

## AN AIMLESS LIFE.

BY G. DE R.

Josephine sat in the faint moonlight playing. One of Chopin's waltzes stole out on the silent summer air, and through the moonbeams the flashing fingers flew like white fairies, keeping time to its perfect music. Then followed a few chords and prelude, and there glided out the delicious "allegro" movement in the "Sonata Pathétique." The tender pleading of the melody rose and fell with the expressive playing of the fair musician. It was indeed a "song without words." Suddenly Josephine felt two hands clasp her head and draw it back, and there fell on her forehead warm, passionate kisses. As suddenly she was released, and turning round, found herself again alone. Frightened and bewildered at what had occurred, she immediately left the room, and passing through the window out to the piazza, where the soft moonbeams were filtered through the vines in dancing flakes of light over its broad floor, never paused until she reached the farthest corner, where she sank trembling into the camp-chair.

"Did Beethoven's ghost rise at your vandalism, Josephine?" cried Fanny, from the other side, where we all sat enjoying the cool half gloom.

Tom broke her silence by exclaiming, "And well you might be struck dumb for taking such liberties, mutilating the great master's choicest works, an arm here, a head there. Why don't you play the perfect statue?"

Then, half in the doorway, Josephine saw the blonde moustache and tall form of Wayne appear, and by the upsteady gait, together with the faint odor of cigars and wine still upon her face and lips, she knew it could have been none but he who had put so abrupt a final to her music. Instantly she turned away her head, and hoped he would not see her in the shadowy corner she had chosen.

All grew still when Wayne came out, for they saw at once, before he mentioned it that he had just come from the pavilion. This was the skeleton in the closet. The eldest son and brother, of whom they were all once so proud, an honored graduate of one of the universities only five years ago, had fallen so low in the social scale since, that all of the class at which he then stood head were now above him in the world. But they all owned "Wayne Brent had the best head, nevertheless." We never looked for Wayne to join our evening group on the piazza, for the pavilion held forth charms, in the way of billiards and bar, that were not on our quiet programme. His presence was a shadow, although tonight he shone with brilliancy as he dashed into the topics of the day with a vim and sparkle unusual to him. Ordinarily, Wayne was a voluble talker, but wine loosened both his wit and his tongue.

Josephine sat in the gloom, still silent, only her white dress betraying her whereabouts. Her brain was puzzled with many thoughts. What could cousin Wayne mean? Did he mistake her for Fanny? But then Fanny didn't play Beethoven, and that "allegro" was his favorite. He knew she alone played it. Ever since she was a girl of fourteen, and he then a young man of twenty-five, Wayne had been to her a sort of seer, knowing everything, teaching her so much. But for him she would never have been what she was, for Josephine passed for a "blue," and was a little vain of the title. He had superintended all her studies. When a student himself, he had attended college in her own city, and she saw him every day. He was kind and good to her, and she loved him like a brother, but never before had he taken such a liberty. On the contrary, he had always appeared to dislike her greetings, as she kissed him with the "other boys" when she came to spend her summer vacations with Fanny. But to-night? Of his own accord—such passionate kisses! What could it mean? And a half-indignant flush mounted her brow as she wondered what Hamilton would think of it. For two years Josephine had worn a "roll-tale" on the third finger of her left hand, and although her lover was across the ocean, she was as true to him even in thought as if he stood beside her, and she blushed and felt dishonored.

As the conversation grew general, she arose and came down among the group, and Fanny cried, "I believe you have been fast asleep, Josephine. What did you dream? Tell us."

She answered slowly, looking toward Wayne, who sat on the steps smoking. "I dreamed I lost a friend."

Tom roared and said, "Oh what a doleful sound! Was it the nearer one still and the dearer one?"

"No," she replied, "it was an old friend." Wayne rose, and stood unsteady, looking right in her face, and asked, "Did he die, Josey?" and waited with his cigar in his hand for an answer.

The fumes of the tobacco and their association made her half sick and angry, and she repined warmly, her face aglow in the moonlight. "He did—a dishonorable death."

Wayne drew his cigar off and lit the grass, where it made fireflies for a minute, and answered, "If he deserved it, all right," and turning on his heel, he went off to bed.

The next morning Josephine awoke with a vague feeling of something wrong in the atmosphere, and when the last night's scene in the parlor rushed upon her, she involuntarily rubbed her lips, as though to erase the hot kisses she still felt burning there. At the breakfast-table Wayne spoke to no one, and swallowed

his coffee in sullen silence. Josephine never looked once toward him; but when she arose from the table and went out on the piazza to wave adieu to the boys as the train passed by, and they went down to the hills and beat that proud in the city, he followed her; and throwing himself upon the lounge that always stood there through the summer months, he called, "Josey, come here, won't you?" No one ever dared abbreviate her name but Wayne, for Josephine was as proud as an empress, and demanded every syllable. She felt her color rise as she obeyed him. "Sit down," and he pointed to the little stool beside him. Without raising her eyes she sat, as he bade her, at his feet, and felt his searching gaze. He was silent for a moment, then a sigh escaped him as he asked, half pleading, "Will you not look at me, Josey?" Then slowly raising her great dark eyes until they met his, he saw in their depths all the indignation she was smothering. "I beg your pardon. I know I was a fool last night," he went on humbly, and looking at her askance. "I was mad. It was the wine and liquor, and, Josey, won't you forgive me? Don't let me die a dishonorable death."

With a half laugh, Josephine put out her hand, and, smiling, said, "Noblesse oblige," but don't repeat the offense, Wayne, or it will be a bullet at twenty paces."

"Nearer than that, maybe," he muttered, under his breath, and biting the ends of his moustache.

Josephine, not catching his words, went on. "Wayne, now that you are in a repentant mood, I am going to talk to you as aunt Rachel does to me. May I?" she asked, half afraid to do so.

"Go on," he answered, with his dreamy eyes away off on the blue mountain-tops melting away into the morning sky.

"But you must pay attention or I won't preach," said Josephine, impatiently. Then he brought his eyes back to full full upon the figure at his feet.

Josephine was one of the old-fashioned girls who look as pretty for the breakfast as for the tea-table, and the tableau vivant was a charming one to me from the window in the distance where I sat sewing—Josephine, her dark braids hanging loosely in her net over her pink morning dress, her lithe figure all action, while Wayne was a striking contrast, his lazy limbs and blonde head thrown out in strong relief on the blue-striped cover of the lounge.

Josephine went on. "You know, Wayne, I have always looked up to you, but I fear you are leading such a life as will cause me, as well as others, to look down upon you, if you do not soon put a bar in the path that is leading you to destruction."

Stopping to see the effect of her words, she continued, as he did not answer, "With all the talent and genius you possess, why do you lead the aimless, purposeless life you are dragging out day after day, and dragging out night after night? Is all your pride dead, that you let your inferiors rise above you in the world, while you lie still, drifting with the tide like a weed, careless whether it carries you to the ocean or to the mire of the stagnant pool? Your father—we all have centred such hopes in you! I, too, have been so proud of you, Wayne."

Here his eyes met hers, and his breast heaved; he seemed about to speak, but no sound escaped his lips.

"And you are waiting this noble, God-given life, half spent already, and what gain? Will you go on for ever leading this aimless life? Do you know where it will end?" and she paused breathless, half in fear at her own temerity, and wholly in earnest in her good work.

Wayne arose, and with his hands in his pockets walked up and down the long piazza, then, coming back, stood looking down tenderly on his little teacher.

"What use, Josey? What use? My life is wrecked. Let the debris float where it will."

"No," she cried, springing up and clasping her hands over his arm and walking with him—"no, Wayne, even the pieces of a rare ship are worth the saving, but you shall not lie so low, even in your own eyes. Rescue yourself from this lethargy and mount upward, until, like those distant mountain-tops, you touch the heavens."

Looking down into the dark eyes that burned with intense enthusiasm, he smiled sadly, and said, "Child, they only touch the shadowy clouds. The heavens lie beyond—as far as my heaven from my hopes."

"You only laugh at me," she sighed. Then taking her two hands in his, he bent down and said in a low, tremulous voice, "Josey, I wish I could weep at your truths, but I am past saying; give up hoping for me. You are too good. Mine is an aimless life, and it shall be one long." Then dropping her hands, he went down the steps and through the gate without a word or a look more.

She stood there, pained and bewildered, her hands hanging listlessly at her side, as he had left them. And so I found her, when I came out to call her to her morning's tasks. Although only staying the summer with us, a half guest, I made her come under the rule of the house and obey my mandates with the rest of my subjects. I, Aunt Rachel, occupied the position of aunt, housekeeper and mother in my little kingdom, Tom being my own boy, while Wayne and Fanny and Bert and Ned were my brother's children, and all consigned to Josephine. Wayne and Fanny and the boys were the heirs expectant to all the broad beautiful lands that sloped down to the river's bank far as the eye could

reach. When they lost their mother, ten years ago, little girl and boys then, I came to them; and staying ever since, I loved them as my own. This summer, Josephine, my only sister's only child, had been left by her mother in our joint care, while she, with her invalid husband, sought the fitting shadow health, which the doctor had said lay for him under the soft Italian sky over the sea. I little dreamed I was accepting so painful a duty when I welcomed Josephine to our happy home, only a month before.

I began to discover, after she came, a vague unrest in Wayne. It was true he had for a year or more been "going wrong," but we all still held our breaths, and waited to see if he would not yet take a fresh start and win the day. But the spring melted into summer, and the summer verged into fall, and still he smoked and lounged and went to "the pavilion," coming home unsteady in gait, and feverish in eye and tongue, and his father's heart sank within him when he beheld his first-born fallen so low. Since Josephine had been with us, he was more at home. He loved music with an artist's soul, and she played exquisitely, and always "felt" cousin Wayne's presence," as she explained, and played to him. And this summer, for the first time in many months, I had found him studying at his books as of old, and I felt a hope born again, and thought he might yet "fulfill the promise of the bud." Then again he would "go wrong," and so all summer I grew hot and cold in my hope and despair over my favorite, for with all his faults he was my favorite still.

That evening Wayne came home like himself, sober and still. He looked so pale and still, I asked him if he was sick. "No, he had been up the mountain, and was tired; he wasn't used to climbing." As he passed Josephine, he threw into her lap a foreign post-marked letter. She caught it with a happy, joyous laugh, and coming into the room where I sat, knelt beside me, and a rosy flush flamed into her lips and cheeks, and her whole face was filled with happiness, as she seemed to hear the warm tones of her lover's voice as she read his burning words. I heard a heavy, labored breathing, and turning, saw behind the vines Wayne's eyes—only his eyes, but they told me what I scarce dared put into a thought. Feigning ignorance of my discovery, I asked, in as calm a voice as I could command, "Well, what does he say?" And Fanny came rushing in from the piazza, where she and Josephine had been watching the sunset. "When, and oh when is the wedding-day to be?" she sang, and Josephine, radiant and blushing, answered, turning to me, "I am so surprised, auntie. Hamilton says I must be ready in October. He is coming for me then, and papa and mamma will wait in Naples for us," and she colored at the words. Fanny hugged and cried over her as though she was to go the next day, and called Hamilton "wicked," and Tom and the boys gave three cheers for the "bride elect." I felt something like tears in my throat, for I could not speak for a moment; then putting my arms round her, I said, "God bless you, my child!"

I heard the vines pushed hurriedly aside, and Wayne stepped in among us. He was pale as death. Coming straight to Josephine, he said in an unnatural tone—it sounded away, far off, like one in a dream—"Do you love him, Josey?"

She looked up amazed; but seeing the earnestness in his face, answered him as earnestly—and she looked like an angel—"With my whole heart, Wayne."

"Amen!" he said, ringing out the word as though pronouncing a benediction, and walked away.

Fanny and the boys and Josephine all looked pained; then I heard Tom say, "Over to the pavilion," in Wayne's unsteady voice, and I saw they believed him what he often had been. Only I knew his secret, and I rejoiced in my heart then that only a few more weeks would my boy be tortured by the sound of the "one voice he loved" and could never possess; and I made up my mind that, hard as it would be, I still would hurry the preparations for Josephine's departure. I knew she never suspected me secret, and it should be kept from her for ever, if possible.

The days following were busy ones. From morn till eve the rattle of the sewing-machine kept time to merry voices as they laughed and sang "marriage bells" and "bridal choruses," and all were—save Wayne and me—happy enough over the making of Josephine's hurried trousseau. As the coming winter had, before this peremptory summons came, been settled upon as the time to give up our girl, we had necessarily to "stitch, stitch, stitch," in order to be ready so much earlier. Wayne seldom came into the room where we were so busily sewing, but sometimes he would wheel the lounge up to the window and lie smoking lazily without, watching our nimble fingers.

One day he said, suddenly, "Josey, is this all your 'aim' in life?" and she answered, laughing. "I had a purpose, don't I? Will not mine be a 'higher life,' that of an honored wife?"

He turned away, and I heard him mutter something from "Lucky Day," a poem he was fond of quoting—I had loved thee more than wife was ever loved; but Josephine and Fanny, who were whispering and laughing together over the matrimony title, did not hear him.

And so the long summer days went on, and I longed for October and Hamilton to come. As the time drew near for Hamilton's return, I watched Wayne closely. He grew more restless, and slept little. Half the time I would find his

bed untouched, and I could hear him on the piazza under my window, pacing like some wild animal all night. At last the steamer was expected in, and Josephine, all nervously anxious to hear of it, telegraphed below, for we were all to go down to the city to meet Hamilton upon his arrival.

When the telegram came telling us that the Russia would be in next day, Wayne brought it to her, saying, "Read the death-warrant." "Oh, Way!" she exclaimed turning pale; but she laughed, and said, "I didn't say yours, Josey."

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful. A soft mist hung over the river, and clinging to the trees and faintly outlined banks, it made them seem shadowy ghosts which had forgotten to vanish with the night. We were all down to an early breakfast. Wayne came in last in his hunting-dress, his gun slung over his shoulder. Tom whistled an air from "Fra Diavolo," and Wayne scowled, and explained, "You'll all be gone, so I'll be off for a day's sport in the woods. I'll aim high, Josey, and maybe bring you home a 'feather for your cap.' Will you prize it among all your glittering gew-gaws?"

"More than all if you accomplish your purpose, Wayne," she said, with an expression he understood.

He looked so pallid that I came to him, and said in a low tone, "I don't believe you are well enough to go on such a tramp, Wayne. You had better stay at home and meet us to-night at the cars."

"Pshaw, auntie!" he said, irritably; "who ever heard of me being sick? I do things by wholes. I'll live or die; no half-way station for me any more;" and he laughed a nervous, short laugh.

We all hurried through breakfast in order to be in time for the early train, as we were to go down with brother and the boys that morning.

As Josephine left the table, Wayne followed her to the hall, and pausing at the parlor door, said, "Come, Josey, play 'my piece' once more. I won't ever have you again so."

"And why not?" she asked, stopping and looking half angry. "Hamilton is not a selfish lover. He is perfect, and I won't allow even an inference to the contrary."

"Well," he sighed, "won't you do what I ask you this last time?"

Then she went in, and pulled off her gloves, half impudently in her haste to be gone, and the soft morning light fell on her fair girlish figure as she sat there and played the exquisite "allegro."

Wayne stood over her, leaning on his gun, still as some carved statue. Then, as the strain died away, he sighed, and said in a low tone, as if to himself, "It is a requiem! Like my life, it is in the minor key, and ended." Then bending down, he looked into her eyes, saying, "Kiss me good-bye, Josey."

But she turned away, exclaiming, "Why, Wayne, I'm not going away for ever!" Then wheeling around again on the stool, "Here, then, good-bye;" and putting up her pure lips, she kissed him—a soft, tender, clinging kiss, like a baby's—and he was gone.

We saw him from the car window tramping over the meadows, his gun over his shoulder, his handsome tall figure a pleasant picture on the bright background of blue sky, gleaming river and dark wood.

The steamer came in on time, but long before she landed her passengers, Josephine discovered Hamilton's bronze beard and dark eyes over the vessel's side, and telegraphed her welcome to him. When at last he came down the plank, she flew into his arms like a bird to its nest, and was glad Wayne did not come.

We dined at the hotel in town, and went out home in the early evening train. Wayne was out at the cars to meet us, and I felt an indefinable pain when I could not discover him among the crowd. The servants said he had not been home since breakfast, and so we waited tea for him, and still he did not come. I felt an anxious dread of something—I knew not what—all the long evening, and tried to laugh off my superstitious fears. The girls were happy enough singing and playing, and with merry laughter "rehearsing the ceremony," for Josephine was to be married and sail the following week. No one missed my poor boy.

When at last one of the farm-hands called me to the door, I trembled with a premonition of something dreadful, and heard my superstitious fears confirmed—"Mr. Wayne had been found in the western woods, miles away, badly hurt; shot; his gun must have accidentally discharged—and they were bringing him home."

I sent the girls to bed. It was late, and they kissed me good-night, unsuspecting of the shadow that hovered over the house, which I wished to spare their bright memory of the day. While the servants were making ready the room, and the man sent for the nearest surgeon, I told brother and Hamilton what the man told me, and we waited with anxious hearts.

They brought him, all bleeding and pale, his closed eyelids sunken and blue-veined, and the blood gushing from his breast. They laid him down tenderly, and we waited. He lay so still, like one dead, no sign of a breath, no shadow of life on his face. When the surgeon came and dressed the wound—it was near the heart—he asked us how it happened; and brother told him Wayne had gone off in the morning for a day's sport, and his gun must have accidentally discharged. He looked grave, but said no more. All through the long night my boy lay so still and white till dawn, then opening his eyes, he muttered, "Did I aim high enough? It was my heart I brought you, Josey. You said you would prize it, 'more than' all. It is shattered, you see. Better dead