

The Reformer

By CHARLES M. SHELDON.
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"Will you live with me here, Luella—here in Hope House?"

"Yes! Yes! For I do love you; I do love you, John!" she cried, sobbing, and he lay so still, so exhausted with his efforts, that she rose at once and, going to the door, called for Miss Andrews and Ford to come, thinking he had fallen into the sleep that knows no waking. But when they came they saw a smile on his face and a look of peace there that was more hopeful, Ford said, than anything yet recorded.

Even as they all three stood by him he opened his eyes and whispered:

"Will you kiss me, Luella? I am happy!"

She leaned over and kissed his lips, and then, with a smile on her face which neither Miss Andrews nor Ford understood until after events made it clear,

She swept on in into the library and sat there for some time, dreading to have news brought her that he had sunk into death. But Ford came in after awhile and said he was asleep and, while at the furthest degree of mental and heavy exhaustion, there was a fighting chance.

So Luella went home and the next few weeks she passed in a suspense of feeling that left with her an experience impossible to describe. Every day she either went to Hope House or heard from there. When she went herself, she did not ask to see him. The delirium of brain fever was on him, and he knew no one, not even Ford. Luella shrank from going into the room. Once she looked in through the open door. Then she passed along back into the library, and tears ran down her face as she went and sat down near the large window overlooking the scene of the fire.

Miss Andrews came in and found her looking out at the place. Most of the rubbish had been removed, and half a dozen saloons had gone up on as many corners. Tommy Randall's double-decker was unfinished, and its incomplete condition added to the general dreary hideousness of the prospect. Luella shuddered at it all.

"Is there any prospect of getting this property for your proposed park?" she asked as Miss Andrews came over by the window.

"We do not know yet. You have heard the news of Randall's conviction in the court of special pleas? Mr. Chambers succeeded in furnishing proof of conspiracy, and it looks very much as if Randall's day was over. The election next week will decide his fate. It looks now as if the present administration would be defeated, and the Reform party elect a full ticket. In that case the boss will have to go. He has already disposed of several lots around the double-decker, and it looks very much as if he was getting ready to leave the city if the election goes against him. It all turns on that issue."

Luella looked wistfully out of the window. Then she turned to Miss Andrews.

"When did the doctor say the—the crisis for Mr. Gordon would be reached?"

"In about a week," Miss Andrews answered gently. Her whole face and manner betrayed the nervous strain under which she had been living. Luella, who had come to know her as once was not possible, admired and wondered whenever this remarkable woman was near her.

"Will the fever leave him any?"

"I think not. Of course he will be very weak for a long time, but he will have hope to sustain him—and—and your promise?" Miss Andrews added, with an effort. "Forgive me, Miss Marsh. I overheard your promise to him. It probably saved his life."

"Do you think it did?" Luella asked faintly. She shuddered again and turned her eyes out of the window and was silent a long time. Miss Andrews possessed the quality of keeping still and did not return to say anything more. After awhile Luella said, "Let us pray God that all may be well with him when the crisis comes."

"Yes, please God," Miss Andrews whispered. Then she went out of the library, and shortly after Luella went home.

When she came into the house, she found Mrs. Penrose waiting to see her.

"How is Mr. Gordon?" Mrs. Penrose asked the moment Luella stepped into the drawing room.

Luella told her.

"Then he is not out of danger?"

"No. The crisis will come next week."

"Do you care very much, Luella?" Mrs. Penrose asked somewhat carelessly.

Luella did not answer.

"If he gets well, what then? Will you marry him?"

Still Luella did not answer. Mrs. Penrose eyed her sharply.

"You are unhappy, Luella. Is it because you are afraid he will die or—" Luella looked up.

"If he lives, will you marry him?" Mrs. Penrose persisted.

"I promised him that I would and that I would live with him in Hope House. But—Mrs. Penrose was watching her closely. Luella was in need of a confessor, and she went on: "But I cannot live there. I promised because I thought he was dying. I was carried away by my feelings. If I tried to live there with him, I should be wretched and make his life miserable."

"So you have decided to make his

life miserable by not living with him. That's good feminine logic. For getting into real dilemmas command to a woman. The graceful thing for him to do would be to die. It would at least save you the awkward business of explaining away your promise to him. I don't envy you your interview with him if he lives. I'd sooner go and live in Hope House all my life."

"Don't!" cried Luella. She walked up and down the room like a man. Mrs. Penrose watching her curiously.

"Of course you never really loved John Gordon. If you had, no question of Hope House would ever have risen. Seeing you have never yet loved any one, maybe you will allow me to present the name of a suitor."

Luella stopped in her walk and faced Mrs. Penrose angrily. Mrs. Penrose continued in the sweetest manner:

"Archie claims your attention. He has won me with his persistent appeals for my pleading in his behalf. And this seems as good a time as any to bring his claims forward. You are not going to marry John Gordon; therefore marry somebody. And it cannot be denied that Archie is somebody, at least in his own estimation. He has money, he is no worse than a good many other young men like him, and he will not ask you to live in Hope House. What more could you ask, Luella? And what more could I say? It is not every day that one has an offer of marriage from such a young man as Archie. The occasion will never come again."

Mrs. Penrose spoke with a smile that could be interpreted as meaning any one of half a dozen things.

"Stop!" cried Luella. "Never mention Archie Penrose's name to me again. If he were the only man in the universe, I would never marry him!"

"And yet," continued Mrs. Penrose slowly, "you throw away, like an old rags, the true love of a good man simply because you are not willing to give up a few of the desplots of civilization. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher. Yet we prize these vanities beyond the best thing in the world, which no doubt is love."

"Oh, do not talk to me any more," cried Luella. She resumed her walk, and Mrs. Penrose placidly resumed her talk.

"Now that I have done my duty by my nephew at his request I am going to plead the cause of John Gordon, though he has not asked me to. Luella, do you realize what you are going to fling out of your life if you go to John Gordon and tell him in cold blood that you lied to him when you promised to be his wife? He is a young man of splendid ability and spotless character. He has chosen a career that is unselfish, noble and full of possibilities. As his wife you could share in his struggles, but no less also in his triumphs. The whole social question is at the front in our republic. Men who, like John Gordon, stand up for the rights of humanity, especially the rights of childhood, are bound to command a hearing from the world. You are missing the rarest opportunity a woman ever had to ally herself with a man who has something in his plan of life worthy of effort. What will you have to give up? A few baubles that make the physical life a little softer and a few that civilized power can get along without and in the most cases be the better for not having. For these baubles you are going to commit an act of deliberate murder of the best feeling a woman ever had, murder of love for a true man. He is perfectly right to demand that you live with him in Hope House. You would have every reason to despise him if he did not ask that of you. A man who has a great life work like that of John Gordon could not ask any woman to share it with him who did not gladly accept all that went with it. Remember, Luella, my married life?" Mrs. Penrose was speaking with deep earnestness; she had been leaning forward, all her usual careless, reckless manner gone completely. "I married for money. I was poor. I longed for the physical softness of things. I need not tell you, Luella, that my marriage was a failure so far as love is concerned. I got the money; I missed the love. What has it been worth? The poorest mother in the city, struggling with saddest poverty, but sure of the love of her husband and children, has been heavenly happy compared with me. I? I never had a home. I had an establishment. I am a homeless woman. I shall grow old and die without ever having known the earthly joy of a home. Luella, do you choose to be one of the army of homeless women in the cities? The poor envy our fine houses, our swell turnouts, our luxuries, our leisure, our dinners, our dresses, our money. They envy hell, for that is what it all means when love is absent. John Gordon offers you heaven, Luella. You choose the other place if you refuse him. You are mad to refuse him, Luella. You will live to regret it in time and eternity."

"Oh, do not talk to me any more. I am miserable over it!" Luella nearly lost all control. She threw herself down on a couch and buried her head in the cushions.

Mrs. Penrose got up and looked at her sternly.

"If he gets well, what then? Will you marry him?"

I almost wish John Gordon may not live, for your sake as well as his," she said. Luella shuddered, and Mrs. Penrose after a pause went out of the room.

The crisis for John Gordon came on the night of the election day. To Ford and the others who watched by him that night it seemed as if the struggle being fought out in the city was typified by the struggle going on in John Gordon's room. Rumors of the political battle drifted into Hope House all day. Both sides were confident. Both sides claimed a victory. It was righteousness against all forms of evil that had grown secure and insolent, but was now alarmed and fighting for her face.

existence. Tommy Randall typified the entire city administration. He had used enormous sums of money. The tenement district almost solidly voted for him against the friends who, like Miss Andrews, lived to better their condition. The whole thing illustrated magnificently the regular social degradation of American civic life.

As night deepened, returns began to come in slowly there seemed to be no decisive indications for either side. Ford, who had been with Gordon from the beginning, refused to leave, although he was thoroughly exhausted. Gordon sank lower and lower. Twice they thought he had passed on. Each time he rallied. At 2 o'clock he was nearer death than he had ever been. From that time on the struggle of life for the spirit grew stronger. When dawn came, the doctor lifted his hand and a grim smile expressed his satisfaction. The crisis was passed, and John Gordon, by the grace of God, was to live and struggle on for a few years more before his spirit should go to God, who gave it.

Out in Bowen street and around Hope House the boys were crying out special election editions. Miss Andrews and Ford could hear the words "Victory for Reform ticket!" "Triumph for law and order!" "Chambers elected city attorney!" Ford stole downstairs and got a paper. The little family of residents gathered in the library. The first questions asked were about John Gordon.

"The doctor says he'll live. Hurrah!" Ford cried feebly. He waved the paper as if that was the special news that covered its first page with heavy type and exclamation points. Some one discovered Miss Andrews over by the window with tears on her face.

Miss Hammond came up and put an arm about her.

"Grand, isn't it?" Miss Hammond said.

"Yes. It did not seem possible in the night that he could live."

"Who? Tommy Randall?" Miss Hammond asked demurely.

Miss Andrews laughed.

"I'm rather unstrung by all this," she said.

"It is a good deal, isn't it? Tommy's death and Mr. Gordon's life at the same time. But joy never kills, does it?"

"It has never killed Miss Andrews yet," said Ford. "But I don't know how she will stand all this. I'm afraid it will go hard with her."

"I will try to accustom myself to it," the head of the house answered, smiling on them all. At the breakfast table no one ever remembered to have seen her more interesting or fascinating.

John Gordon rapidly grew stronger. When once life had claimed him, it seemed as if all the forces of good came to his assistance.

One day when he had become strong enough he listened with the greatest delight to Ford's account of the election.

"Chambers is going to make history for the double-decker fellows. There are over a hundred cases like already. The atmosphere around the end of Bowen street is of a dark blue. Tommy Randall has skipped out for his health and carried with him the bundle he was careful not to use for campaign purposes. The property out here, including his unfinished building, has all passed into other hands, and the city is likely to take measures toward condemnation and purchase, of course that means lots of legislation and law's delays, and so forth, but the gang is out of the city halls, and Chambers and his gold bowed spectacles will move things as rapidly as the law permits, which to my mind is not fast enough to set anything afire. At the next election the city ought to make Chambers a king and give him absolute authority to do as he pleases for the good of the city. But I tell you, Gordon, you missed a mighty good fight by being here the week before the election."

"So did you, my dear fellow, from what I hear of you," said Gordon affectionately.

"Oh, I had a good fight over you," said Ford. "There were also others. Miss Marsh came down or sent word every day. We were all determined not to let you die. But 'twas a good fight. I'm about used up. I turn you over to Miss Marsh."

"I'm sorry to miss you, Ford," Gordon laughed lightly.

"I've no fault to find."

"I understand. You simply want a better looking nurse around. Don't blame you," said Ford, who was uncommonly honest and not at all sensitive over it.

"I did not say so," replied Gordon, laughing again.

"The world seemed good to him. The victory of the righteous forces in the city, the defeat of Tommy Randall, the prospect for the future and, above all, the thought of Luella filled him with joy. Life was worth living after all. There would always be battle, but victory was possible; always sorrow and trouble, but God was not dead. Every minute brought healing to him. When a few days after, Miss Andrews told him that Miss Marsh was in the house, he felt almost equal to his old time enthusiasm.

He was up and dressed, sitting by his window, which overlooked the same prospect as that commanded by the library window downstairs, when Luella stepped into the room.

She had put off coming to see him as long as possible. When she had no more excuses to offer, she went down to Hope House. Gordon of course asked to see her. He was growing strong so fast that there was no reason why he should not see her.

She came slowly into the room, and started to rise and walk toward her, but he was not equal to it and sank back, smiling at her and not noting in his effort the very grave look in her face.

"I have been told that you are a nurse, Luella, but I was ignorant of it."

He noted her look and instantly felt troubled by it. She leaped up to his chair and put out her hand. He had bent over and placed his tips on it and felt it to be trembling and cold.

"What is the matter? You are ill."

"No; but, John!"

She sat down near him and covered her face. John Gordon sat very still. He did not break the silence.

"Oh, let us not—do not ask me to you are not strong enough. It is cruel in me to come to you in this way, but I am not able to act a part."

"What is it?" he asked quietly. She looked up. He was gazing at her so gently, so lovingly, that she was deeply moved. She rose and kneeled down by him and let him put his hands over hers.

"John," she exclaimed wildly, "is it right that I should make you unhappy all your life?"

"There is only one way you can do that."

"Yes; but it is not the way you mean. It is the way I mean. If I should be your wife and come here to live, I should be acting a part I am not made to act. It would be unfair to you. When you began to realize the impossibility of it for me, then your unhappiness would begin."

"Your promise—" John Gordon began, while his eyes sought to dwell on hers and then wandered away to the window.

"My promise? Oh, it was given when I thought you were dying. You cannot know the agony I have suffered! John, tell me you despise me. What a contradiction I am to myself, to you, to everybody!"

"There are no contradictions in true love," said John Gordon gently. He removed his hands from hers and turned his face away. She slowly rose and stood looking out of the window.

"It is that, that?" she exclaimed passionately, pointing at the view from the window. "It would kill me, all that dreary, hideous, unattractive, horrible humanity, with its miserable, sordid, mean, selfish life. To dwell with it, to neighbor it—I cannot—I cannot! It would be a sin for me to pretend that I could be happy in that kind of a life."

"And yet," said John Gordon, looking at her with a new look, in which pity for her predominated more than any feeling for himself—"and yet it is the kind of humanity that the Son of God came to save. I am sorry for you, Luella. God help you."

She turned toward him swiftly. Something in his tone reminded her of something Mrs. Penrose had said.

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