

The North Branch Democrat.

HARVEY SICKLER, Proprietor.

"TO SPEAK HIS THOUGHTS IS EVERY FREEMAN'S RIGHT."—Thomas Jefferson.

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In strengthening and restoring the system. Thousands of ladies who have suffered for years and tried various other remedies in vain, owe a renewal of their health and strength wholly to the efficacy of

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Select Story,

FRANCIS HALEY.

BY CLARA AUGUSTA.

CHAPTER I.

A long stretch of dull, lured sky—the fiery sun sinking from view behind a ridge of gray, blue hills—a dark—musky vapor hanging over the waste, which was bounded on one side by a line of rank willows, and on the other by the sluggish waters of a shallow river. The south-east wind blew up sickly and chill from the distant sea, and sent a shudder through the leafless branches of the woodbine still clinging to the casement.

Francis Haley closed the window, let down the curtain, and turned inward to the scant fire burning on the brick hearth. The red glow lit up her face, but the warm light could not make that face other than it was—plain and hopelessly ugly, save for the sweet eyes and heavy masses of golden hair.

"It's time to go to milking, Frank," said a querulous voice from the depths of the great arm-chair in the corner. "In my days gals didn't stand stargazing, and the cows waiting to be milked."

Francis put some more fuel on the fire, took down the wooden pails from the "dresser," and went out. The cows were not in the yard; she had to go down into the pasture, through the damp grass and across the swamp, and drive them up.

Into her little gray and white kitten followed her. She stooped to pat the silken head, lifted for its accustomed caress. "You are all I have now, Ino. There are only you and I," she said, half sadly.

Ino climbed to her shoulder and laid his soft head against her cheek. After all, there is more sympathy in the brute creation than we dream of. God knows we all see through a glass so darkly that our wise judgment is a thing of error.

Francis hugged him tight, then put him down and went to her work. She had finished, and was putting up the bars—stopped to listen to a blated whippoorwill, that forgetting his natal June had long passed, was disturbing the silence of the October twilight.

A quick step crushed the crisp grass behind her, Squire Evelyn took the foaming pails from her hands.

"They are heavy for you, Frank; let me carry them."

Ino ran away, and sought refuge in the old oak before the door. Francis followed the Squire into the dairy. He set the pails down and touched her arm.

"Come out a moment, I wish to speak with you."

"Will you not go into the house?"

"No, it is a freer atmosphere outside."

He drew her to a seat beneath the oak, decayed and old—her dead father had placed it there for her when she was a mere child.

Squire Evelyn took her hand in his, and his naturally stern voice softened as he spoke—"Francis, have you ever heard aught against my character?"

She looked at him with surprise.

"Never. The whole town knows your uprightness."

"Thank you. I asked you the question, because I want to ask you another of far greater moment to me. Francis Haley will you be my wife?"

She started back from him, flushing to the very edge of her hair. Even in the dim light he saw the swift rush of color.

"Do not decide hastily, as I see you are about to do. I want your answer only after mature reflection. Understand me fully.—I am forty-five and you are twenty-four—twenty-one years' difference. I am rich and you are poor; and you are killing yourself with hard work, while I, a strong man, live at my ease. Yet, do not think I would marry you because I pity you. Far from it. I am not so unselfish. I want a wife. I know no other woman for whom I could feel sufficient respect to give her that place—none save you. You know something of my early life. You know that I have lived single until middle age, because she whom I loved in youth fled from me to the arms of another. And last of all, Francis, I love you. Not with a young man's passion, but with the strength of riper years—you only utterly and entirely. And now I give you a week to decide. Think of the life that lies before you—think of the helpless woman you will care for so nobly to the end—think of all the burdens your slight shoulders must bear, and remember how more than willingly I would carry them all for you. Next Saturday night I shall be here for my answer."

He pressed the hand he held, almost shuddering at its iciness; folded the shawl she was letting slip to the ground, over the passive form of Francis, and left her to herself.

She leaned back against the tree, her eyes looking straight forward into the gathering gloom, but seeing only inward. Ino came down and purred around her now that the stranger was gone, but he got no answering caress from his mistress. Francis was thinking—thinking deeply.

She took in the subject fully. She was weighing it in all its bearings, just as he had told her to do.

Poor, yes, so she was, her only heritage the few acres of barren land, and the dilapidated old homestead, where the brief, happy life of her parents had been spent. She thanked God sincerely that they had died before the evil days had come. The property her father left was ample; but his only son, and her brother, was a reckless spendthrift, and at the early age of twenty he had squandered everything save this poor home, and that had been bequeathed to Francis solely.

Five years previously—Francis shivered as she recalled it—George Haley had been missed from his home. Three weary days—oh, such desolate, fearful days!—the search went on, and then—they found him early one November morning, stark and dead—drowned in the sluggish stream that skirted the farm. Whether he met death accidentally, or whether he took his wretched life into his own hands and sacrificed it, God only knew!

After that, Francis led a dreary life. Her grandmother—so she called her always, though she was in fact only the step mother of Francis' mother, was a sour-tempered woman, given to fault-finding; and, being nearly helpless from a paralytic shock, was a sad burden on the feeble strength of the girl.

True, Francis might have renounced her, and let the town look after its poor, but such a thought never entered her mind.—The sense of duty was strong with her. She must meet that old woman, one day, before the face of God and the angels, and she wanted to be able to stand up with unshrinking eyes and tell them that she had done what she could.

To night she reviewed the painful past and then she looked into the future. Oh, how gaunt and grim it appeared to her; she was beyond her first girlhood. Care had made her old before her time. Already the gray, rosy village girls called her an old maid. She looked still a little beyond, and saw her life going down to the grave—alone, uncheered, uncared for. No voice of kindred to soothe her, no pitying hand of affection to smooth the cold forehead which death had touched with his frozen lips.

But it was not so much dying alone—for God would be there—it was living without love that she dreaded. Years ago, in her shy, girlish heart, she had dreamed of the time when she should have a lover. That time had just come to her, but oh, how sadly different from what she had pictured. She had received her first offer, probably her last. She looked at the decaying, gloomy old house before her, and thought of Evelyn Hall with its sunny parlors, its spacious chambers, the grand, ancestral trees around it, and lastly of its generous master.

Francis knew Evelyn for more than kind. She remembered whose hand had put flowers on the coffin of her erring brother, and who had drawn her away from the new made grave to remind her that life still had duties for her, and still claimed of her exertion.

Do not blame her if she thought of all these things, if they influenced her decision. She was a woman, with a woman's hunger for love and care, and if she sinned, it was only because nature craved it for her. She went into the house fully decided, and when, a week afterwards, Squire Evelyn came for her reply, she met him at the door.

"I will marry you," she said quietly, but do not ask me yet for love. I, who know so little of it must wait to learn."

"God help you in the lesson!" he said, fervently, and kissed her. So they were betrothed.

CHAPTER II.

Squire Evelyn listened to the expressed wishes of Francis, and the wedding-day was deferred to the first of May. She wanted to get familiar with the thought of the new life she was to begin, she said.

She had very little care now, thanks to the oversight of her lover. A trusty woman managed the household affairs, and laborers from the Hall kept the farm in good order. The Squire came down daily, directing Francis' reading, walking with her, or taking her to ride over the wild, bleak country. How very kind and tender he was she hardly dared to think, when she remembered that her heart never beat quicker at its approach, never her pulse thrilled when his hand touched hers. She was too old for such manifestations, she said, guiltily.

Early in March, a visitor came to the Hall, Max Chesney, from New York, the Squire's nephew. Max was a physician of great promise; and to severe attention to the duties of his profession and somewhat disturbed his health. He had come down for a breath of the fresh air of Evelyn, and a month's recreation.

As a matter of course, the Squire brought him to see Francis, his aunt that was to be. He wanted the two to be very good friends. Max was his favorite nephew, and his tastes were much like those of Francis'; he was sure they would get on together.

So it happened that the two young people were almost constantly in each other's society.

Francis was just one year her senior, gay, handsome, generous, and high soured. Before she had been a week in his presence, Francis found out whether she was to old and grave to love. His step would crimson her face with blushes, the touch of his fingers on her thrilled her for hours afterwards with a subtle sense of delight. She awoke with a sort of helpless horror. She could not speak and send him away, for her lightest word would reveal that she had given her heart unsought.

So the farce went on. The Squire still played the generous lover, and was genial and happy; Francis grew pale and wretched and Chesney was never at ease. They mutually avoided each other, Francis Chesney but one day in April they met on the fields, a couple of miles from home, Francis had been searching for blue violets, Chesney had been down into the coal mine to look at the operations of the miners.

He had just emerged from the shaft when Francis paused. He spoke to her, telling her something of the gloomy darkness below. Some impulse moved her to go and look down the shaft.

"I should like to look up at this," she said inadvertently.

The miners had just come up to dinner. One of them overheard her. "Nothing easier, Miss," he said, touching his cap, "we let down dozens of ladies every week. Just step into the basket, and you can go down and back again in a moment."

She stepped in; Chesney followed her quickly. She would have stopped him, but it was too late. The cord was being rapidly unwound. They were descending swiftly.—They touched the bottom, and, looking up, saw only the minute circular hole filled with daylight.

Chesney spoke to his companion. "Will you get out and look father?"

"No, no!" she said with a shiver. Let us go back instantly."

He put up his hand to give the signal of return to those above, but it fell back powerless to his side. A pale blue flash of light illuminated the blackness—there was a noise as if the solid universe were rent—a fearful sense of suffocation filled the air, and then afar off they heard the rush and gurgle of water.

"Good God!" cried Chesney—"the fire-damp!"

Francis clung to him blindly—she forgot in that terrible moment of peril, the existence of John Evelyn—forgot everything but that she loved better than life or hope Max Chesney. Max realized every thing at a glance.—To hope for aid from above was futile.—The whole shaft had been filled up. The only avenue to safety was cut off. The best he could do was to labor for a few more moments of life. It would end in death eventually.

He lifted Francis some feet above to a shelf of rock, and climbed up beside her. She clung to him like a child—he took her into his arms and soothed her as if he had been a very babe.

She spoke at last, quietly he started to hear her.

"I am not afraid, Max. I am only happy."

He clasped her convulsively.

"Francis, darling! May I speak now?—Oh, I have loved you from the very first, but I tried to be honorable for his sake. He is so noble, and so generous. But now it is no wrong to him to understand each other, Kiss me, Frankie."

"On the other side," she said simply. "In this world my lips belong only to him. [Have patience a little longer.]

He acquiesced, and restraining the impulse that craved her close against his breast, he only sat with his arm around her, her hands in his.

It seemed ages to them, but it was only a few moments, ere the terrible stillness that had come upon the place was broken by a dull thud. The very darkness quivered and danced before them; a second and a third stroke, and a mass of earth fell over them from above, stunning and blinding them, and then a breath of heaven's own air swept in—a ray of sunshine dropped its gold into the gloom.

The miners had broken in the top of the mine, and they were saved. A rope was let down—Chesney fastened it around the waist of Francis—she was drawn up, and he speedily followed. But when full of joy, he sprang forward to lift her up, she sank a dead weight in his arms—without life or motion.

Long weeks of anxious watching elapsed before Francis Haley rallied, and they knew that she would live. All through the spring months she lay in the great guest chamber, at the hall, whether they had carried her—lay quietly, taking no notice, and uttering no word of complaint or recognition.

Squire Evelyn watched over with the tenderness of mother for her child. His face was the first to greet her return to consciousness—and his eyes the first to drop on her wan face the tears of gratitude. She turned unasily.

"The mine, Max?" She whispered faintly.

"You are safe with me, Frankie, dear.—And Max has been here all the time. He will come soon."

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