

AN OLD MAID'S ROMANCE.

FRANK H. SWETT, IN DONAHOE'S MAGAZINE.

CURIOUSLY enough it had never come home to Elizabeth Dunning that she was an old maid until this morning. She had been trimming the unruly arms of a clambering seven sisters, when pretty Susie Wrenn came slipping by on her way to the mill.

"Oh, Miss Dunning," the girl had called, slackening her pace a little as she neared the gate, "ma wants to know if she can borrow your cake tins this mornin'." "We're expectin' company, an' we've only got one."

"Why, certainly, Susie; you can have them and welcome. Come on your way back from the mill."

"Thank you," moving on a little and then lingering as though wishing to say more, but hardly knowing how to proceed, "them's awful nice roses you've got."

"Yes, they are nice," assented Miss Dunning, clipping off a handful and offering them across the fence. "You must come in some morning and look at my bed of tea, and at my hedge of Jacks." Then she smiled encouragingly into the blushing, perturbed face. "Now, what is it, Susie?" she asked. "You have something else to tell me."

"Oh, it's nothin' much!" protested the girl bashfully, but with eyes and cheeks which belied her words. "You see, I've only told ma so far, an' now it seems I must tell you next."

"Of course," with affected indignation. "Did I not know you as a baby in long clothes, and have I not been your Sunday school teacher more than ten years? Certainly you must tell me."

But still the girl hesitated, looking at her feet and down the street and across the fence to the pretty cottage, whose verandas were embowered with clambering roses and honeysuckles. At last she broke into a frank, merry laugh.

"What a fool I am, Miss Dunning," she cried. "It's only that I'm going to be married. I'll stop for the tins comin' back," and she ran lightly down the sidewalk, only pausing for a moment to glance over her shoulder.

"It's Mr. Gray," she called with something that was almost exultant in her voice, "an' he's real nice, even if I do say so."

Miss Dunning's face had been full of the kindest interest, and its expression did not change now as she watched the girl speed buoyantly down the street. But her long, taper fingers trembled slightly as they left the paling and returned to the rose clipping. Long years ago—she did not care to remember how many—she had tripped down the sidewalk like that, and had been pretty and vivacious and hopeful. And with her in those days it had also been Mr. Gray, and she, too, had thought him real nice.

"Snip! snip! snip!" went the pruning shears, and from a branch of the great elm overhead came down the mellow love song of an oriole to his mate in a swaying nest near by. Butterflies chased each other in bewildering circles above the flower beds, and a gray squirrel whisked down the trunk of the elm and up the gray garden skirt to the shoulder of Miss Dunning. She stopped her clipping a moment to stroke the soft fur and look into the bright eyes that were asking so obviously for recognition. They, too, were friends of long standing.

But the rose bushes were waiting, and presently she lifted the squirrel in her hand and replaced him carefully upon the ground. Only for an instant, however, for with a curious little bark of exclamation, he made a quick spring and was back on her shoulder. Again she essayed to put him down, but he chattered so appealingly that she relented and dropped her pruning shears instead. A cosy garden seat was but a few yards away, and she walked to it and sat down; and the squirrel, as though it was all of his own planning, dropped lightly into her lap, where he curled up and went to sleep.

And still the golden oriole sang on, oblivious of all but his mate and the capture of his own music. Miss Dunning listened with a tender smile on her face.

Had she chosen for the best? She thought so unflinchingly, even when her heartstrings were crying for redress. He had succeeded wonderfully; as he could not possibly have done had there been a weight to clog his flight. Yes, there had been no other way.

She stroked the squirrel tremulously, and he awakened enough to play with her finger for a moment, and then was again lost in sleep. The house dog came down from the veranda and took a position beside her, not to sleep, but to wag his tail and gaze up into her face with a satisfied love in his big brown eyes. Other birds beside the orioles were singing about her, the odors of many flowers came from various points of the garden,

and the deep, vine covered verandas looked very inviting and home-like. Yes, she had chosen for the best.

The returning footsteps of the young girl broke in upon her meditation, and she went forward to meet her with the same loving eyes and tender smile which had made her the older sister and adviser of all the young girls in the neighborhood. The tins were procured, with many bits of advice and cheery gossip, and sympathetic and congratulatory remarks were made about the new joy and obligation that were coming into the perspective of the young girl's life; and yet Susie lingered, smelling of the roses and caressing the squirrel and dog, and occasionally moving forward a few steps, only to find a new excuse of flowers or birds to encourage her return. This little world of beauty and tranquility was a place by itself not easy to relinquish or leave behind.

But at last the gate clicked reluctantly, and the now softened footsteps of the young girl grew fainter up the street, until they were lost in the sudden whirl of racing bicycles. Miss Dunning went to her rose bushes and gazed down absently at the pruning shears; then she turned and walked back to the shade of her garden seat and to her unaccustomed retrospection; and the dog returned to his loving watchfulness at her side, and the squirrel to his slumber in her lap.

Yes, she was an old maid; Susie's approaching marriage emphasized that beyond question of doubt. Even Susie's mother had once been her Sunday school scholar, and Susie's father had been a little neighboring boy whom she had sometimes dragged to school on her sled. Surely, it must be a long time ago, and yet it seemed such a little while. She would scarcely have retained it for Susie's announcement and for another bit of indubitable evidence which made her lips grow tremulous. He had planted the maple under which she was sitting, and which they had found as a little sapling in the woods. Now it shaded the ground for many yards around, and its trunk was as large as a man's body.

At that time Alfred Gray had been tetter in the village bank, but with ability and intellect which rose superior to the circumscribed area. A tender, reminiscent look came into her eyes as she thought of their congenial tastes; and they had liked the same books, and the same walks, and the same bits of landscape; and they had had the same broad, loving charity for the world and its foibles. It had seemed almost wonderful that they two had come together, so alike in all their dreamings and ambitions.

And then had come that great opportunity which had seemed specially created for Alfred's advancement, and which would carry him on to a pinnacle of success of which neither of them had ever dreamed. Only to attain its utmost height he must go without clog or impediment of any sort to retard his progress.

She was glad to remember that she had impulsively told him to go, with unflinching eyes and lips; and she was glad to remember, also, that he had looked at her with exultation and expectancy, and that he had flatly refused to consider so cold blooded a thing, and then had flamed out and declared she did not love him as he did her, and that he would follow her command and make ambition the rule of his life. She had not faltered, even when he left her in anger and did not communicate with her through long years of struggle and eucases. His work was perhaps even dearer to her than to him, and it was her determination that had rendered it possible. Had she hesitated in the least he would not have gone, and with her his success could only have been the moderate success of other men.

She had not been able to keep up with his progress; very closely, for even a brilliant career on the other side of the world only comes back in stray paragraphs and the most meagre of reports. But she knew the success was there, and that it was of the kind they had dreamed. Never among all the scraps which she had preserved had she found one that spoke alightingly of the man, or in anything but the highest praise of his work. Truly it was well worth the sacrifice! The world was better for his being, and the work was hers as well as his.

Long ago she had given up all thought of their ever being to each other more than they had been; perhaps they would never see one another again in this world. But what then? Were they not working together in mind and heart, even though the world divided them? Only sometimes she thought that his part was the easier, for he was working with his hands and in the face of positive results, while she must be content with her waiting and trusting. Even when she learned that he was coming home, renewed for his intellect and noble work, she looked forward to meeting him with unquestioning gladness. It was not so much her youth returning as it was the great success of her planning coming back for approval and commendation. Their youth was very near and dear, but it was something that was past and laid away in the lavender and rose leaves of her memory.

She had always remembered him as the young man who had gone away from her strong, erect and with black, curling hair thrust carelessly back from his forehead; now, looking carelessly into the past through the revelation which had just come to her, and without the glamor of her own love to idealize him, she tried to imagine how this man who had been here, but was now another's, might appear. He was older than she by two years; that meant he was forty-one—here she broke resolutely from her retrospection. Why was she so foolish? Forty-one was young for a man, even as thirty-nine was old for a woman. Of course he was just the right age for pretty, simple-minded Susie, and would have the clear judgment and experience which she lacked; and of course a strong, beauty-loving man, who had been so long away from the world, would prefer a pretty young girl to a faded old maid. But as she walked resolutely to the house, forgetting alike the squirrel and dog and pruning shears, there was for the first time a hard, bitter pain at her heart. She could spare him to greater usefulness, to a noble ambition; but this—ah, this was different.

And yet when she came from her room an hour later there was no sign of disquiet in her brown eyes, or trace of

agitation on the delicate flush of her cheeks. The rest of the unruly army of the Seven Sisters were out away or trained toward usefulness, and she was standing with her head tipped slightly to one side in contemplation of her work. When again came the familiar tap, tap, tap down the sidewalk, ending with the sharp click of her gate latch.

"Here I'm again, Miss Dunning," a blithe voice called, "heggin' for roses this time. The cows have eaten ours off clean, an' we must have a good spread for our company. I don't know what the place would do without your rose garden an' lilies an' strawberry beds—or we girls, for that matter—without you," catching a hand and raising it to her lips with a pretty, graceful caress that caused the older woman to throw an arm across the young girl's shoulders in sudden tenderness. "We often speak to gether about our Miss Dunning, just as if you really and truly belonged to us."

A cluster of freshly opened roses caught her attention, and she ran for ward to smell of them, and then engaged in a romp of tag with the squirrel, who evidently enjoyed the excitement of the game. At length she came back with flushed face and sparkling eyes.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Miss Dunning," she cried roguishly, "he's come." Miss Dunning's hand closed a little more closely upon the pruning shears, but her face was calm, even smiling.

"I thought he was not expected until next week," she observed, "at least, that is what the papers said."

"Oh, I don't know," doubtful; "we don't have the paper. But I think Charlie was expectin' him before next week—Charlie's my brother-in-law, you know, an' owns that pretty house next the river. Mr. Gray's kin' to stay with him. They need to know each other. But, there! I'd better get the roses an' be goin'." They're all comin' up this evenin' an' ma said for me to hurry back an' get through with my fixin' an' fussin'." An' say, Miss Dunning, if you don't mind, I'd like to bring him to see you 'fore he goes," looking up with a roguish, pleading expression on her pretty baby face.

"Of course," the strained line forced themselves to say; you must bring him by all means."

But after the girl's departure Miss Dunning left the roses and hurried away to the seclusion of her room. Bring him to her, this young girl who had been but a baby when they two had been so much to each other? What did it mean? And he had not ever written to her, or in any way announced his coming.

The next day was spent on the front veranda, under a mixed pretense of reading, or playing with the squirrel and dog, or idly touching the strings of the guitar, which was another of her hobbies. But through it all her mind was elsewhere, listening for long absent but familiar footsteps, recalling incidents which she had stored away among the treasures of her memory and sending swift, eager glances to that point of the road at which Susie first appeared. She was getting old, she told herself, weakly; this lack of self-control was proof of it. But still she sat there and listened and thought and watched. The man's life and work had been hers too long for separation; every day the joy of them had been with her, and had added new beauty to the roses and household duties. A little while and it would all have to be put away forever, and then there would be for her but the memory of the past and the work which had been done.

But the day wore away, and he did not come; and then the next and the next. Through all these years her eyes had retained their brightness and buoyancy, and her cheeks had lost but little of the delicate bloom of their youth. It is now her face grew stained and piteous, and dark circles began to enclose her eyes. If only he had gone by once and lifted his hat, or had given some sign of remembrance or recognition? But no, he did not even pass along her sidewalk or in any way evince a consciousness of her existence. On the fourth day Susie hurried by on her way to the Post Office and back, but was apparently too much occupied with her thoughts to glance at the rose bushes of vine enclosed veranda. Miss Dunning watched her until she disappeared behind a hedge of altheas, and then turned hastily in search of some work to occupy her tremulous fingers. Evidently Susie was too happy to divide her thoughts, and probably he was happy, too; but somehow, for the first time in her life, Miss Dunning could not bring herself into thorough sympathy with the happiness of others.

One day, as she sat there with the squirrel in her lap and her eyes fixed upon that last visible point of the street before it was shut out by the althea hedge, a firm, eager step came up the sidewalk from the opposite direction. But she did not notice until her gate-latch clicked. Then she turned inquiringly.

She knew him in an instant, for the years had brought but a stronger step and nobler carriage, with perhaps a too liberal sprinkling of gray hair, which she could discern even from the veranda. She was conscious of a curious thrill of awe and tenderness as she rose from her chair, for even in that brief instant she remembered that there was not a single gray intruder among her own soft hair, and his she associated with the work which had conquered obstacles and adversity.

There was no reserve or ceremony in her movements, and by the time he had closed the gate she was half-way down the walk. But it was as an older sister greeting her brother here, or rather, as one who had sent her best thoughts out to conquer the world and was now eager to wreath them with the laurel of victory.

"Alfred," she said, as she went forward with extended hands.

"Elizabeth," and then he bent forward and touched his lips to her forehead. And she received the kiss with her eyes looking straight into his and with only the faintest possible color stealing into her cheeks. It was not a wrong to her girl-

ish admirer, nor an act of presumption or breach of faith on his part. It was merely a seal of the success of their twenty years of joint labor.

"Come up to the veranda, Alfred," she said, with her eyes full of frank welcome. "I want to hear all about it. Of course I know, in a fragmentary way; but it will seem new and more real from your lips."

And he told her, sitting in his old place behind the honeysuckle, with the swaying sprays sending alternate lines of sunlight and shade across his face in the same old way; and she listened with eyes full and lips half parted and with her head nodding commendation or sympathy from time to time. It was a story of heroism and triumph, told in a straightforward matter-of-fact way, without egotism or self-depreciation, knowing it was her right to have it entire, even as she had lived it.

"But it is good to be home again, Elizabeth," he concluded, with a satisfied sigh, as he leaned back in his chair and surveyed the veranda and rose garden beyond. "The memory of these flowers and their owner has been with me through all the twenty years, and many times have I been on the point of giving up and returning to them. And, indeed, a trace of reserve coming into his voice, "I might have done so but for what you said, and the look you gave me when we last stood together among your honeysuckles. I knew I could only return to the sentence of a deserter who had forsaken his colors." She was looking at him in a wondering, startled way now, with the color coming softly into her face.

"But—you never wrote, Alfred," as though she hardly knew what to say.

"Yes, twice. One of the letters was lost, however, for I heard of the ship going down in mid-ocean. The other I never heard from. Perhaps it was lost, too."

"I never received it." Then "but you have been in the place a week, Alfred, and only just called."

He looked puzzled.

"I came in on the train an hour ago, Elizabeth, and would have been here before but for a complication over a telegram. It seems there is another man of the same name in town."

"But Susie?"

He raised his hand impatiently.

"Never mind, Susie. I have gone through my probation, and have done my work with all the strength that God gave me. Now I have come ten thousand miles for my reward—for you. If there is more work, bid me do it; but for charity's sake do not refuse your companionship in the labor."

She was not looking at him now. Her heart was too full for speech, almost for thought. The squirrel ran down a pillar of the veranda and sought her lap, and the oriole lifted up his voice in a sudden ecstasy of song. She stroked the one tremulously and looked at the other with the new tenderness of the great joy that had come to her.

Then the gate clicked, and she raised herself with an effort. A young man whom she did not know stood before her, and with him was Susie.

"I've brought him at last, Miss Dunning," the girl cried merrily, "but I just had to drag him, he's so bashful. Mr. Gray, this is the Sunday School teacher I've told you about. Then disregarding further formality, and with bubbling gladness in her voice, "An' oh, say, Miss Dunning, we've coaxed him to stay with us for good an' all. He's goin' to open a grocery next the Post Office." Here she caught sight of the gray-haired, soldierly figure in the background, and stopped in sudden confusion.

"This is Mr. Gray, too, Susie," Miss Dunning said, with something in her voice which the girl could not understand, "and we, too, are going to be married."

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PROVINCE OF QUEBEC, DISTRICT OF MONTREAL, No. 224.

IN THE SUPERIOR COURT.

Mtlio Plinik, of the City and District of Montreal, who, separated as to property, of Sachno Numinisny formerly of the said City of Montreal, and now of parts unknown, duly authorized to prosecute, Plaintiff, vs. Sachno Numinisny, formerly of the City and District of Montreal, and now of parts unknown, Defendant. The Defendant is ordered to appear within two months. Montreal, 27th July, 1897. L. A. BEDARD, Deputy Prothonotary.

PROVINCE OF QUEBEC, DISTRICT OF RICHMOND, SUPERIOR COURT.

Dame Elise Vincent, of Vercheres, wife of Philibert Dalphé, hotel-keeper, of the same place, Plaintiff, vs. Philibert Dalphé, hotel-keeper, of the same place.

An action en separation de biens has been instituted in this case on the twenty-third of July inst. Montreal, 27th July, 1897. VICTOR CUSSON, Attorney for Plaintiff.

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