



The Family Circle.

THE PAPER THAT WAS CRIED OVER.

BY LOUISA CROW.

CHAPTER I.

The air was clear and dry on the hill, although the mists of an autumn twilight were settling down on the busy little town in the valley below, and as Mrs. Hallett from the terrace walk in her garden watched a puff of white steam in the distant landscape come nearer and nearer she said confidently, "Charlie will be in that train; we shall have him at home with us this evening."

Mr. Hallett had been an invalid for the last week or two; not ill enough to cause any alarm, yet not well enough to go to the city as usual, and thankful that he had a shrewd, sensible son both able and willing to take his place.

As is frequently the case, business was at its briskest just as Mr. Hallett became unequal to it, but Charlie threw himself into the breach manfully, and had even slept in town for several nights, that he might sit later at his books and begin earlier.

The mother would have preferred to stay and watch for her boy's coming; but Mr. Hallett was calling and she went to him.

He was surveying a doomed honeysuckle. It was but one of the many climbing plants trained over the walls, covering them with beauty from the yellow jasmine of early spring till the sweet white clematis and late roses were nipped by the autumn frosts.

"We planted it the year Charlie was born," he reminded his wife. "I suppose you think that would be a reason for letting it stand?"

Mrs. Hallett smiled as she replied, "Nay, John; it is not I who give way to sentiment."

The words were no sooner spoken than she wished she had not uttered them, for a frown contracted her husband's brow and he raised his eyes involuntarily to where a couple of windows were nearly hidden by the passion flower that was allowed to throw its tendrils across them.

In the room those windows should have lighted John Hallett's father had spent the closing years of his life. An accident rendered him incapable of leaving it, and when, after terrible suffering, he expired, his wife, worn out with fatigue and sorrow, soon followed him to the grave.

Was it an affectionate son's tender reminiscences of the dead that caused him to shut up the apartment they had occupied? No one could say, but so it was.

From the day of the funeral not a creature was allowed to enter this room but old Lisbeth, the trusty German who had drifted into the household of the Halletts in her youth.

Lisbeth saw nothing strange in the command she obeyed so literally, going into the closed chamber once a week on tip-toe to sweep and dust as noiselessly as if some one still lay there whom her movements could disturb; but Mrs. Hallett could not enter into the feelings that induced her husband to keep one of the best rooms in the house shut up.

A shout from the children proclaimed that Charlie had come.

His first look was for his mother. After she had satisfied herself that he did not appear to be any the worse for the confinement and hard work of the week she was content to stand quietly by while business matters were discussed. She could have fancied that Charlie was rather restless under the questioning to which he was subjected.

But at last Mr. Hallett appeared satisfied, and he would have led the way indoors, but now in eager haste the young man poured forth the tidings he had been burning to tell.

"Such news for you, father! Mother dear, what do you think has happened? Aunt Mary sent for me the other evening—you will say that that is not a very uncommon occurrence," and Charlie and Mrs. Hallett interchanged amused smiles, for Miss Mary Hallett was one of the fussiest of maiden ladies. "She sent for me that she might introduce me to some new relations from over the sea. You had a brother,

papa, who died not long after my grand-father?"

Mr. Hallett did not immediately reply. Yes, he had had a half-brother whose restless disposition had induced him to demand his portion and sail away with it to America. After many wanderings he had settled in Canada and married. Pride had induced him to be silent respecting the mistakes he had made, the misfortunes that had befallen him; but just before the death of the elder Mr. Hallett a rumor reached England that the Canadian farm did not pay and its owner was struggling with sickness as well as an unfavorable season. Offers of help were sent, but they were declined; those offers were repeated to Tom Hallett's widow, and again, but more gratefully, refused. Since that time, long years ago, no intercourse had been kept up between the families; what, then, did Charlie mean?

"It was to my Uncle Tom's elder daughters Aunt Mary introduced me. They are tall, bright, handsome girls, merry and frank and unaffected, yet quite as ladylike as my sisters Eva and Emma. They have led a busy life, working with their mother to free the farm of its encumbrances. Their labors have been successful; they are prospering at last; and so they have felt themselves justified in taking a trip to England to make acquaintance with their kindred."

"And crossed the Atlantic alone!" exclaimed Mrs. Hallett.

"Oh, no, they came under the wing of a friend, the elderly lady who took them to Aunt Mary's. They have fascinated her, and—" Charlie turned to his silent father—

"and I think, I am sure, you will like your nieces, sir; they are charming girls."

But Mr. Hallett put out his hands, crying hoarsely, "Keep them away from me! I will not have them here!"

And so saying, he went quickly into the house, whither his startled wife would have followed if her son had not detained her.

"Mother, what does this mean?" he asked in his consternation. "Is my father worse? Is it possible that he knows what he is saying? He never had any quarrel with Uncle Tom, did he? Then what could have made him speak so strangely?"

"I do not know; perhaps a sudden spasm. I must go to him."

"Ah, yes, go, and beg of him to explain himself, for they are coming here; these cousins of mine. I told them, in your name and my father's, that they would be welcome, and so I thought they would. How can I meet them again? how tell them—"

And then, groaning in his impatience and alarm, Charlie hurried his mother indoors.

CHAPTER II.

On Monday morning Mr. Hallett pronounced himself sufficiently restored to go to business. He had repulsed his wife when she attempted to win his confidence; he had given no explanation to his son. Both, therefore, were feeling hurt and anxious, though trying to conceal it from each other.

They would have pitied him had they known what a Sunday he had spent, shutting himself away from his family because every questioning look they turned upon him seemed to pierce his heart and lay bare that which he hid within it.

Yes, the upright, honorable John Hallett had a secret that he had buried so deep down as to be sometimes forgotten until a chance word or recollection would bring it back to his memory. He had a trouble of which no one knew anything but old Lisbeth, and even she did not suspect its nature.

In all honesty of purpose she had told him, as he stood by his mother's coffin, that madam's dearest wish had been to see her absent son Tom.

"I think she had a message for him," Lisbeth added, "a written one. I know that just before your good father died she was talking to him of Master Tom, and I heard her say she was sure he would come back if he could come to the old home."

"Did she wish my father to will this house to him?" asked John Hallett, startled and incredulous.

"I think so," Lisbeth replied. "I know he gave the dear mistress a paper that she cried over after he was gone, but I do not know what she did with it."

That paper had never been found.

At first John Hallett's feelings with regard to it had been of angry surprise. He was the elder brother and had always resided at the Copse. With the approbation

of his parents he had brought his bride here, and his children were born under the roof he had come to look upon as his own. He did not deliberately scheme to wrong his brother, but he never made any search for the paper of which Lisbeth had spoken.

And so years had rolled on without any one disputing with John Hallett his possession of the home so dear to him. Lisbeth made no further allusions to the paper. She knew that Master Tom was dead, and she was not aware that it might be of importance to his widow and his offspring.

And now, after all this lapse of time, the children of John Hallett's dead brother had come to England. For what could it be, he asked agitatedly, but to claim their own?

John Hallett started for town oppressed with a new fear. Lisbeth might have found the paper, and, suspecting him of foul play, posted it to Canada.

How he got through the day no one knew, for Charlie pleaded a headache and stayed at home. The disappointed youth would not risk encountering his newly-found relatives while he was unable to account to them for his father's extraordinary refusal to receive them at the Copse. He knew how much they were looking forward to this visit. Had not their father talked to them of his English home till they would be able to recognize every antique piece of furniture in the house, every fine old tree in the garden?

Mrs. Hallett's sympathies were with her son, but she was too dutiful a wife to say so, and seeing that she avoided him, Charlie carried a book into the shrubberies, shunning the eyes of his elder sisters, who for lack of any other reason for his depression, decided that he must have fallen in love.

And so he had. Already his heart had gone out to bright, capable, brown-haired Nell, who seemed to him just what a pure good woman should be. Min was a most attractive girl. He would be a fortunate fellow who won her, but she lacked the indescribable something that made her sister bewitching.

At last he went indoors to find his mother, and—if he could get her by herself—to confess how keenly he would feel a separation from the pretty Nellie, who was rapidly becoming dear to him.

He hurried to the morning-room and had entered it from the garden before he became aware that the parlor-maid was just ushering in some visitors.

It was too late to retreat; they were actually in the room, Nell and Min, gazing around them with shy pleasure, and Miss Mary Hallett, her broad face beaming with smiles as she caught hold of her sister-in-law's hands and kissed her on both cheeks.

"My dearest Jennie, I have brought these dear girls to spend a few days with you—poor Tom's daughters; of course, Charlie has told you all about them. Ah, there he is! Fetch your sisters, Charlie. And ask the cabman, my dear boy, to carry in our trunks. It was a good thought of mine to come with our nieces, wasn't it? How pleased John will be when he gets home and finds us all here!"

Mr. Hallett by a great effort composed himself sufficiently to meet his guests, but if his lips were pale and he turned away from them to shade his eyes with his hand, they saw nothing suspicious in it.

On the contrary, their conviction that he was thinking of their father, of whom this gray-haired, stately gentleman was the living image, drew them towards him. They hovered near his chair, they left off speaking when they heard his voice, and when, complaining of fatigue, he rose to go to his room, moved by the same impulse, both girls ran forward to put their arms about his neck and hold up their fair young faces for a good-night kiss.

It was plain that he had been mistaken when he fancied they had come to wrest his home from him, but he was none the happier for the knowledge. He tried to appear calm and cheerful, to respond to the affection with which his nieces were disposed to regard him, but when they talked—as they did freely—of the trials and struggles they and their mother had gone through before and after their bereavement, his heart fainted within him and his remorse would become overpowering.

John Hallett would fain have made atonement. He thrust into Nell's hand a roll of notes, but it was promptly returned.

"Dear uncle, we want nothing from you but your love. How can you imagine that while we are strong and well able to work

we would rob you of what you have earned for your children?"

No, he was not to be allowed to gloze his conscience by this kind of compensation. Neither was it any use protesting that the very act of leaving the Copse away from him—the eldest son—was unfair, especially as Tom's portion had been justly meted out to him at his own desire. As long as Tom's daughters were in his house, keeping alive the old recollections, how could he be at peace with himself?

Four days elapsed—anxious ones to Charlie and his mother, who watched Mr. Hallett's changing moods, but hesitated to speak of them even to each other, yet very pleasant ones to the young Canadians. Attributing to their uncle's ill-health the shadow they saw on his brow and the troubled looks his wife and son would interchange, they were always gentle and sympathetic.

It was the only check on their enjoyment of their visit to their English relations. Aunt Mary, in spite of her fidgety ways, was a lovable old lady. Mrs. Hallett was very motherly, and as for Charlie, ah, Nell would sigh whenever she reminded herself how soon their stay in England would draw to a close.

One morning the sisters were on their way to the garden when they saw Lisbeth in the act of unlocking the door of the closed chamber. They pressed into it with her. Why should they not? They knew of no prohibition and were so eager to hear all she could tell them about grandmamma that presently Lisbeth opened a tall press and shook out before them the folds of their grandmother's wedding-gown.

As she described her mistress, who had been always young and beautiful in her eyes, Nell saw that from the pocket of the dress a morsel of the bridal handkerchief was peeping. To get a better view of the fine old lace that bordered it she drew it out, and with it came a folded paper.

"Ah!" cried Lisbeth, "it is the one my good master gave to her before he died. She must have gone to the press and slipped it into the pocket of this dress instead of her ordinary one; they hung together then. Take it, young ladies. I believe, nay, but I am sure, it concerns your father."

Mr. Hallett was just sitting down to the early breakfast which his wife had risen to share with him when Nell and Min came to his side with the paper.

"We have not opened it, dear uncle; it is you who should read it to us. Perhaps it was to let my father know that his parents had quite forgiven him for leaving them. He used to say he had not acted well in deserting them."

But John Hallett pushed the paper from him.

"The hand of God is in this," he groaned. "Read for yourselves and ease my soul of the burden that lies heavily upon it. Lisbeth told me there was such a paper in existence, but my search for it was a half-hearted one. I valued my home more than what is right, but if I am to lose it I will bear the loss without murmuring, for I have had greater mercies bestowed on me than I deserve."

Mrs. Hallett drew nearer and laid her cheek against her husband's, while Min in faltering tones read the few feebly traced lines the paper contained:

"I have thought over your wish, dear wife. It is hard to say you nay, but I cannot let compassion for Tom make me unjust to his brother. Do you not know that if John had not toiled early and late at the time of that terrible crisis we must have been ruined? It was his industry, his perseverance, that enabled us to retain the home that has grown so dear to us. When we are gone let him reap the fruit of his labors. Tom will not love us any the less because we have nothing more to give him but our blessing."

So the Copse was the property of John Hallett after all; but who that saw his face just then would have ventured to congratulate him? He bowed it on his hands and the sisters stole away, leaving him alone with the tender, faithful wife, from whom he nevermore had a secret.

Nell and Min went back to Canada at the appointed time, but they did not refuse the useful gifts their uncle added to their luggage, for they saw that he would be a happier man if allowed to take the place of the father they had lost. Charlie will follow them in the spring to fetch home his bride.

—The Quiver.