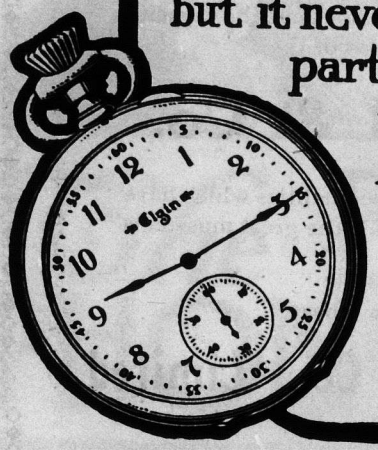


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stranger would have been likely to attract attention. Still, not the faintest clue could be obtained to the identity of the daring individual. Even the strange child, which looked old enough to talk, only made a soft little cooing noise and laughed when spoken to, without uttering a word.

Caroline Vantyne had drooped like a beaten lily from the first moment. She lay among the foam-white pillows of her couch, pale and motionless, and seldom speaking to any member of the household.

But one day she astonished her anxious watchers by asking that the strange child be brought to her. It had been decided to retain the little creature instead of sending it to the almshouse as first proposed, both as a sort of a hostage for the safety of the other, and a possible clue to its fate.

The little one was brought to her in her husband's presence. It wore still the same clothes in which it had come, and had a neglected look, that, taken in connection with the subdued wistfulness of its little face, was most pitiful to see.

Mrs. Vantyne's own babe was a blue-eyed little girl. This child was a boy.

When they put him down on the carpet in Mrs. Vantyne's chamber, he turned from the frowning and unfriendly faces of all the others, and with a sidling, shy movement crept to the bedside of the bereaved mother, and put his dimpled warm cheek against her hand.

Mrs. Vantyne started as though something had stung her, and some powerful emotion stirred her lips to tremulousness.

With a gesture she indicated that he should be lifted up beside her, and with his usual soft, glad coo, he nestled his curly head down upon her bosom.

The poor lady looked frightened, but hers was too gentle and loving a nature to find enmity toward anything so innocent of her great and cruel wrong as was this child.

She spoke to it in timid tones, then as it did not notice, more caressingly; finally, lifting its face from her neck, and softly touching its cheek with her hand, the little one gave utterance again to that sweet, inarticulate murmur like the trill of a bird.

Mrs. Vantyne turned to her husband, who had come forward, with a half-angry remonstrance on his lips.

Something ails him, Gerald," she said. "He is not like other children; I am almost sure he is a mute."

"Nonsense," Gerald Vantyne said, and reaching his wife's little bell, he tinkled it in the boy's very ear, without letting him see what he was doing.

The child did not turn his head. "I believe you are right," Gerald said, trying the other ear with the same effect.

Tears filled the unhappy mother's eyes, and as she regarded the poor babe through them, the child's own radiant orbs grew misty and his pretty scarlet lips began to tremble.

"Perhaps if I am kind to this little unfortunate, Heaven will the sooner give me back my own darling," murmured Mrs. Vantyne, with questioning glance at her husband. "Would you mind, Gerald?"

"Certainly not. I can't sympathize with the wish, but I don't object to you doing as you like in the matter."

And from that day Caroline Vantyne began to mend rapidly.

The very helplessness of this little pensioner upon her kindness, the very nature of the extremely peculiar circumstances under which he had come to her, seemed to draw the cords of the affection she soon felt for him the tighter.

When her husband or others gave any expression to their surprise at her very apparent fondness for the little one, she would say, gently:

"It was very hard at first, but I never ceased to ask for help from a higher source, or to pray that upon the head of my own lost babe might be requited my kindness to this."

She called the child Jason because she said he had been her soul's and her body's physician, and Jason meant physician.

Mrs. Vantyne under the discipline of

this last terrible affliction seemed to have grown almost an angel, both in looks and heart. Always amiable, now she seemed saint-like. Always lovely, now her face seemed to radiate light. The bloom came back to her cheek, delicate but brilliant as the inner flush of the sea-shell, and her soft eyes had a tender luster, that, all unconsciously to her, woke in the heart of her husband a sort of idolatrous worship that was as unlike any love he had ever felt before, as the fruit differs from the blossom.

She had withdrawn entirely from society, but for the sake of the little boy whose health was delicate she spent much time out of doors with him, never trusting him to a nurse, for reasons she could scarcely have told if questioned. Perhaps she had a vague terror that if this sweet heart, about which the tendrils of her own had twined so closely already, might be torn from her also by that cruel hand which had once invaded her happiness.

Wherever they went the pair were the object of the most vivid interest, both among those who knew their story and strangers who did not, for if the one looked an angel the other seemed to have wings growing under the tangle of soft bright curls which fell upon his shoulders. The devotion of the two to each other was entire and unmistakable. Jason's great wide eyes said "mama" as plainly as her fond glances repeated "my son."

One day when the child was, so nearly as they could tell, five years old, he quitted his play suddenly, and came to his more than mother with his little hands clutching at his throat, his eyes starting with agony.

He had the diphtheria, and the disease had made such progress before it was discovered that in spite of everything that could be done he died in the course of the next day.

Mrs. Vantyne neither wept nor bemoaned, but the springs of life seemed dried. She grew in a moment, as it were, too weak to stand alone, and lifted upon her bed, lay whispering with pale smiles and her hand upon her heart:

"God's will—not mine."

When they took little Jason to the grave, she was too feeble to go with him, and while the mournful cortege moved slowly away, she asked to be alone, and the nurse in the next room heard her praying softly.

That night after all had retired to rest, the door-bell rang, and when the door was opened a figure appeared standing muffled to the chin in a long black coat, and holding by the hand a little girl, perhaps three years old.

Here is Mrs. Vantyne's child and heir," said the stranger; "say to her that for her kindness to the poor lad who was buried today, her own child, which it was never meant she should see again, is returned to her."

That was all. He vanished while he was speaking, leaving the little girl standing sobbing in the doorway.

The servant who had opened the door, half crazy with joy and amazement, caught up the little girl, shut the door, and running upstairs to her master's room, knocked, and asked if she could speak with him for a moment.

It was Mrs. Vantyne who answered. She had heard the child sobbing, and weak as everybody had supposed her, she got to the door without assistance, and before her husband, and opened it.

She gave a little gasp when she saw the child.

"Oh, my darling!" she cried, and caught the little one to her bosom. She did not need to be told.

Further than that outsiders never knew. But Gerald Vantyne confessed at last to his wife that he had known almost from the first that little Jason was the child of that poor, wronged girl he had forsaken for her. His mother had died suddenly, and a sister from revengeful motives had exchanged the children. Only Mrs. Vantyne's tenderness to the little unfortunate waif cast upon her mercy under such trying circumstances had softened the sister's heart at last, so that she had returned the babe she had stolen to its mother.