

POOR DOCUMENT

6 QUEENS COUNTY GAZETTE, GAGETOWN, N. B., WEDNESDAY AUGUST 10, 1898.

Literature.

FORGOTTEN.

It was one of those close, oppressively hot days of July when the sky is uniformly gray and the thunder at intervals growls a distant warning of the tempest on its way.

A young man, with a military walk and an ugly scar that marred his otherwise handsome features, passed along an unfrequented country road at some time between ten and eleven o'clock in the morning.

To a close observer there was something about his eyes that told of recent illness. He was somewhat thinner, too, than seemed natural, and his unglazed hands were too white. Every now and then he raised his head, and let his glance wander over the peaceful landscape with the air of one who loved it.

"My poor little girl," he was thinking. "Shall I startle her too much if I go to her and tell her I am alive? No, joy will not hurt her. I am glad I did not write. It is as though I had indeed died, and had come back to earth to see what blank my death had made. Which is it to be? Home first, or Adeline?"

He had stopped where the road forked at the top of a little hill. Down to the left lay the little country town, with the square church tower rising from among the various-tinted roofs.

To the right the road lay between rows of palms that fenced in an undulating park, beyond which portions of a large white house gleamed through ornamental trees.

The thought of those hearts to which he was to bring gladness instead of mourning moved the muscles beneath the scar with a touch of emotion.

"Poor mother!" he said, inwardly. But he turned to the left, and went down towards the church.

There was some event pending evidently, for the churchyard was thronged. As he came nearer he recognized the signs as pointing to a wedding about to take place.

"What is it?" he checked the unworthy thought, and stopped a nurse-girl with a perambulator, to ask her who was going to be married. She told him hurriedly, and sped on.

A quarter of an hour later there was the sound of wheels, and eight carriages set down their burdens at the church gate—father, mother, bridesmaids, groomsmen, friends, and most important of all the bridegroom and bride-elect.

As the fair bride, blushing and trembling, walked up the aisle on her father's arm amid admiring, loving, and envying glances, no sudden impulse caused her to turn her head, or she might have seen, in the furthest and darkest corner of the building, a pair of eyes, whose light she believed quenched forever, fixed upon her full of fierce despair.

"Forgotten!" The ceremony was over, the church emptied of all save him who had come back this day to give the lie to the published report which had numbered him among the slain in battle.

"Forgotten!" The word came in a groan from him as he sat with his arms crossed on the ledge for books, and his forehead bowed on a damp and mouldy smelling "church palter."

"Forgotten!" His eyes went back in a confused way to his parting with that fair bride, when her soft arms had clung about him, her quivering lips refusing to articulate goodbye.

She had loved him then. And now that he had been but four months dead, she was consoled! How long his stunned brain had been trying to realize this he could not have told. He was roused by a hand on his shoulder, and a kind voice inquiring: "Are you ill?"

He slowly lifted himself and uncrossed his cramped arms, but not being able at first to collect himself sufficiently to reply, stared vacantly at the grave young curate before him.

"I was afraid you would be locked in," said the latter. "They will shut the doors directly."

"Thank you, I will go," said the other, with an effort.

"Can I do anything for you? I am sure you are ill; and I fancy you are a stranger."

"The greatest kindness would be to leave me alone," said the young man; but repenting of the discourtesy, he added, the next minute: "I beg your pardon, but I am—I—"

He broke off, bit his under lip savagely, and there was a minute's silence. Then he said, quietly enough: "You are right. I am a stranger of late, though I used to live here. If you will tell me one or two things about people I used to know, I shall be very grateful."

"Certainly! Anything I can. But come outside."

He led the way out into the green graveyard, and leaned against the vestry door, where an angle of the building screened them from the eye of the curious.

"I did not see any one in the—the Hardings' seat. Can you tell me anything of them?"

The curate looked grave, and his eyes rested on a new and imposing tomb. "Lady Hardings died a month ago."

She never recovered the shock of the loss of her son who was killed at the Cape. Sir John—

He had looked back at his companion, and his voice died away.

"Why, surely you must be—" "Yes, I am Guy Hardings," said the young man, hoarsely. "Thank you."

He was turning away, but the curate caught his arm.

"You must not go like this—you are not fit!"

Hardings shook him off, and strode away without another word, leaving the other full of misgivings, uneasiness, and sympathy.

Up the hill again, to where the road bent down to the right; and this time he took that road for a hundred yards or so; then leaped the palings, and walked across the park, startling a number of deer to flight at his approach. Then he flung himself on the grass in the shade of a tree, and lay there like one dead.

The kind-hearted curate went home to his early dinner, musing on the uncertainty of life, and piecing together what he had heard of the son and heir of the Hardings, who was engaged to pretty Adeline St. John, and whose supposed death had created sad havoc in the hearts of three of whom he knew.

The happy bride and bridegroom drove away after the breakfast; and the inquisitive occupants of a phaeton that overtook and passed theirs glancing in, saw the pair indulging in an embrace never meant for other eyes.

And still Guy Hardings lay in the grass unnoticed, undisturbed. A lark hung high over his head and sang, as the clouds parted for a little and showed the serene sky flecked with white clouds far above the gloomy gray.

Then the opening closed; a few rain-drops far apart each from the other pattered down; thunder muttered still at a distance, and the afternoon glided into evening; the sultry air cooling as the veiled sun sank lower in the heavens.

Then the young man rose up and walked about aimlessly, his hat in his hand, the gentle breeze touching his brow like the cool caress of a woman's hand.

He stopped at last before a gnarled old oak—a familiar friend of his boyhood—round whose knotted trunk was an inviting seat, where on the hottest day one might be sure of deep shade.

Often and often he had climbed that tree to sit hidden among the leaves and dream away some lazy Sunday afternoon, book in hand, when it seemed to him bliss simply to exist in a world so beautiful.

It was but to stand on the seat and step from one branch to another. Acting on the impulse of the moment, he climbed to his old place, and tried to recall that time—to recall the past, and live in it once again!

But he could not. That time was gone forever, and with it all trust in woman! There were voices! Here, in the park! He parted the leaves and looked in the direction from which they came, to see an old man and a young girl coming directly towards him.

It was only a swift glance, but he drew back his hand with a quick catching of the breath and a fresh sinking at his heart!

His father! It was his father—and yet—could that stooping, gray man be his father, whom he had left erect, proud, and strong, untouched by age at fifty-four?

They came straight to the tree and sat down beneath it.

"You must rest a little, uncle dear," said a silvery voice. "It is a very tiring day. I think we shall have a storm."

Sir John did not answer.

"Uncle," said the girl, "I am sure something is troubling you to-day. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"Two things, Uncle," said the old man, sadly. "To-day is my poor boy's birthday. He would have been twenty-seven."

Clove laid her cheek against his shoulder.

"And the other?" she asked, gently, after a pause.

"That wedding. Ah, my child, if the dead knew what passes here. . . . It is only some sixteen or eighteen months since he brought her to me, and told me he was going to give me a daughter. But I wished it had been you, Clove."

"You have me now, uncle. I will never leave you while you want me."

They were silent, except for a sigh or two.

"Clove, child," said the old man at last, "I don't know what to do for you. They tell me you look ill—that this place is dull. But I don't think it is the dullness that makes these cheeks so pale. It is a trouble that would be as great elsewhere as here. My child, you—"

Clove remained long at her window that night, with the sash flung wide, and her clasped hands laid on the sill. She looked out into the dark sky, whence no stars twinkled, watching the frequent flashes of light that showed up the fantastic shapes of the thunder clouds, and tried to draw consolation from the thought of her own insignificance in the vast universe. Was it worth while to weep and grieve for the loss of some loved one, when in so short a time one's own place would be empty?

Away to the north a faint light showed that the midsummer sun was not far below the horizon. Before many hours were over it would be broad daylight. Hearing the church clock strike twelve, she undressed and went to bed.

She woke early, to find the clouds of the previous day dispersed. A gray mist hung over the park, and every branch hung down with the weight of dew.

The servants were scarcely astir when she glided out into the garden, to enjoy the only time of day when one could be certain of any coolness, and to gather some roses for the breakfast table.

As there was at least an hour before that meal could be ready, she decided to walk the full extent of the grounds first, and accordingly struck into the broad centre drive that round through the trees for about half a mile on either side of the house.

She was fond of these early rambles, though she never went beyond the gates at such an hour unattended. Within those limits there was no one to see her, which fact had a great charm for Clove, whose home was in London.

A step crunched on the gravel behind her.

"Clove!" She stood still, without strength to turn round.

It was the voice of her cousin Guy. "Clove, don't be frightened; I am no ghost. It was a mistake."

Clove had turned to him now, with every tinge of color gone from her face, but both hands held out, and her eyes shining with a great joy.

"Guy!" It was all she could say; but her eyes went up for an instant to the blue heavens, and her lips moved in a whispered thanksgiving.

"You are glad, then?" he asked, holding her hands tightly.

"It will make your father young again. But you have been ill—wounded?"

The gray pallor and haggard lines of his face chilled her as soon as she had taken in his appearance more calmly.

"I came yesterday morning," he said, slowly. "Yes, I know all that has happened."

"All?" He nodded, and turned aside from her keen scrutiny.

Clove laid her hand, trembling with eagerness, on his arm.

"Come in, and let me tell you. Oh, how wet you are! You have your coat?"

"Only out here. It's the dew. Poo! that's nothing to a soldier!"

His cousin said no more, but started towards the house, in her haste often leaving him behind, then waiting till he overtook her, half impatient at his leisurely steps.

Like one in a dream he followed her, and was soon seated in the cheerful breakfast room, drinking the hot coffee she brought him, and reviving with the new life it gave the keenness of the pain that had been lying dormant.

"It's a strange home-coming," he said, "very different—"

"From what you expected," said Clove, finishing the sentence his own tongue refused to complete. "Don't think of that. Think of uncle, whose heart is half broken with losing you."

"I have come too late!" and Guy again stopped, with his eyes on a chair that memory filled with a motherly form which had been wont to rest there.

He sat staring before him in silence then, ignorant of poor Clove's pitying eyes.

Breakfast was spread, and Sir John's step was heard descending. Guy stepped out through the French window.

"I will not go far," he said. "Tell me when I may come. Break it as gently as you can."

Sir John came into the room slowly, like an old man, but sufficiently alert to things around him to notice the look of something unusual about Clove as she came to kiss him.

"What has happened?" he asked, placing his hand under her chin, and raising her face for greater convenience of inspection.

"I have had good news—very good news, uncle."

"Well, what is it?"

"Oh, uncle John, how can I tell you? It is good news for you too!"

Her agitation impressed him with the importance of what she had to tell.

"Don't be so about the bush, child," he said, sharply. "Speak out!"

"Guy has come back," said the poor girl, obediently, but trembling for the result of her words.

The next minute the young man, waiting without, heard a sharp and terrified cry of "Guy."

He dashed in, to see his cousin trying, with her weak arms, to keep Sir John from falling to the ground.

Springing forward, he helped him to a chair.

"Get some brandy," he said, hurriedly. "He'll be all right directly. Don't ring."

And in a few minutes the elder man was sufficiently recovered to whisper: "It is true then?"

His head sank on his son's shoulder, and the silence was broken by strong sobs that Clove felt that she had no right to hear.

She stole one look at the face she loved and saw that it, too, was working, then slipped away to wait and thank Heaven!

It was two years since Guy Hardings returned to the place which had mourned him dead.

He was away on a visit of a week to some old friend, and Clove had, for the time, resumed her post of companion and housekeeper to her uncle.

"He will come back to-morrow, and then I must go," she said, with a sigh, as she left the house for one of her early morning rambles. "I will just go and look at his favorite tree."

She strolled slowly and rather sadly among the fine old oaks, elms and beeches, until she came to that from which Guy had heard her confession; one which she wished unspoken now that he lived, although she believed that one alone, her uncle, shared her secret.

She had paused to look with a sigh at the rugged bark on which were many half-finished inscriptions carved by Guy in his younger days, when the leaves rustled, and Guy himself dropped from it.

The past two years had restored all his vigor of frame, though they had not quite obliterated the marks left by the night in the park.

"As I expected," he said, laughing, and brushing Clove's cheek with his lips. "Cousin's right, Clove. I thought you would be out early this morning, so I came back by the first train. How's father?"

"Very well; but he misses you, I think."

"When he has such a substitute! Impossible! Is there any news? Anything happened since I went? Sit down here; breakfast isn't ready yet, I'm sure."

"Nothing," said Clove, slowly, without looking at him, "except that Adeline has come home. Poor girl; it seems very sad for her to be a widow so soon."

"I have seen her. She bears it very well."

His tone was so unconcerned, that Clove turned round, and met a gaze that brought a deep blush to her face.

"Clove," he said, suddenly becoming very earnest, "you don't think—I have been waiting until—Clove, she is no more to me now than any other mere acquaintance—I mean it."

Clove tried to look unconscious of his meaning, and kept her face averted, but made no resistance when he drew her to him.

"I am not worthy of you, sweet, unless loving you with all my heart and soul is any merit."

When the breakfast bell rang they strolled towards the house together, and met Sir John coming to look for Clove.

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