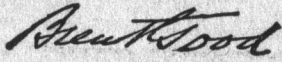


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Old Hagar's Secret...

By Mrs. M. J. Holmes...

"Don't ask me, grandma," cried Mag, covering her face with her hands, "don't ask me, for indeed I can only tell you that I am very unhappy."

A little skillful questioning on Madam Conway's part sufficed to explain the whole—how constant association with Arthur Carrollton had won for him a place in Maggie's heart, which Henry Warner had never filled; how the knowledge that she loved him as she could love no other one had faintly revealed itself to her on the night when he asked her if she were engaged, and had burst upon her with overwhelming power when she heard that he was going home.

"He will never think of me again, I know," she said; "but, with my present feelings, I cannot marry Henry, unless he insists upon it."

"A man seldom wishes to marry a woman who says she does not love him, and Henry Warner will not prove an exception," answered Madam Conway, and, comforted with this assurance, Mag folded up her letter, which was soon on its way to Cuba.

The next evening, as Madam Conway sat alone with Mr. Carrollton, she spoke of his return to England, expressing her sorrow, and asking why he did not remain with them longer.

"I will deal frankly with you, madam," said he, "and say that if I followed my own inclination I should stay, for Hillsdale holds for me an attraction which no other spot possesses. I refer to your granddaughter, who, in the little time I have known her, has grown very dear to me; so dear that I dare not stay longer where she is, lest I should love her too well, and rebel against yielding her to another."

For a moment Madam Conway hesitated; but, thinking the case demanded her speaking, she said: "Possibly, Mr. Carrollton, I can make an explanation which will show some points in a different light from that in which you now see them. Margaret is engaged to Henry Warner, I will admit; but the engagement has become irksome, and yesterday she wrote, asking a release, which he will grant, of course."

Instantly the expression of Mr. Carrollton's face was changed, and very intently he listened, while Madam Conway frankly told him the story of Margaret's engagement up to the present time, withholding from him nothing, not even Mag's confession of the interest she felt in him, an interest which had weakened her girlish attachment for Henry Warner.

"You have made me very happy," Mr. Carrollton said to Madam Conway, as at a late hour, he bade her good-night, "happier than I can well express, for, without Margaret, life to me would be very indeed. The next morning, at the breakfast table, Anna Jeffrey, who was in high spirits with the prospect of having Mr. Carrollton for a fellow-traveler, spoke of their intended voyage, saying she could hardly wait for the time to come, and asking if he were not equally impatient to leave so horrid a country as America."

"On the contrary," he replied, "I should be sorry to leave America just yet. I have, therefore, decided to remain a little longer," and his eyes sought the face of Maggie, who, in her joyful surprise, dropped her knife with which she was helping herself to butter, while Anna Jeffrey, quite as much astonished, upset her coffee, exclaiming: "Not going home! What has changed your mind?"

Mr. Carrollton made her no direct

reply, and she continued her breakfast in no very amiable mood; while Maggie, too much overjoyed to eat, managed, ere long, to find an excuse for leaving the table. Mr. Carrollton wished to do everything honorably, and so he decided to say nothing to Mag of the cause of this sudden change in his plan until Henry Warner's answer was received, as she should then feel free to act. His resolution, however, was more easily made than kept, and during the succeeding weeks, by actions, if not by words, he more than once told Maggie Miller how much she was beloved; and Maggie, trembling with fear lest the cup of happiness just within her grasp should be rudely dashed aside, waited impatiently for the letter which was to set her free. But weeks went by, and Maggie's heart grew sick with hope deferred, for there came to her no message from the distant Cuban shore where, in another chapter, we will for a moment go.

CHAPTER XVII.

Brightly shone the moonlight on the sunny side of Cuba, dancing lightly on the waves, resting softly on the orange groves, and stealing gently through the casement into the room where a young girl lay, white as the flowers strewn upon her pillow. From the commencement of the voyage, Rose had drooped, growing weaker every day, until at last all who looked upon her felt that the home, of which she talked so much, would never again be gladdened by her presence. Very tenderly Henry Warner nursed her, bearing her often in his arms upon the vessel's deck, where she could breathe the fresh sea air as it came rippling over the sea. But neither ocean breeze nor yet the aromatic bowers, where for a time they stopped, had power to rouse her; and when at last Havana was reached, she laid her weary head upon her pillow, whispering to no one of the love which was wearing at their hearts, both her aunt and Henry watched her, the latter shrinking ever from the thoughts of losing life, who seemed a part of his very life.

"I cannot give you up, my Rose. I cannot live without you," he said, when once she talked to him of death. "You are all the world to me," and laying his head upon her pillow he wept, as men will sometimes weep over their first great sorrow.

"Don't, Henry," she said, laying her tiny hand upon his hair; "Maggie will comfort you when I am gone. She will talk to you of me, you must not leave me here alone. You must come home and bury me in dear old Leominster, where my childhood was passed, and where I learned to love you so much, oh, so much!"

There was a mournful pathos in the tone with which the last words were uttered, but Henry Warner did not understand it, and, covering the little, blue-veined hand with kisses, he promised that her grave should be made at the foot of the garden in their far-off home, where the sunbeams gently shone. That evening Henry sat alone by Rose who had fallen into a disturbed slumber. For a time he took no notice of the disconnected words she uttered in his dreams, but when, at last, he heard the sound of his own name, he drew near, and bending low, listened with mingled emotions of joy, sorrow and surprise to a speech which, waking, she would never have said to him, above all others. She said: "The fair girl he called his sister—but not as a sister loves, and now, as he stood by her, with the remembered thrilling nerve, he knew where, but for his blindness, he would have seen how every pulsation of her heart throbbled alone for him, whose hand was plighted to another, and that other no unworthy rival. Beautiful, very beautiful, was the shadowy form which, at that moment, seemed standing at his side, and his heart went out toward her, as the one above all others to be his bride."

"Had I known it sooner," he

thought, "known it before I met the peerless Mag I might have taken Rose to my bosom and loved her, it may be, with a deeper love than that I feel for Maggie Miller, for Rose is everything to me. She has made and keeps me what I am, and how can I let her die, when I have the power to save her?"

There was a movement upon the pillow. Rose was waking, and as her soft blue eyes unclosed and looked up in his face he wound his arms around her, kissing her lips, as never before he had kissed her. She was not his sister now—the veil was torn away—a new feeling had been awakened, and as days and weeks went by, these gradually crept in between him and Maggie Miller a new love—even a love for the fair-haired Rose, to whom he was kinder, if possible, than he had been before, though he seldom kissed her lips or caressed her in any way.

"It would be wrong," he said, "a wrong to himself—wrong to her—and a wrong to Maggie Miller, to whom his troth was plighted, and he did not wish it otherwise, he thought; though insensibly there came over him a wish that Maggie herself might weary of the engagement, and seek to break it. "Not that he loved her less," he reasoned, "but that he pitied Rose the more."

In this manner time passed on, until at last there came to him Maggie's letter, which had been a long time on the sea.

"I expected it," he thought, as he finished reading it, and though conscious for a moment of a feeling of disappointment, the letter brought him far more pleasure than pain. Of Arthur Carrollton no mention had been made, but he readily guessed the truth, and, thinking "it is well," he laid the letter aside and went back to Rose, deciding to say nothing to her then. He would wait until his own feelings were perfectly defined. So a week went by, and again, as he had often done before, he sat with her alone in the stilly night, watched her as she slept, and thinking how beautiful she was, with her golden hair shading her childish face, her long eyelashes resting on her cheek, and her little hands folded anxiously upon her bosom.

"She is too beautiful to die," he murmured, pressing a kiss upon her lips.

This act awoke her, and, turning toward him, she said: "Was I dreaming, Henry, or did you kiss me as you used to do?"

"Not dreaming, Rose," he answered; then, rather hurriedly, he added: "I have a letter from Maggie Miller, and ere I answer it I would read it to you. Can you hear it now?"

"Yes, yes," she whispered faintly, "read it to me, Henry," and, turning her face away, she listened, while he read that Maggie Miller, grown weary of her troth asked a release from her engagement.

He finished reading, and then waited in silence to hear what Rose would say. But for a time she did not speak. All hope for herself had long since died away, and now she experienced only sorrow for Henry's disappointment.

"My poor brother," she said, at last, turning her face toward him and taking his hand in hers, "I am grieved for you to lose us both, Maggie and me. What will you do?"

"Rose," he said, bending so low that his brown locks mingled with the yellow tresses of her hair, "I do not regret Maggie Miller's decision, neither do I blame her for it. She is a noble, true-hearted girl, and so long as I shall live I shall esteem her highly; but I, too, have changed—have learned to love another. Will you sanction this new love, dear Rose? Will you say that it is right?"

The white lids closed wearily over the eyes of blue, but they could not keep back the tears which rolled down her face, as she answered, somewhat sadly: "Who is it, Henry?"

There was another moment of silence, and then he whispered in her ear: "People call her Rose; I once called her sister; but my heart now claims her for something nearer. My Rose," he continued, "shall it be? Will you live for my sake? Will you be my wife?"

The shock was too sudden—too great, and neither on that night, nor yet the succeeding day, had Rose the power to answer. But as the dew of heaven is to the parched and dying flower, so were these words of love to her, imparting at once new life and strength, making her, as it were, another creature. The question asked that night so unexpectedly was answered at last; and then, with almost perfect happiness, she, too, added a few lines to the letter which Henry sent to Maggie Miller, over whose pathway, hitherto so bright, a fearful shadow was falling.

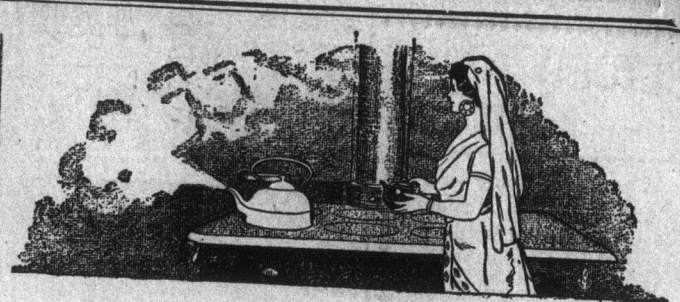
CHAPTER XVIII.

It was a rainy April day—a day which precluded all outdoor exercise, and Hagar Warren, from the window of her lonely cabin, watched in vain for the coming of Maggie Miller. It was now more than a week since she had been there, for both Arthur Carrollton and herself had accompanied Anna Jeffrey to New York, going with her on board the vessel which was to take her from a country she so affected to dislike to one where she would substitute his name and so be "Maggie Carrollton."

(To Be Continued.)

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