

THE LOST CHILD.

"HOPEDALE!"

I opened my sleepy eyes as the conductor's voice rang through the cars, and, taking my carpet-bag, sprang out upon the platform of the little station.

It was a very rare event for me to leave the village whose name heads this story. My father had been the only resident physician there, from the time when I was a boisterous schoolboy up to the hour when, in his professional rounds, he fell dead with heart-disease in the main street, leaving me, his heretofore assistant, sole heir to his name, property and practice.

It was literally Christmas I spent, leaving home at midnight on the 24th, and my friend's house exactly twenty-four hours later. It had been a pleasant break in the monotony of my life, and as I stood at sunrise on the Hopedale station platform, I was sure my recreation would give me new vigor for my daily duties.

As I turned to descend the steps leading to the road, some impulse, nay, a Providence, led me to look in at the window of the room, by courtesy "Ladies' Room," of the station. It was cold and desolate. No fire was lighted, and there was no furniture, unless the hard wooden benches against the walls could be so denominated.

Allowing Mrs. Watson no time for amazement, I pressed her into service, and in what she called a "jiffy" we had the little form undressed, in my bed, and undergoing the most vigorous treatment. It was so long before we were successful that my heart almost failed me;

Only a look of sleepy inquiry was visible, as he stared a moment at me; then, obeying my order to drink the warm food Mrs. Watson, held to his lips, my little patient closed his eyes again, and turned over to finish his nap.

It was nearly nine o'clock when my housekeeper roused me to say that breakfast was ready, and the child awake.

Very wide awake I found him—the glorious brown eyes staring round my room, taking in every detail of its arrangement.

"Who are you? How did I get here? Am I nearly at Australia? Who's that man in the picture?" were the questions poured rapidly forth, before I had time to frame one inquiry.

"Not a sign of fear or a word of homesickness! I was puzzled.

"What is your name?" I asked, sitting down beside him.

"Trot! I want to get up."

"You shall get up in a minute, but first tell me your name, and how you came to be asleep in the station?"

"My name's Trot! and the plaguy

cars started off without me when I got out. It was dark night, and I could not catch them, so I went into the room and went to sleep till they came again."

"Was your mother in the train—in the cars?"

"No; nobody but just me. I'm going to Australia."

"Going to Australia?"

"Yes, Ellen's there. They have roses there at Christmas, and we wanted some for our tree."

"But, my child, you did not leave home alone?"

"Yes I did. I ain't afraid. I'm going back right away, as soon as I find Ellen, and get the roses."

"But, don't you know you will have to sail in a great ship for months to get to Australia."

"Ellen went in the cars. We saw her go, mamma and I. We went in the carriage and said good-by, and she got in the cars with Mr. Williams."

"Who is Mr. Williams?" I said, eagerly catching at a name.

"Ellen's husband. Our milkman he was, before he went off to Australia. He's jolly! always filled my cup for nothing, when I was up."

"And who was Ellen?"

"My nurse."

"What's your father's name?"

"Papa!"

"But his other name?"

"Harry, dear. Mamma always called him so."

"Where does he live?"

"He's dead," said the child in a whisper. "Mamma cries all the time, most, and wears an ugly black gown every day."

"Well, where does mamma live?"

"At grandpa's, with Aunt Daisy, and Walter, and Sue, and baby, and—ain't it funny—baby's my uncle, and he is so little he has to be carried about, and Walter's littler than me, and he's my uncle, too; and Sue's only six, and she's my aunt."

"Where does grandma live?"

"Why, home in her own house."

"Well, what is her name?"

"Grandma!" in a very positive tone, and becoming restive under so much questioning.

I took him from the bed and began to dress him, and explain his position; but even when he understood that he must give up the Australian journey, and was made to feel something of his mother's despair at losing him, he could give me no clue by which to find his home.

My heart grew fairly sick as I looked in his beautiful face and pictured the grief of his widowed mother over the loss of her only child. In vain I searched his clothing for the mysterious "locket containing the miniature of a beautiful female," always found on the stray children in novels; no "strawberry or raspberry mark" disfigured his smooth, white skin.

Days passed away, and still the little Trot—for he would own no other name—was an inmate of my cottage, the very darling of Mrs. Watson's motherly heart.

She made him pretty garments to replace the rich velvet suit which we put carefully aside, in case they were ever required to prove his identity. She furnished for his bed-room a small apartment leading from her own sleeping-room. She made the day one long act of service for his comfort, and as weeks glided into months, and there was no clue found to guide us to his home, she taught him to call her grandma, while Uncle Charlie became my new acquired title.

To tell how he was petted in the village would be a vain task to attempt. To say that he was the hero and idol of Hopedale will give but a faint idea of his popularity.

Gradually the memory of his home, Ellen, the visit to Australia died away, and he seemed to forget that he had ever lived away from us. Mamma and Aunt Daisy had been the two of whom he spoke most, but I judged from all he said, that his father's death was very recent, and his residence at his grandparent's a brief visit only in his memory.

Eleven months had this dear little treasure been an inmate in my house, when there came into my life a new dream of hope and happiness. About five miles from Hopedale there resided, and had lived for many long years, an eccentric old bachelor, by name Herman

Graham. His home, Leehaven, was far away from any cluster of houses, indeed, nearly a mile from any other residence; and here, in solitary state, with only two ancient servitors for his household, he had lived ever since I could remember. He was a morose, ill-tempered man, and some early cross had made him adopt a perfectly hermit-like seclusion, though his wealth would have commanded every advantage society could offer. It was early in November that I was summoned to attend this odd genius, professionally. The little note brought to my office by an elderly man on horseback, was signed "Lillian Graham," and urged my immediate attention.

It was a long, cold drive, but the man represented his master as very ill, so I prepared to obey the summons. "I had no idea your master had a daughter," I said, referring to my note.

"That's master's niece," was the reply; "a nice, sweet-spoken young lady as I see. She comes down on a visit sometimes from her father's place near Albany. They were burnt out, her father's folks, last winter, and the family all went to Europe while the new house was a-building. They came home about a fortnight ago, but they won't go to the new house until spring, so some of them's boarding in New York, and some in Albany, and Miss Lillian she's come to spend the winter with her uncle. They're all coming down for Christmas, I expect."

I found my new patient very ill, and for a week my visits were frequent, and more than once I passed a whole night by his bedside. I do not mean this for a love-tale, so I will not weary my reader with the why and where fore of my heart bending in allegiance to Lillian Graham's charms. Her beauty, gentleness and winning grace touched my heart as no woman had ever before thrilled it, and before that weary week of anxiety and watching was over I loved her.

As her uncle began to recover, my visits slid from a professional capacity to a social one, and I saw that my welcome was a sincere one from both the old gentleman and the fair girl, whose devotion to his sick bed had proved her love. I was agreeably surprised to find the hermit neither so savage or inaccessible as he had been represented to be. He had a painful chronic disorder; his manner was burlesque, and his voice often harsh, but he could soften, and I was able to give him relief from pain, for which he repaid me a gracious reception.

Christmas was drawing near, and I had resolved to lay my heart before Lillian, and ask her to be my wife. I was heir to considerable property left by my father. I had a good practice, a pleasant home, and could offer her to the pure love of a young heart, so I was not without hope, especially as I could see the flush deepen on her cheek, and a glad light spring to her blue eyes whenever I was announced. She wore mourning, and I often longed to question her about the loss it implied, but our private interviews were very brief, and but seldom occurred, and she never spoke of her sorrow. I, too, had a story to tell. Of course, if she became my wife, she must hear about Trot.

It was the day before Christmas, and the snow was smooth and hard round Hopedale; so I ventured to propose a sleigh-ride, meaning to open my heart to her as we drove. She accepted my proposal readily, and we were soon on our way. Somehow there fell a long silence between us; I longed but not daring to speak, my eyes fixed upon that lovely face framed in its pretty furbund hood, the eyes looking down, the sweet mouth set with a sadder expression than I had ever seen it wear. Suddenly she spoke:

"I expect my parents, brothers, and sisters here to-morrow."

"For Christmas gayeties?" I questioned.

"No, to escape them. They are coming here to pass the day quietly, far away from any festivity. It is a sad day for us. Doctor, do you believe in a broken heart?"

"Yes; I know they exist."

"And are fatal?"

"Sometimes! I have seen heavy sorrow drain away life!"

"My poor sister," she said, sadly, her eyes filling with tears, "I fear her heart is broken." And after a pause she said: "A year ago—a year ago—poor little Trot!"

"Trot!" I cried, breathlessly.

"My sister's only child, who died on Christmas day last year."

"Died?" I said, my hopes sinking.

"Burnt to death!" she said, sadly.

"We had had a Christmas tree for the children in the nursery. My sister had been a widow only three months, so we had no holiday gathering, but we dressed a tree for the little ones and lighted it on Christmas Eve. The next morning they, the children we mean, were all in the nursery, and we supposed one of them tried to light the tree. Certain

it is that they set the room on fire, and before we could save anything the whole house was in flames. All escaped but my sister's child, her only one; he perished in the fire."

"Are you certain?"

"Where else could he be? My two little brothers and my sister were saved with difficulty, and the roof fell in while we were frantically searching and calling for Arthur, or, as we always called him, Trot. My sister's health gave way entirely under his blow. She had concentrated all the strength of her love upon this child after her husband died, and the loss prostrated her utterly. We took her to Europe; we had the best advice for her, but she is slowly dying of a broken heart."

"It is from no impertinent curiosity," I said, "that I question you. Will you answer my inquiries?"

"We were speeding over the frozen ground toward my home, as she answered—

"Certainly."

"This little child—he had a pet name for you?"

"Yes; my home name. They all call me Daisy, and he called me Aunt Daisy?"

"And your sisters' names are Mary and Sue, your brothers' Walter and Bady."

"Yes, yes," she said, turning very pale.

"And Trot's nurse, Ellen, did she go to Australia?"

"Yes, a year ago last fall. Your face is radiant! Speak quickly—our lost boy!"

We were at my door; her face was ashy white with emotion, but she obeyed my motion, and let me lead her from the sleigh to my office. I made her sit down, and began to explain, when—

"Uncle Charley's come! Uncle Charley!" rang out from my pet's voice, and Trot burst into the room. Lillian rose to her feet with a wild cry of "Trot! Arthur! darling!"

For a moment he stood bewildered; then a sudden rush of memory came over the childish heart, and he sprang into her arms.

"Aunt Daisy! Where's mamma! I want mamma! Quick! quick! Uncle Charley, Aunt Daisy, take me to mamma!"

For nearly three hours we sat in the little office before Lillian could tear herself away from the child, but at last she let me take her to the sleigh, consoling Trot by a promise that to-morrow he should see his mother.

I left the disclosure to her womanly tact. But, on the morning, when I drove over with the child dressed in his black velvet suit, altered to fit him by Mrs. Watson's trembling fingers, and moistened I am sure by many tears, I found all prepared for the great joy.

Such a Christmas never dawned for me. To tell of the gratitude of the pale widow, the joy of the grandparents, the boisterous greeting between the children, is beyond the power of my pen.

Of course the precise time and manner of Arthur's escape from the house we could only conjecture. The nurse was in the kitchen nearly an hour when the alarm of fire was given, and the flames had gained great headway before they were discovered, the family sitting room being on a different floor, and some distance from the nursery. Of course the fearless boy had left the house before the attempt to light the tree was made, but the others, absorbed in Christmas delights did not miss him. The distance from the house to the station was very short, and Ellen had gone to New York from the little village near which Mr. Graham's house was situated. The departure for Europe, and the certainty all felt of his fate, had prevented any search being made for the boy, and we presumed the railway officials supposed he belonged to some party on the train.

It was a glad day for all; for if I lost my little treasure, I won from Lillian the right to be called in good truth Trot's Uncle Charley.

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