most of the year in London, and have come to this village for a month's rest, as my health has not been strong of late. There is my history, sir. It is all my introduction."

"And quite enough," said the old man heartily. "Your face is too frank and open to deceive, and I am quite sure your heart is honest, too."

He shook hands cordially with the guest so strangely brought beneath his roof, and then bade him come into the little sitting-room when he felt sufficiently rested.

"You will find Vera there," he said in his genial, kindly tones, that were so frank in their cordiality, so trustful in their welcome. "My daughter, I mean."

"May I ask the favor of your name" said the young man, smiling. "Mine is Keith Brandon. I do not know whom I have the honor of addressing."

"My name is Ashford; it used to bear the prefix of Doctor, but I have dropped it long since."

"I am not to use it then?" questioned Keith.

"If you wish, certainly. But most of the people know me only as 'Master,' or 'Maister,' as they pronounce it. Now, I really must be off. You are sure you are strong enough to come down stairs?"

"Quite sure. Why, gratitude alone would give me strength, were I not all curious to see one, who with a woman's weakness unites a man's heroism."

"You must not spoil Vera's simplicity by fine words and London manners," said the old man with sudden gravity, as he stood at the door and looked back at the handsome face and strong, erect, young figure in the room beyond.

"Do not be alarmed," was the gentle response. "I reverence the simplicity and guilelessness of a true woman beyond all earthly things."

"You were no true man if you did not," said Doctor Ashford gravely, and he closed the door and went down stairs to Vera with his usual calm face and tender smile.

"How is he?" the girl asked eagerly, as she came up and kissed him.

"Much better. He is coming down stairs presently. He is anxious to see you and thank you for your bravery. Oh, my dear—my dear, I tremble now even at the thought of it. If help had not come!"

"Why trouble yourself over possibilities, father," said Vera, gently. "Help did come, and there is no need to tremble. Your child is safe here, and likely to plague you a good while longer."

The old man smiled lovingly at the bright, beautiful face.

"May heaven send all fathers such plagues!" he said tenderly. "What happy homes there would be, my darling!"

"You'll make me vain with so much praise," she said merrily. "Come along and have breakfast. I had better send some up for the invalid, I suppose."

"Indeed no, Miss Ashford; the invalid is here to answer for himself!"

At the sound of the voice she turned; the sunlight waving over her delicate face, the look of startled wonder and of glad surprise still lighting her soft shy eyes. They looked at each other.

As their eyes met, as their hands touched—as their lips opened in the old, trite, world worn greeting which we use to strangers as to friends, so surely something deeper awoke in each heart—something sweeter spoke in each glance! Then their hands loosened their clasp; but the feelings, started into sudden life, never loosened their fast, sure links, riveted in that one brief moment, that one lingering look.

"So you have found a sweetheart?"

Vera was standing by the corner of a little brown, shallow brook, fringed with tall bull-rushes and waving willow stems. She started as the words fell on her ear, and looked round at the speaker. The old man whom she had met in the poppy-fields some three weeks before, "the miser of the glebe," as the villagers all called him, was standing a short distance off, leaning on his stick, and scanning her with malicious eyes and sneering smile.

The girl's face flushed slightly beneath his scrutiny.

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"You are still happy, are you not?"

She lifted her eyes to his face with a dreamy, wistful regard.

"I am very happy."

"And who is the handsome stranger who is always by your side now? I heard of your folly in nearly sacrificing your life for his. Of course, woman-like, you will complete it by giving that life to him hereafter, to guard or wreck as he pleases."

She flashed on him a look of such startled pain, such speechless anger, as made the mockery of his own eyes fade.

"You have nothing to do with my actions," she said haughtily. "I scarcely think you mean to insult me, but your words are, to say the least of them, unwarrantable and incomprehensible."

He laughed.

"I thought nothing in the way of admiration was incomprehensible to woman. I scarcely suppose your new friend has been with you so constantly and left you unaware of your own attractions. You must know that you are beautiful."

"You are the first person who ever told me so."

"Is your lover so cold then, or so blind?"

"How dare you use such words to me," she said, with sudden anger in her voice, and a certain shame in her pained young heart. "You have no right—"

"Save my experience and your ignorance."

She shrank away with a movement of aversion.

"You need not remind me of that. If experience turns all fair and holy things to bitterness and contempt, I pray I may never exchange my ignorance for it!"

The keen eyes of the old man sparkled with malignant mirth. He liked to rouse the gentleness and calm of this girl's spirit to something more akin to wrath and bitterness than she herself was aware of.

"Keep that ignorance, then, my dear," he said ironically, as she moved away with a slight bow of farewell. "Keep it with its twin sister—content. When you part with them your life's happiness goes too!"

She made no answer, but turned away, hurt and pained, and left him by the brookside in the evening shadows.

But as she went homeward she could not forget his words. They had stirred her heart from its rest; they had left her with memories whose innocent shame tortured her as nothing in all her bright life had ever done before. Hitherto her heart had leaped to the gladness of youth, the mere sense of living, and enjoying, the simple, innocent life she had known. Now a new element had arisen in that life; and through the golden haze of pure faiths and trustful hopes and fairy dreams another face looked back to hers, another future met and paused beside her own.

The old man's word had shown her this, and left her disturbed and saddened all at once. This stranger whose life she had saved, whose presence had haunted her for these short few weeks, had grown unaccountably dear, though no word of love or glance of passion had lived in his speech or look.

She did not know—how could she—the conflict that he waged each day, each hour, that found him in her presence. She could not guess how hard it was to retain every word and every look that might betray his own secret. She did not know that, being in his own sight a nameless, obscure, toiling son of fortune, he, therefore, deemed it dishonorable to awaken either interest or regard for himself in the girl's fancies, knowing that to take, or seek to take, her from the shelter and innocence of her sheltered life, and to ask her to battle with him through the stern and sordid ordeal which his own future represented, was a thing utterly impossible to his generous impulse and his chivalrous love. Therefore he guarded himself so closely, and betrayed by no word or sign the weakness that at times she unconsciously tempted almost beyond endurance. Therefore it was that he said to himself as he wrestled with a love that every day but strengthened and increased: "I will leave her unwooed. So best!"

Perhaps some vague hope of a future when he might win her arose at times in his heart. Some vision of a female he might touch, a fortune he might secure. Then, he told himself, he might speak. Now it looked to him unmanly to do so.

"She will never know," he thought, "She is but a child still."

But do what he might he could not forget her—could not care for her less. With one look she had shattered the serenity of his whole previous life, and left to him a memory that was precious and painful both in one, and had given him, along with its preciousness, a weary self-contest that brought but little hope of peace, but little care for victory. For he loved her too well to forget, and between them lay a barrier that it would be the work of years to overthrow, the foe of many a youthful love—poverty.

He had grown accustomed to shifts and straits for himself; to go without meals; to deny himself all but the bare necessaries; to live from hand to mouth, toiling, working, struggling, fighting single-handed in a great city's warfare; but to ask her to share such a life or risk such straits, with only his arm to lean on, his love to recompense, was what he had not courage to do.

He was her debtor. Could he ask her to take such recompense as this? Could he repay thus the noble heroism that had risked life in his service without a thought of the consequence?

All the manhood in him rebelled at the thought. He crushed down the impotent desires that stung him to madness—the passionate longings which strove ever and always to tear aside the mask of impassiveness he wore—the regrets that no power of his own could lull to rest.

"I must leave her," he told himself. "I cannot, dare not, stay here longer. With each day my strength grows less."

Even as the words were on his lips he met her face to face.

She was coming home with the old man's taunts still fresh in her memory—with the shame his words had awakened still burning in her innocent heart.

As she saw him the color flushed from brow to throat. Her eyes dropped. The usual welcome died on her lips unspoken.

"I am glad I have met you," he said with his usual courteous gentleness. "I was about to call at the cottage to say farewell. I leave tomorrow."

She started slightly. Had he but looked at her he would have seen the sudden pallor of the sweet face, the flash of pain in the wistful eyes. But he was looking far beyond, to where the sun rays touched the river's quiet breast with slanting bars of gold.

"It is sudden, is it not?" she said at length.

Her voice sounded cold because of its hard-won firmness, and her cheek flushed back to warmth with sudden pride.

"Yes," he answered, looking at her face now, but unable to meet the eyes she steadfastly averted, "It is sudden. I am grieved to go. I have been so happy here. I shall never forget this place or you!"

A few moments later she stood there alone, her eyes on a retreating figure, her hands clasped tightly on her fast-throbbing heart.

With all her pain a thrill of gladness mingled.

"The cloud has a silver lining," she said softly. "He said he would return."

And with the music of those words in her memory, she passed across the yellow corn-fields and took the pathway home.

"I am sorry young Brandon has gone," said the old doctor that evening, as, leaning on Vera's arm, he paced up and down the little garden. "I shall miss him very much."

Vera was silent.

"I wish I could have learned more of his history," resumed her father. "He goes by his mother's name. She never would tell him his father's. She had been cruelly wronged and driven from his roof with her infant son, and only the charity of strangers stood between her and starvation. From what Keith says she must have been a noble woman."

"And she is dead now?"

"Yes, my child—dead—with her honor tarnished by a cruel lie, and her son's life darkened by an unmerited shame. It is very sad—very very sad."

"How clever he is! He has such great gifts!" sighed the girl with unconscious pathos.

"Yes, he is both gifted and noble. But he is so poor, and in the world genius always suffers in the grasp of poverty—it is a mortal foe. The man who can dower genius with success lives in a palace—the man who owns it in a hovel. The one who buys is great, the one who creates may want bread, or be thankful for a beggar's crust. Yes, it is strange but true."

"There is not much happiness then in the world?" questioned the girl, to whom all knowledge of its miseries, sins and woes were alike unknown.

"My dear, there is happiness everywhere who seek it aright; but it is a word of many meanings, and the true meaning is only—there!"

He pointed up to the radiant heavens as they stretched in cloudless calm above his head. The girl's face grew awed and pale as she looked at him, then suddenly she drew his arms around her and laid her head upon his breast.

"You have made all my life's happiness for me," she said. "How good you are—how good!"

"My love, none are that!" he said tenderly. "Being mortals, and being weak throughout sin within and beset by sin without, how could it be otherwise?"

"Do you know anything of the old man at the glebe?" asked Vera, presently. "He speaks to me sometimes, but he is very hard and very bitter."

"I only know him by what the people here say," answered the father. "That he is miserly and eccentric, and lives quite alone, save for the old witch-like woman who attends to his simple wants. I have never exchanged words with him since I lived here."

"I feel sorry for him," continued the girl pityingly. "And he talks so strangely to me always. He seems to resent the mere fact of being glad and light-hearted as an injury to himself. He warned me one day that every life had its shadow—its days of woe and darkness and grief—that mine would come too. If they do—Papa, papa, what is it?"

The awful agonized cry that left her lips was echoed by a groan of mortal agony. The old man's feeble form seemed to slip from her childish arms, and lay on the grass at her feet like a felled log, in the grasp of that terrible foe—paralysis.

The girl's shrieks quickly brought the old woman-servant from the house, but their united strength was unequal to the task of carrying that helpless burden. Aid had to be procured from the village and medical assistance summoned; but the old doctor's great age rendered science of no avail. He lived for a week unconscious, then died in his child's arms.

Over her life the cloud and darkness of a great sorrow had indeed fallen.

CHAPTER III.

It was all over.

The funeral had taken place, the few necessary arrangements had been made, and Vera awoke from the pain and lethargy of grief to the startling fact that she was alone in the world, and penniless.

What little money her father had, just sufficed to pay the necessary expenses of his death bed; but for her there was nothing save the cottage. If she lived in it what was she to do to earn her daily bread—to support herself and the faithful old woman, who had lived in their service over twenty years, and mourned her master's death as deeply almost as his child?

To be poor was nothing very terrible to one who had never known riches; but the necessity of doing something, of turning from dreams to work, from dependence on another to dependence on herself alone, at first fell upon her with the cruel sharpness of necessity, and a sense of the bitter helplessness of youth and womanhood.

The rector's wife advised her to become a governess, though she had so few accomplishments, and promised to write and interest friends on her behalf. Vera had never liked the fussy, patronizing little woman, and liked her still less when she came full of advice and suggestions to intrude on her grief.

Human interests and human sympathy seemed alike indifferent to her now. It was so terrible to think of the love she had lost, the sympathy and tenderness and care which had guarded her life so long, and were now forever fled beyond recall.

It was about a week after her father's death when, as she sat alone in the little parlor in the summer dusk, old Dorcas, the servant, entered:

"If you please, Miss Vera," she said, "there's a strange-looking lady without, who wants speech of you. She says she comes from the Glebe."

The girl raised her pale, sad face from her hands.

"Tell her to come in here," she said listlessly. "I will see her."

A moment after, an old, bent, witch like woman entered—a woman with a brown, wrinkled face, and hard, fierce eyes, and long, bird-like, quivering fingers that clutched her ragged shawl as she spoke.

"You wished to see me?" said Vera gently.

"He bade me come," murmured the old creature indistinctly. "He bade me haste and say he was ill—a dying, he thinks—he would see you at once."

"Whom do you mean?" asked the girl in wonder.

"My master—the miser, they all call him Aye, and a miser he is, sure enough, and gold heaped up there like dust, and he stinting and starving, and hoarding all the time. But he is ill now—very ill. He would see you at once."

She mumbled and muttered the words in strange, disjointed fragments as Vera sat gazing at her, half in wonder, half in fear.

"He lies a dying," she repeated, as though she had found some inward pleasure in the sound of the words; "and all the good gold heaped up and none to gather—none to gather—kith and kin all dead and gone. Ah, it is a fine world—a fine world!"

"Is he really so ill?"

"He lies a dying," she repeated. "He bade me come; he would have no doctor—none only you. Are you coming?"

"Yes, I will follow you."

"Indeed, Miss, and you don't go to that heathenish place at this time of night alone," interposed old Dorcas who was still lingering near the door.

"Who will harm her, do you think?" chuckled the old crone. "Not he, she never loved me; she turned my life into hell; she—"

"Oh, hush! hush!" sobbed the girl. "Indeed, you are wrong; she was maligned, slandered, and you believed too easily. Could a guilty mother bear such a son? Could his every memory of her be as fond, and pure, and tender as it is were she indeed what you believed? Oh, listen, and for once have mercy. I know him, he was here so short a time ago; all that old sad story of his youth and suffering I learned. Oh, if you could but see him, hear him, you would know you wrong him. If honor ever lived in mortal man it lives in him!"

He stared at her aghast.

"What do you know?" he said. "How dare you champion one whose very name I abhor—whose mother's memory has poisoned all good, or glad or holy things within me for thirty weary years?"

"I know him," the girl said very gently. "I heard this story from his own lips."

"You know him? Are you mad?"

"He was here but a short time ago—surely you knew—the stranger whom you saw with me was called Keith Brandon—if that is your son's name, the stranger was you son!"

"My son!"

He fell back on his pillow, the damp dew standing bead like on his brow; his face gray with the ashen hues of death, and the fierce agony that was rending his heart.

"The draught—quick," he gasped.

Vera seized the bottle to which he pointed and poured out the quantity directed into a glass; very tenderly she supported him and wiped the damp, cold sweat from his brow and adjusted his pillows with a touch widely different from the old crone's rough handling. The draught revived him. The gray hues faded back, and were replaced by color more life like. For some moments he rested back on the pillows, with closed eyes and lips, his hands plucking restlessly at the quilt. Suddenly he looked up at her.

"A good girl!" he muttered. "A good girl! If heaven had sent me such a daughter I might have been a different man."

"Heaven sent you a son," the girl answered gently. "How have you played a father's part to him?"

"Peace!" he shouted fiercely, as he raised himself again with sudden strength. "Peace girl What I did was right—I had proofs, every proof, she never loved me No, it was for gold she cared—for gold. Aye, and I drove her forth to perish or not as she pleased, while the gold for which she sold herself remained with me. I denounced her with its curse; I told her neither her nor her child should touch it. Ha! ha! it is mine still—mine."

Vera shrunk from him with sudden horror.

"Can you not turn your thoughts to softer things?" she asked. "Is a death-bed the time for anger—the place for revenge?"

"You are a good girl—yes," he muttered in the old rambling way. "But is what you say true; do you indeed know my son?"

"I know Keith Brandon, as I told you before."

"That man—that man," he went on muttering, "with the bright, handsome eyes, the frank young face; he spoke to me once, so courteously, so kindly, and I—I for once was weak enough to wish he was my son."

"Will you not see him—hear his story yourself?" asked Vera beseechingly. "I pray it now for your own sake, and for his. May I not send? I know where he lives."

"No—a thousand times no!" he shouted fiercely, raising himself on the pillows with the old angry light flashing into his hollow eyes once more. "If I saw him I might believe, I should be again deceived. No, girl—no! As I have lived so will I die—wifeless, childless. Let my will stand; the wealth is yours!" "I will not take it—not one single shilling of it all," said the girl haughtily. "It is your son's by every right—by every law. To him does it justly belong. A poor recompense at best for a neglected youth, a toilsome, hopeless manhood, an alien name."

"You plead for him with rare eloquence," said the old man, with that strange sarcastic smile curving his lips once more. "Well, remember, it is in your power to beggar him. If you refuse my wealth I shall not will it to him any the more. If you accept it I withdraw my condition."

"Are you a man and can talk thus?" cried the girl, flushing and quivering with the shame and humiliation enforced upon her. "You must know that, with condition or not, it is equally impossible for any one to do him justice save yourself."

For she knew her undeclared lover well enough to be only too certain that her riches would be a barrier ten thousand times more formidable than his poverty, and that this hateful wealth could never come to him through her. And she was right.

With sudden tenderness she passed to the old man's side and bent over him. "Listen!" she said. "It is not for me to counsel or advise, for I am young and ignorant, and a woman; but this I must say: You tell me you are ill—dying. Well, can you die with your conscience burdened by a sin to one who is innocent and good? Can you meet your injured wife, and know that you have left in poverty and degradation and need, her still more injured son; for he—what has he done that you should be so unforgiving? Think how, even if your son had erred, or your wife had wronged you, that One who suffered death at a traitor's hands bade us forgive until seventy times seven."

As her voice fell hushed and solemn across the silence of the dreary room, as the hot tears dimmed her sad young eyes with the intense pity and longing that filled her soul, the old man's iron calm forsook him—the long sealed fountain of softness and tenderness was broken up.

Down his furrowed cheeks the slow, salt tears of age were silently coursing; into his heart some old forgotten memory crept of the wife he had loved, of the little babe whose innocent eyes had smiled on him, whose waxen fingers had touched his own.

"God forgive me!" he murmured in sorrowful, broken words. "Perhaps I have wronged them both!"

When morning dawned it saw a great wrong rectified, a great sorrow healed. It saw father and son reconciled; it saw a wife's name honored and blessed by the dying breath of the man who for forty years had wronged and doubted and neglected her; it saw two young lovers hand in hand, kneeling beside that couch of pain until the sun rose in triumphant glory, and for both living and dead there dawned the peace of a perfect day.—*All the Year Around.*