

THE RESURRECTION

— OF A —

FRUSTRATE GHOST.

"If your doughnuts are done sizzlin' just wedge in half a dozen. There's plenty of room in that lunch-basket yet. Men folks can't keep the kettles bilin' all night 'thout sumthin' nourishin', though I guess they wouldn't get it if you were left to yourself. You always was kind of small in your ways. Min'y Ostrander."

"I ain't a grudgin' the men all they can eat," was Miss Ostrander's reply. She spoke in a humble, injured tone. "There's bread and meat and pickles and pie—"

"Oh, yes! You ken always find food in my pantry," interrupted Mrs. Chessey, loftily. "Tisn't that food's scarce, but that you've got such a nippin' way of nandin' it round. I s'pose it's on account of your havin' no men folks of your own."

Mrs. Chessey was a large, autocratic-looking person, whose presence pervaded her comfortable kitchen. She concluded her reflections upon her companion with a cough expressive of the experience of a woman who has had two husbands and several sons.

Araminta Ostrander kept silence. She knew when Mrs. Chessey spoke captiously it was because she was tired of her company. Araminta was a welcome guest through hog killing and hay time. When Ezra was down with the typhoid Mrs. Chessey spoke softly enough to the handy little old maid who helped nurse him. But now that the carpet-rags were all sewed up and the big boys' clothes made over for the smaller boys, and nothing to do but cook and wash and mend for the men who were watching the sap and boiling down the syrup in the maple woods, Mrs. Chessey regarded it as a slight extravagance of hospitality to entertain Minty Ostrander any longer.

Miss Ostrander's thin hands grew hot as she wedged the doughnuts into gaps left between the slices of bread and meat which filled the basket. She was a long waisted, thin-shouldered little body, with kind, bright eyes, though her chin was sharp and her nose looked some way as if it had been prolonged by pinches given to check a tendency to snuffle. She was firmly corseted, and her gingham gown cracked with starch and shone from the polish of the flat-iron. It struck one that nothing was left of Minty Ostrander but utility. When the cover of the basket was fastened, and while Mrs. Chessey was pouring the scalded milk into the can of hot coffee, Miss Ostrander stepped to the looking-glass and tied a red hood on her head and pinned a warm shawl around her straight, long-waisted little figure. Then she went to the landing of the staircase and called up:

"Come, Clairy, I'm ready!"

There was a choking homesick sob in her throat. She always had it when she left one place and went to another. For twenty years she has fitted into the empty places in the various homes of the neighborhood. Mrs. Kilso, whose children were down with the measles, would be glad to have her now. But it gave Minty a sore, suffocating feeling to think that Mrs. Chessey had got through with her. She liked the Chessey's about the best of any of the places she fitted into, even though Mrs. Chessey was apt to be captious.

Clara Chessey came slowly down the stairs when she was called. The road to the maple-woods was lonesome, and neither of the women dare go alone to the sugar-camp after dark. Clara was a slim, white-skinned girl. Her pale-blond hair was freshly crimped, and she wore a blue "fascinator" with silver beads in the fringe. Her eyes had a strained look, as if she had been staring into the darkness; they blinked in the bright light of the well-trimmed

lamp set before a tin reflector that hung on the wall.

"I should think you'd be stiff cold stayin' up in your room so long," said Mrs. Chessey, who was Clara's step-mother. Then she added, sarcastically: "What you pinkin' for to-night? Ned Slosson's give up comin'. You ain't expectin' any one else, be you?"

"I suppose I can comb up my hair! I'm a mind to," muttered the young girl. A sympathetic observer would have seen that she was in trouble of some sort.

"Don't be too pert, missy. When a girl's fellow's given her the slip, she wants to be a bit humble-mouthed about it!"

Mrs. Chessey was fitting the cover into the can. She did not see the piteous little tremble about Clara's lips. She went on: "I s'pose Ned thought 't was more convenient to sit up with some of the girls around the Corners than to tramp up here to the farm. It's about two months since he's been, ain't it?"

"I don't know whose business it is when he's been," the girl muttered. Her cheeks were red with anger now.

Mrs. Chessey rested her hands on her hips and laughed.

"I b'lieve you're fixin' to be an old maid, Clairy," she said. "I do b'lieve you be;" and she laughed again as Minty and Clara went out the door.

The sky was dappled with white, vapory clouds, and the lonely road was white with a light March snow. Around the moon was a large pale ring. Araminta led the way with her usual brisk step. At the gate Clara Chessey stopped and looked wistfully down the road toward the Corners for a minute.

"I don't see what makes you in such a hurry," she said fretfully to Araminta, overtaking her.

Miss Ostrander looked at the girl with sudden interest, as she stepped along in her trim, gingerly way, balancing the heavy basket of night-lunch she was carrying to the men in the sugar camp. Judging from appearances she was about the last person in the village to sympathize with a love-sick girl. Her life was given to helping her neighbors through with all sorts of straits excepting those of their love affairs. Few or none of these neighbors remembered that Araminta had ever been other than the brisk, handy, quick-witted little woman, good for every emergency and pushed aside when the emergency was over. Few or none ever realized that she was the mere frustrate ghost of the real self who had died and been buried twenty odd years before, on the night when her helpless, irritable old father had flung his cane at young Nicholas Slosson and bade him "Be gone!" adding that no such roving blade need be hangin' round his girl so long as he was above ground.

"Am I walkin' too fast, Clairy?" said Minty Ostrander, gently. Then, not giving the girl time to reply, she added: "What's the matter with you, Clairy?"

"Nothing," was the sullen answer; but there was a note in the voice which belied the denial.

"Did you expect Ned this evenin'?" Araminta persisted.

"I don't know why I should expect him. You know as well as I do he never comes any more."

"Clairy, why doesn't he come?"

The anger and misery and disappointment in the girl's heart welled up in a thick cry. Her blue eyes were blinded with tears.

"Be—cause I was a f—fool and quarrelled w—with him about nothin'," she muttered in a suffocating voice.

"You was watchin' for him when I called you down stairs," stated Miss Ostrander, uncertain just how to proceed.

"Yes—I—was. He—was in the store this morning when I went after the spice for your doughnuts. He was standin' right 'longside me at the counter, and says he: 'Was what you said

at New Year's time for good and all, Clara Chessey?"

"And what did you give him for an answer?" inquired Miss Ostrander.

"I—I couldn't say nothin' much, 'cause Snell was coming back with the spice, but I says, 'If you're a mind to come up to the farm to-night, Ned, I'll tell you.' I couldn't say no more'n that, right there in the store."

"No," said Minty Ostrander, "I don't think you could. A girl can't cheapen herself too much with a young man—"

Clara cried out with passion: "I—I—don't care. I—I—if I thought he'd wanted to make up—I—"

Miss Ostrander walked more slowly. She said: "If I'd known, I wouldn't have hurried off so. If Ned should come up now, and find you gone out, he'd think you meant to fool him. Now wouldn't he, Clairy?"

"Ye—es. That's just—it," sobbed the girl, her teeth chattering.

The two walked on a moment in silence. Then Miss Ostrander shifted the basket on her arm, turned and held out her hand.

"Give me the can, Clairy; I can carry both. You've got to go home. You've got to go back. Ned'll come. I bet he'll come. And unless you straighten it up between you to-night, it'll go crooked forever."

Clara drew back: "You can't go into the woods alone. You'll be scared; and besides, I wouldn't go back and have 'em make fun of me about it. I wouldn't—for anything!" Minty laid her mittened hand firmly on the can.

"I know all about seein' the fellow you care about turn round and go to courtin' some other girl, Clairy. You wouldn't think I know, maybe; but I do. I ain't a going to be the means of partin' you and Ned. I don't want to see no other girl a-goin' through life's lonesome as I be. You've got to go back. You han't no cause for going into the house, nor lettin' on you're there. You can jes' wait round the front door. If Ned Slosson comes, you'll be there to see him. If he doesn't come, nobody need know you waited for him." She took the can half forcibly from the girl's hand. "Won't you be scared, in the woods alone, Minty?"

"Nobody'll touch me."

"There's lots of—strangers—in some of the camps."

"If you waste any more time, Clairy, you'll lose your chance of seeing Ned Slosson. He's had time to come and go as it is."

Clara Chessey accepted Minty's advice. The elder woman started onward with her double load; and Clara, her tears dispelled, her cheeks glowing and hoarse panting with sudden hope, set off with quick steps on her return.

Minty Ostrander stepped on briskly alone. The dappled clouds rode fast across the face of the moon. She had reached the wood-road now, narrower and darker than the highway. That she was afraid would be idle to deny. She panted more from fear than from the weight of her load. But she said to herself: "Tisn't much for me to do for her. 'Tisn't much when you think how long life is, and how lonesome it is when all people care about you is for the help you can give 'em in a strait." She kept straight on, trying not to start away from the sudden shadows that the swaying boughs flung before her; trying not to remember that more or less tramps always found their way to the neighborhood of the sugar-camp, hurrying as fast as she could.

"Pshaw! nobody'd tetch me," she said to herself from time to time. But her heart was in a whirl and thoughts went flying through her head. She thought over all the past—how Nicholas Slosson had said bitterly:

"Take me now or never, Minty Ostrander!"

And now she had cried just as Clara was crying a few minutes ago, and

answered: "Nick, it can't be now. On account of father, it can't be now. You know it can't be now." And how Nick had gone off mad, and made up to Ellen Good; and how they were married, and how Ellen faded away and died, knowing her husband had just taken her out of spite; and how after her death Nicholas Slosson had quit the neighborhood, leaving his baby boy to be brought up by his grandparents.

This was the boy (Ned) Slosson whom Clara Chessey had gone back to meet. No one conjectured it, but Ned Slosson was dear to Araminta Ostrander. She had often thought she should leave him the savings she had in the bank. She had sent Clara Chessey back to him more on the boy's account than on that of the girl.

"He's fond of Clairy; I've seen it these two year," Minty said to herself. "An' he's like his father; it'll break him up if he loses the girl he wants."

Araminta stopped suddenly. It was time: she was near enough to the sugar camp to see the fires. She started around her. Surely she knew her way through Ezra Chessey's maple-woods. Yet somehow she must have missed it. She tried to collect herself, to fix some landmark. The dappled clouds were darker than when she had entered the wood-road. The bare boughs sighed mournfully in the rising wind. Had she come faster than she thought and farther? It seemed so. Minty Ostrander was used to dilemmas, accustomed to collecting her wits and controlling her feelings. And she did both in the situation in which she found herself. She began to retrace her steps. But the more she scanned the paths the less familiar they grew. From time to time she stopped and listened to the silence, or gazed into the dark aisles in hopes of catching the distant glimmer of a camp-fire. The moon, with its great pale ring, had gone out of sight behind the darkening clouds. The basket on her arm grew heavier with every step. Sometimes it seemed as if she caught the sound of a footstep, as if something or some one was near her. "I'm lost, and I'm clean beat out, besides," said Miss Ostrander to herself at last. She set down her load.

"It seems as if I heard sounds. I reckon I'm getting nervous," she said. "It'll all come out about Ned and Clairy, too, now." She stood still to find in what direction the wind was blowing, and then, drawing a deep breath, she placed her hands each side her mouth, gave a long, shrill cry, and listened breathless for the response. It came in an unlooked-for way. A man stepped out from behind a great tree on one side of where Miss Ostrander was standing—a solitary man, indistinctly disreputable in outline; a lurking stranger, who could have no lawful business in these dark woods.

"Have you lost your way?" the man inquired.

Minty's tongue clove thickly to the roof of her mouth. Her lips felt like lips of leather.

"I'm near Ezra Chessey's sugar-camp," she said. "I've got a heavy basket, and I want one of the boys to come and help me carry it the rest of the way."

"I reckon you're wrong there. You're two miles from Ezra Chessey's camp."

"How do you know that?" She could see that the man was tall and not young. His voice was not rough either. There was even something familiar about it. "And what are you going here?" She asked the question more to show him she was not too scared to speak than for any other reason.

"I thought some of Chessey's folks would be bringin' down a lunch. I was hanging around for that, and when I saw you with your basket I followed on. I'd have stopped you before, if I had n't been afraid of frightening you