

Deacon Sharpe's Wife's Niece.

CONCLUDED.

"NOW see here, my dear Miss Lawton, there's no use to mutiny in this way. That air, made up of rebellion and obstinacy, is very becoming, I admit, but it won't be of the least use in the world. So just keep quiet now, and attend to your canaries."

"Now, Miranda, isn't he provoking? I don't believe his salary is half large enough to support all these extravagances in which he indulges us, and I would not have incurred such a heavy debt for music lessons if I had not expected to defray it."

"I think," said the soft grave voice of cousin Miranda Carter, as her gentle face looked up from her sewing, "that Lettie is in the right. You know, my dear boy, that I wanted to organize a little school when we came here, and you interdicted it. Our expenses are increasing every year, and I know the burden must rest heavy on you."

"Well, I've strong shoulders to bear it, and I'm twenty-four now," said the young man, rising, and walking across the room, while very loving eyes watched the proud, handsome figure, whose bearing was so full of strength and manliness.

"Beside this, you bother me, girls, by continually harping on this subject. I don't want Lettie to teach, and have people that aren't half as good and smart as she is, turning up their noses at her. I want to see her happy, and free from care, in the bloom and gladness of her youth."

"Do you think, Gorham, that I'm so craven as to care for the miserable, heartless, soulless people that would despise me because I was a music teacher?"

"No, Miss Independence, I don't think you are. But that's no sign I want them slighting you. Now, don't, cousin Miranda, read me a lecture on moral courage. I know you're all right, and I'm all wrong, beside being a great scamp into the bargain. But Lettie's not going to teach, so the matter's settled. By the by, Mrs. Conrad came into the store yesterday afternoon!"

"Did she? Oh! tell me about her," in my eagerness spilling half my canary seed on the floor. Mrs. Conrad was the bride of the senior partner of the firm in which Gorham was engaged. The gentleman was a millionaire, and the lady young, brilliant, fascinating, and had created a great sensation in the high social circles in which they moved.

"Well, she is not strictly symmetrically beautiful, but she is very interesting, and her face is one you would turn and look at twice in a crowd. It is full of character and vitality, and though it may melt with tenderness, you feel too fit might flash into earnestness, perhaps anger. The eyes, hair, and mouth, are perhaps the most attractive features. The first is rich, the second glorious, the last beautiful! They say she is very good-hearted, very kind to the poor."

"Gorham Lawton! what an artist was spoiled when fate made you a book-keeper!"

"I know it, little girl; but it's growing late," looking at his watch. "Kiss me; good-bye, girls," and he was gone.

Two months had elapsed. It was a wild, warring, November day; and when Gorham Lawton paced with unsteady step, and working features, the little back office where his days were passed.

"Six hundred dollars in debt," he muttered, looking at a number of papers he held in his hand, "and I cannot meet ten of it. My creditors will certainly pounce upon the furniture, and Lettie and Miranda—oh! what will become of them! If I had commenced in a plainer way—or not given them to understand that my salary was larger than it is. But something must be done to-night. What shall it be?"

The young man sat down, and buried his head on the desk, and, sitting there, a terrible temptation entered into the heart of Gorham Lawton. At first he tried to resist it, but it folded closer, and closer about his soul—and at last—

No wonder the faintness of my heart shakes my fingers so that I cannot write it. I never knew a man's hand that he could not imitate, and every member of the firm's as well as his own.

"I will try to win it back at some gaming table this very night," he said, "and it is but a thousand dollars."

"It's very strange Gorham does not come!" said cousin Miranda Carter, for at least the tenth time, and she walked to the window, and looked out on the great flakes of snow which December was lazily shaking through the air.

"I'm hungry, cousin Miranda!" I answered. "Gorham's probably been detained by somebody. He will come in while we are at tea." So we sat down.

"Lettie," asked Miranda Carter, "has it struck you that Gorham seemed changed, absorbed, restless, for the last day or two?"

"Why, no, Miranda. I'm sure he was very full of his jokes last night."

"I know it, but his laugh didn't seem natural, and there was a look in his eyes I didn't like. Goodness! what a ring!"

Ten minutes from that time we knew all—Gorham was discovered, arrested.

All I can say of the night that followed is, we lived through it. Most miraculous it seems that I can say this, that the first knowledge of that terrible truth did not strike me dead, as the blow of a sword, or a flash of midsummer lightning would have done.

But I lived, so did cousin Miranda Carter. Our hair did not turn white, or our faces grow wrinkled that night; but our hearts grew older.

Miranda did not speak often. Once in a while she moaned out, "Edward's child! Edward's child!" and twice during that night she crept up close to me, and, putting down her blanched face to mine, whispered, "Don't tell his father; it will kill him; don't let him know it," and I saw this great shock had almost prostrated her reason.

That late, pallid morning at last rose over the earth, and then, through all the darkness and despair that had folded itself in my heart struggled up the memory of those words of Gorham's.

"They say she is a kind-hearted lady, and very good to the poor."

Somehow, my soul grasped at those words, and a new impulse stirred at my heart. The day was not three hours old when I mounted the broad steps of the millionaire's princely mansion on Fifth Avenue. The servant stared at me curiously, and said she was in, though she probably could not see me for half an hour, as she had just breakfasted, and was dressing to go out.

"Will you tell her my business is very urgent. Perhaps she will allow me to go to her room. I must see her quite alone."

He bowed me into the parlor, and oh! with a heart ache I closed my eyes on my magnificent surroundings. In a few moments the servant returned, stating that his mistress would see me, and in her own room.

I followed him up the long winding stair-case, and reached Mrs. Conrad's chamber at last. She came forward to receive me, with a good deal of curiosity and interest in her face. She was a small, very graceful woman, with large, deep set, glorious eyes. Her hair was hastily coiled up behind, and I remember, though I was not consciously observant of it at the time, that she wore a dark blue silk morning dress, unconfined at the waist—indeed her whole appearance indicated she had hurried from her toilet to meet me.

"Come in, and sit down," she said, in a soft, languid voice; those dark eyes searching my face.

And I went into the luxurious chamber, but I did not sit down. I stood still by the table, and she stood before me; and I told her my story.

How I told it I know not. It seemed to me my lips did not move, only my heart spoke. I remember, as I went on, the lady's face worked, the tears flooded up her large eyes, and rained over her cheeks. "It was for our sakes he did this deed," I concluded. "It was for mine, his orphan sister, who had none on earth to take care of her but himself, and he was a loving, tender brother. Oh! if you have the heart of a woman, have pity upon his youth, and our misery—have pity upon him, and save him."

"I will try. I will try," she sobbed. Oh! I am very sorry for you. It was such a little sum too—a thousand dollars. My husband would never miss it. Why, I could have pawned some of my jewels, and the thing might not have been discovered at all."

Oh! I could have fallen at the woman's feet, and worshipped her, as she said these words.

"He will repay you all the money in a little while," I gasped, "and oh, our name is an honorable one; there was no stain on it when my father laid his head under the spring grass, and left it to his boy. If you save it from disgrace now, he will thank you for it when you see him in heaven."

"I will do all I can. It is terrible for you to suffer so. You so young and fair. But I must know your brother's name before I attempt to accomplish anything."

"Gorham Lawton."

She sprang forward with a strange, wild cry, the like of which I never heard before, or since. "Gorham Lawton! Did he ever live in Pentouville?"

I bowed my head, staring mutely at her, for something in her face seemed to grow upon my memory.

"And you—you are—"

"Lettie Lawton."

She threw her arms around my neck, and strained me to her heart. "Save him! I will save him if it cost me my life, for all I have and am, I owe to him, and to you. Lettie, I am Mercy Lane!"

I sat down in a chair, faint, dumb.

What happened after this I cannot clearly remember. I know Mrs. Conrad covered my face with kisses, and then begged me not to faint away, and tried to give me a glass of water, but her hand shook so she spilled it all on the floor.

Then, I recall more distinctly, her walking, with nervous unsteady tread, across the floor, murmuring to herself, "Gorham Lawton! Gorham Lawton—he was so noble, so generous, so good," and then she would rush up to me, with her white hands clasped together, crying, "I will save him, Lettie—indeed I will save him!" and sometimes she would laugh loudly, and sometimes she would sob wildly.

Two hours later, I stood in the cell where he was. "Oh! Lettie, do not come to me now," Gorham lifted up his haggard face, and stared at me a moment, and then dropped it in his hands again, as though the sight of me was more than he could bear.

But I went to him, and knelt down, and laid his head on my shoulders, and covered his hair with kisses; for a while I could not speak to him.

At last he moaned, "Oh! Lettie, do you know what I have done, and why I am here?"

"Yes, Gorham, darling! I know all; but we will not talk of that now—there is hope for you!"

"Hope for me!" He lifted his haggard face, and I shuddered at the change which a single night had wrought in it. "Do you know, Lettie, I am a criminal; I shall be doomed to years of imprisonment; that I have ruined myself, and brought everlasting disgrace upon you? Oh! would I had died long ago; would I had died!"

This is too painful to linger over. And, with many caresses and tears I sobbed out the story of my interview with Mrs. Conrad, the Mercy Lane of our childhood. I gave him, too, the words her trembling fingers had traced for him when I left her.

"GORHAM LAWTON—Take heart! take heart! For the sake of the past, I will do all I can to save you."

MERCY CONRAD.

And when the hour came that terminated our interview, I left him "comforted."

"Well, what is it, my darling?" and the pompous, but very proud, indulgent husband pushed back the braids of hair from the forehead of his young wife, and looked very tenderly into the face, which if not strictly beautiful, possessed a wondrous charm for every one.

She sat on the arm of his velvet cushioned chair, and they looked like father and daughter with the two score of years difference between their ages, and she leaned her soft cheek to his, "I am almost afraid to ask it, Morton."

"Afraid! Why, darling, I never refused you anything in my life, did I?"

"No, oh, no; but this is so different from the others—and yet I shall never be happy for another hour of my life without you grant my request."

"Bless me! then out with it quick, dear; why, how you tremble!" and lifting up her head so that the soft light from the chandelier rushed over it, the gentleman looked at his wife in amazed curiosity.

But she dropped it once more on his shoulder, and the story palpitated out of her orphaned childhood, of the friends that rescued her from mental misery, degradation, death, and the rest—you know, reader, what followed this.

Mr. Conrad was not a man of generous instincts, though he loved his wife better than anything on earth.

"It is certainly very unfortunate for the young man," he said, "and I can understand. You feel indebted to him, Mercy, but really it was a very serious matter to forge my name. I hardly know how to act in this thing."

"Act? Oh! Morton, act only to save him! Remember if it had not been for him you would never had your Mercy! Am I not worth so much as this to you? Will you not do it for my sake?"

Mr. Conrad rose and walked up and down the room several times with a perturbed brow, and his wife followed his movements with great, beseeching eyes.

At last he came and leaned over her. "Mercy, my wife, you have conquered. I will save him."

And Mercy sprang up with a cry of joy, and wound her arms around her husband's neck, and pressed many kisses on his face, with more of wifely tenderness, it may be, than she had ever done before.

The rest was easily done. The principal witness in the case was a clerk at the bank, whose silence was readily procured with a little of Mr. Conrad's wealth.

Then the services of a brilliant lawyer were secured, and the trial soon came off; Gorham was acquitted. There was no shadow of disgrace on our honorable name. I will write it again, for my pen fingers joyfully over every letter. He was saved! saved! saved!

What a meeting it was when he re-

turned home! How cousin Miranda Carter and I hugged him again and again to our hearts, and laughed and cried over him in that great joy which is well nigh pain. Mrs. Conrad was there too. Gorham went to her, but when he would have spoken she laid her hand on his lips, "Do not thank me," she said, "I have only paid what I owed you."

And I have no doubt it was through her influence that Gorham was, soon after, elevated to a much more honorable and lucrative situation than the one he had formerly occupied in her husband's establishment.

I need not say that Gorham never fell again. Aye, I believe that he is this hour a stronger and a better man because of that time of weakness. Was he not afterward doubly tender and charitable to the sinning? Did he not struggle harder and with longer enduring patience to reclaim others because he had once sinned? Ah! they who have felt the temptation can pity the offender!

Seven years had passed. It was a day bright with sunshine, and balmy with soft odors from the summer woods. Mrs. Conrad was passing it at our house, and she looked very young and fair in the robes of widowhood which she had worn for two years.

And a little longer than this had we worn these "tokens for the dead," for cousin Miranda Carter had joined our father and mother in heaven.

"Now, don't you think, Mercy," I jestingly asked, in some pause of the conversation, "that it's manifestly Gorham's duty to get married? He is over thirty years old, and I verging toward old maidism, am obliged to stay here to be his dutiful housekeeper, thereby letting slip all chances of ever being my own. It's too bad, and I'm going to mutiny."

Some one called me at that moment, and I left the room before Mercy could reply.

"There is a reason (you understand it, Mrs. Conrad,) why I have never asked any woman to be my wife," said Gorham, in low, solemn tones.

She flashed up an inquiry in his face with those large, deep-set eyes.

"Oh! Gorham, it is very wrong even to speak of that. No true woman would ever love you less."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it."

"There is but one woman on the face of the earth whom I would care to know that it would influence. Shall I tell you who she is?"

"Yes."

"Yourself."

Another inquiry started wondering, flashing up from those glorious eyes. "Oh, Gorham!" and she burst into tears. He took her hands, and he was answered.

"To think," she said to him, half an hour afterward, "you suppose I could let that matter influence me! I, who have known from my childhood your ingrained nobleness, and truth and generosity! Besides have I nothing to confess? Did I not marry an old man for his wealth, when I loved him only as a child should love its father?"

"But I was an orphan and alone, Gorham, and toiling very hard in my arduous school duties; and when he brought his niece there, and took so much interest in me, of course I was very grateful."

"Then when at last he asked me so tenderly to be his wife, and promised to surround me with all the beauty and luxury my nature had always panted after, I could not refuse him."

"I did all that could be done to make him happy and am sure I succeeded."

"Well, if you marry me, you will at least not marry for money," replied Gorham.

When I returned to the room my surprise was as great as my satisfaction at the result of my remark about my brother getting married. The marriage in due time took place and they lived happily, near neighbors to me and my husband who I soon found after Gorham did not need me for his housekeeper. We all often think over the days of our early lives, and love yet to talk of the times when my brother's wife was only "Deacon Sharpe's Wife's Niece."

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