

A Rift in the Clouds

Marian, dear, how is the morning fair or cloudy? Inquired Ethel Ray, turning on the invalid couch, where she lay day after day as well as night.

Marian swept the seat certain back from the narrow window of their poor room.

"Dark and cloudy," she replied the cold dreariness of the new day striking, a chill to her sensitive, heavily-burdened heart.

"Never mind; that will be a rift in the clouds by and by," she said with renewed hope.

"I am glad you have such faith, pet," said Marian, still looking out on the street. A poor beggar crept feebly along, his rags fluttering in the bitter wind, and in pity for a lot sadder than his own, she turned from the window with a brighter expression, and put on her hat and cloak to start on to that weary round of music lessons, which were their support.

"I am sorry to leave you all day Ethel but it will be late before I can get through."

"Do not fret about me, Marian. Mrs. McNally will come in and give me my lunch and a fresh glass of water, and I will be in the kitchen to meet for Miss Constantine, and that magazine you brought me yesterday to read. Oh, I shall be fully occupied until you return."

"Well, well, it is comforting to have so brave and busy a little sister at home. I think of often when I am out, and it gives me courage," said Marian, bending over the couch with tender sympathy.

"The crippled girl clasped the slender hand caressing her hair, and drew it down against her pale cheek.

"Am I really your Marian? Oh, that thought makes me happy! I like her such a helpless useless creature. Sometimes I have feared that I was only a burden to you."

"Never think that again, dear one—never! It is not for you—"

"She broke off, and stooping, kissed the sweet, pale face resting on her breast, when she would have moved away. Ethel held her a moment longer.

"Marian, darling, do not lose your faith and hope. There will be clear sunshines after a while, and all these dark clouds will vanish."

"I will try to think so," she replied, with a smile— a smile that vanished the moment she left her sister's presence, and memory began to bring up one by one the events of the two years passed.

The girls had been left orphans at an early age, but with property sufficient to supply all they could ever need, not only of necessities, but even luxuries. Their guardian controlled the money, and they lived in his house, under the care of his good hearted maiden sister.

Ethel had always been lame and delicate, but Marian went out into the world, seeing and enjoying its beauties and pleasures.

Walking swiftly along to give her first music lesson, she drew a sharp breath of surprise as memory too faithfully recalled all the glory and happiness of a three months tour to Europe, with a party of friends, just before the downfall of fortune.

At the very outset they met Mark Keller, handsome, travelled, and to the young girl a very kind among men. He joined the party, and was the object of all her attentions. The routes they travelled had been over before, and she could point out all the beauties and interesting spots.

A golden season, and the girl's heart surrendered in spite of womanly pride and reluctance. But she had no cause to feel shame, or believe her love unrequited for one man, moonlight night in an old Italian garden, he stretched out his hand to her with sudden and earnest words of love, and so eloquently did he plead for the sweet gift of all her future life, she could not withhold the promise to be his wife.

"You shall never regret it. You shall be happy," he cried, with a lover's confidence.

"I am happy now," she whispered, flushed all shy, but radiant.

They wandered long among the flowers feeling that heaven lay about them; but the next morning the girl received bad news from home. She only made out clearly that her presence was needed, and with only one regretful sigh for the brighter dreams she had cherished, she began preparations for the long journey. Keller earnestly begged to accompany her, but she gently refused. He must go on with their friends, and if he needed him she would write for him to come.

"It shall come on in a few weeks whether you send for me or not. We must finish this interrupted tour together, Marian."

"She returned home to find her guardian dead, and their fortune gone, swept away in some ill-directed speculation. The maiden lady sought a home with relatives and Marian Ray found herself among the world's workers, and with a helpless invalid to take care of. Helpless, did I say? Nay, she was the only hope and comfort of poor Marian's heart, for her handsome wealthy lover came not, and the letter she wrote to him explaining their reverse of fortune remained unanswered. She tried to think of him with content; but in the evening a strip of faded in the hour of her bitterest need as a valueless, but she only succeeded in tormenting her own faithful, loving heart which in spite of pride and reason clung to that short sweet romance, with a hold which death alone could break.

All day she walked from house to house through the bitter cold, while the clouds hung dull and heavy over the city; but when her day's work ended, she started home to find the little rift had become a broad space across the heavens, and call it a happy one, but it cannot, she thought with a tender smile that ended in a sigh.

"It was dark when she reached home, and hurrying eagerly up stairs, she pushed open the door, anxious to be with her sister as soon as possible. They were careful with fuel, with everything necessary forced them to study economy, and Marian expected to find the room in darkness, only a dimmy handful of coal in the grate. She entered, to find a glowing fire, and the table set with dainties, while the tea-table steamed merrily on the hearth.

"Ethel!" she cried, hastily throwing off hat and wraps and taring toward her sister's bed.

"Oh, Marian, sister!" cried the invalid, in a voice trembling with strange emotion; then Marian felt her heart leap in a sufficing throb of pain and rapture, and out of the semi-darkness of the corner, Mark Keller advanced, with outstretched hands to meet her.

"Marian, have you no welcome for me?" A chilling remembrance of all his silence and neglect swept over her, and pride rose in arms.

"Certainly, I—I welcome you, Mr. Keller," she said, stiffly, and stepping back a little.

"What? Have you forgotten?" he cried, in keenest disappointment.



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