

"Yes. They were years of struggle to keep true to the man who had never even let me know that he lived."

"I know it," whispered Tom.

"But there was one who did care. He was noble and tender-hearted, and after word came that you were dead, things seemed different. For a while he left me to myself in my sorrow. He was very gentle, no one could have been more so; and after a time his gentleness won me. If you had not come back—yes—it might—have happened."

"And could you have loved him, Elsie?"

"It would never happen if I did not."

"And do you love him now?"

"For a moment there was silence."

It was getting dark. A whip-poor-will darted past, and lighting on a linden tree near by, repeated over and over again his melancholy note. Strong emotion was manifest upon Tom's face. His heart did not hide it, but the struggle for self-conquest was of brief duration."

"I have more to say," he commenced in low tones, as he rose to his feet, "and whatever comes of it, I want to be a man. I know of whom you speak. He is just and honorable, and no touch of calumny, true or false, can ever tarnish his name. In this he towers above me. He has a ripe education, which I have not. He has means and an income that would make your life comfortable and free from care. If you love him Elsie, all I can say is, take him. I must have your whole heart or none. Do not take me to save me. But, Elsie, I have always loved you, ever since I dragged you in your little frocks on my sled to school. No man could love you as I love you. You are my heart's sweetest treasure; and I am ready to lay at your feet both my love and my life."

The battle in Elsie's heart was not long for, as he resumed his seat, she nestled down close to his side.

"You have my heart, Tom, every bit of it," she whispered at last. "You always had; and this cloud, sad as it is, we will bear together. You are my only love."

The gloaming deepened. The whip-poor-will sang on, but his strains seemed brighter—the melancholy cadence had taken on a joyous inflection—as in sympathy with the lovers he repeated in gayer mood the notes of his song; while Tom pressed his loved one passionately to his heart in that little grove of hickories.

"And what of your name?" Elsie gently asked, looking in joyous timidity upon his face. "Is it not at last to be mine—the one you bore for those long years on the Concord?"

"No, dearest! never!" was his answer, as he stooped to fondly kiss her lips. "It is buried out of sight forever, as deep as Lake Erie can hide it."

THE END.

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