

The Foster Brother;

The Orphan of the Wreck.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ORPHAN'S RECEPTION—THE FUNERAL.

It came to pass as Kenneth had desired. Lucy's eyes opening all at once with wondering vagueness, as suddenly she passed from her long deep sleep into perfect wakefulness, lighted on the lovely face which was bent over her, and the slight caressing touch of her hand to her heart, fortifying it therefore against the disturbing and saddening recollections which were immediately to follow.

For one brief moment she deemed that it was but her usual morning waking, and that Kenneth had risen early, as he often did, to work at his pen. But all at once recollection returned to its fulness, and the sorrowful events of the night took possession of her mind.

She remembered now that death was in the house—that her cousin George lay in his shroud in the next room.

"How soundly I must have slept?" she said.

"Yes, darling, very soundly; the doctor's draught did its work most effectually."

"Did you sleep?" she anxiously asked.

"Yes, unwittingly I did, in the chair. I watching by your bed, and actually committed the offence of sleeping at my post."

"What is to be my punishment?"

"I hope, dear, it will not come in the form of a cold, as indeed it may, sleeping where you did. Have I slept long? Is it very late?"

"It is two o'clock."

"My gracious, Kenneth, two o'clock!—so much of the day gone! Why did you not wake me?"

"For what purpose? You needed the sleep; and I am very glad, my darling, to see how thoroughly it has refreshed you."

"Yes, indeed; I am quite strong and revived. But, oh, Kenneth, what further news of the wreck? What has the day-light revealed?"

"Much that was to be expected, he sadly answers. 'The beach is strewn with the cargo and broken parts of the vessel. Several more dead bodies have also been found.'"

"And has no one been saved alive?" she asked, with a trembling earnestness.

"Has every one in the ship perished?"

"He did not well know how to reply to this question, and turned silently toward the window. This movement she interpreted as an affirmative answer, and murmured in a broken voice—

"Dead—dead—all dead! Oh, how terrible is the calamity!"

"You are not asking how George has done without you all night," he suddenly observed, desisting by the remark to bring her to a consciousness of the presence of the child sleeping by her side.

"But she is here," answered Lucy.

"You must have laid her beside me, and she is sleeping so soundly, the sweet darling, just as if she had known that mamma had got a powder and must not be disturbed. How cozy and comfortable she feels wrapped up in a blanket—Why, Kenneth—oh, Kenneth—who is this? This is not George!"

He was by her side in an instant, for he anticipated the effect of the discovery she had made.

"No, darling—that is not George; that is another child, which God has sent to us, to keep and cherish—the only rational survivor of the wreck—the only rational life which the sea has spared!"

She gazed at him in breathless wonder while he spoke. Then turning herself round till she could behold the little form by her side, she gently folded down the clothes, and lo! the golden hair and cherub face of George's little bright vision on her sight.

"How beautiful! how lovely!" were the exclamations that burst from her lips as in rapturous delight she gazed on the little sleeping countenance, whose innocence, purity, and extreme loveliness made it radiant as with celestial light.

"And yet, Lucy," whispered Kenneth, "the poor little thing has been made a helpless orphan—his parents have perished in the wreck—he has no home, no friends, unless—"

"Kenneth," said Lucy, turning towards him eyes beaming with tears, which sparkled like the most precious gems, "did you say that God had sent him to us to keep and cherish?"

"But do you accept the charge?"

"Do I accept it? Oh, how can you ask? You cannot, no, no, you cannot—don't you catch me trying my heart against such a lovely, innocent cherub? No, Kenneth, no! I must—I must supply, so far as I can, the place of the mother he has lost. He will be a brother to our own dear little girl. He must be nearly two years older than she is. He will be her companion and playmate. Surely, Kenneth, you will not refuse to have him so. Oh, say you do not!"

He bent down with a smile and kissed her.

"My darling," he whispered, "this was my thought, my wish, when I laid him beside you. I promised, over the dead body of his mother, that you and I would be parents to him, and with God's help, we shall make the promise good."

"We shall, we shall!" murmured Lucy, who felt a yearning impulse to snatch the child to her bosom, and forgo only because she would not disturb his slumbers.

"Of course we cannot at all settle it so," observed Kenneth. "It may be that the child has friends and relatives who can claim him, and in that case we will require to give him up to them. But should it be otherwise—should the inquiries which must be made fail to find forward persons who have a right to take him, then we shall adopt him as our own, and so far as we can help it, he shall feel that he is an orphan."

"Yes," murmured Lucy, reflectively, "he may be claimed; he has the appearance of belonging to people of refinement, his clothes are so good and so nice, and he is so very, very pretty. He must have friends, and he belongs to them more than to us."

And the fair young wife looked quite wistful and regretful at the thought of the possibility of the beautiful child being taken from her.

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