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A Canadian Story.

By Mrs. J. K. Lawson.

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John Stewart's brow was clouded and his eyes troubled as he stood on a doorstep under the shadow of an umbrageous maple, waiting his affianced to answer his pull at the bell.

"Why, John!" she cried, admitting him gladly, "we thought you had gone. They said you had gone—isn't it terrible I haven't slept a wink all night—what with the ringing of bells and the clamor and confusion in the streets. These ruffianly Fenians!"

"Oh, the boys will soon beat them back," said John, gloomily, noting how tear-swollen were the blue eyes now smiling upon him.

"And then of course, if—if the worst did happen any of you, John,"—and here they filled with tears—"it's a grand thing to feel one has at least died in defence of one's country. Don't you think so, dear?"

As she spoke she seated herself on the lounge beside him, and looking up into his troubled face, she laid one soft hand upon his arm, and with the other touched up the curls on her brow into careless witchery. John smiled down on her tenderly; he could not do otherwise with such sweet sympathetic eyes appealing to him.

"Yes, Nettie, a man might easily die a worse death, but I won't get the chance—not this time, at least—the boys are all gone."

"Oh! you go later, I suppose?"

"No, I had returned my volunteer uniform at the expiry of the three years, only two months ago, and it was well my time was up, too, otherwise I must have gone with the rest. An urgent private duty would have gone to the wall then; and I am glad circumstances have left me free. I must go home at once."

"Home! John Stewart! did you say home?"

"Yes—home to the farm where I should have been all this year instead of studying here in Toronto. If I had known what I know now I would never have come. However, it's never too late to mend. Once I am there with my shoulder to the wheel I shall feel better. What with seeing the boys off now and being compelled to stay behind, I am as blue as indigo."

She suddenly withdrew from his the hand he held, rose to her feet, and faced him scornfully, a Canadian maiden with her country in danger. All night long she had bedewed her pillow with tears for her hero off to fight the Fenians, while here he was an ordinary man, talking of urgent private duties, going home to farm while the boys faced the foe. It was too, too much! She felt herself a Volumnia and Virgilia in one as she stood up in indignant protest.

"If any one had told me that you—you of all men—had backed out at such a moment of your country's history—I should have— Oh! it is awful! What are you thinking of? Are you a man, John Stewart?"

"I trust so—I try to be, anyway," answered John, a red flush creeping hotly along the top of his young brown beard. "But there are certain private duties, Nettie—"

"Private fudge," interpolated the maiden, with her chin in the air.

"Private duties, I say, which are quite as imperative as public ones on certain occasions."

"All very well—when one wants an ex—"

"Nettie! what ails you to-day? I came here expecting you would sympathize with me in the unfortunate circumstances which prevent me from resuming my place in the ranks of the Queen's Own and instead I find you—well, let me explain the whole matter. When I first came in to the university—"

"That will do, please," was the frigid interruption, uttered with a protesting lift of the little hand and a perceptible elongation of the figure. "Nothing, nothing, can alter the fact that you turn your back on your country in the hour of danger; that upon some paltry excuse of 'urgent private duty,' forsooth, you run home like a—a coward."

The word was out and could not be recalled. No sooner was it uttered than she repented it. She had not intended to go so far as this—but it was provoking, after all the beautiful sympathies and condolences and tears she had poured on her by her companions last night, when she had imagined him hustled off in hot haste with the boys of K company.

John rose slowly to his feet and looked at her. A new glitter as of steel was in his dark eyes, usually so gentle of expression—the red flush had died from his cheek, and left him pale and stern.

"Then, I suppose, there is nothing more to be said."

Nettie's heart beat with a sudden and wild alarm; she had never all the two years they had been lovers, seen him look like that, but she was on her dignity—John must be made to feel his lack of patriotism.

"Nothing more," she answered, icily.

"If you would only listen to my explanation," he began; but she shook her pretty head loftily.

"Good heavens Nettie! is this all you have to say? I understood we were engaged."

"Were—yes, but engagements, you know, can be cancelled. The man I engaged myself to was not—"

"A coward," laughed John, cynically. "Well—do you mean that you repent your engagement?"

For answer, Nettie slipped the ring he had given her off her finger and held it out to him.

He was ashy white now, but he said: "Is it possible! do you really mean it?"

Nettie did not answer. She expected him to rave and swear and protest and refuse to take it back, so she coolly held it out in her open hand.

He looked at her keenly, his lips set firmly; a flash shot from his eyes that she did not see. He held out his hand for the ring and strode out of the house, the door banging behind him. It sounded like a knell to Nettie, and she threw herself on the sofa and fell to weeping over her folly.

"But he'll come back. I know he'll come back; of course he'll come back," she kept telling her aching heart.

CHAPTER II.

There had been no rearrangement of the solar system, and in the steady march of Time there were still sixty footfalls to the minute, and sixty minutes to the hour. Yet in spite of this indisputable fact, the days in Nettie Worth's life had grown unconsciously long since John Stewart had stepped out of them. For from that day she had not seen his face or heard from him, although the long, pensive fall had passed in a glory of sunset hues, and the winter had snowed itself out, and the glad and blithesome summertime had returned once more. In the large circle of her acquaintances, she had met no more manly man, and bitterly had she repented the outburst of cheap patriotism which had begun to cost her so much. She continually told herself that she had been a fool, a blatant fool; she had felt vaguely, even while denouncing him, that he had some sufficient reason for his action. More than once she had written expressing regret and apologizing for her bitter words, but these letters she had posted in the stove—she could not bend her pride to sue, and there was still the latent hope that he would come back to her. She felt sure he would come some day—oh! he could not but come, for he had loved her, and she—she was now desolate—desolate! The times were out of joint. There were plenty of young men who would gladly have held John's place in her estimation—but none of these were John. There was but one John Stewart—she felt that more and more as time wore on, and he made no sign.

"Do you know, Nettie," said Mary Hughes, her cousin, as they walked out together one day, "I think John Stewart is a brick, quite an A1 individual."

"Don't talk slang, Mary," said Nettie, concealing her inward satisfaction at this encomium.

"Don't care if it is slang, it's the truth alleesamee. John Stewart is what I call an out-and-outer. There's some more slang."

Nettie laughed. There was no use finding fault with this great, good-natured girl, who found conventional English too circumscribed, not vivid enough to depict her wholesome appreciation of whatsoever was lovely and of good report.

"Yes, siree! He walked into father's office to-day with a coat on—well—you should have seen it! He was simply a holy show. I went in just as he was at the office door, and, of course, we shook hands. And he was as courtly and unabashed as though he had been arrayed in the most conventional swallowtail. His hands, too! sunburned and horny—oh!"

"He's been working hard on the farm, I suppose," suggested Nettie, with a sudden yearning for the clasp of those brown hands once more.

"Don't know what he's been doing, I'm sure, all I know is that these same sunburned paws of his planked down five hundred dollars on his mother's farm mortgage, and he is to clear off the balance in the fall, 'please God.' It did me good to hear the firm ring of his voice saying 'next fall, please God.'"

A humiliating sense of shame held Nettie silent. This then was the urgent duty which had compelled him to stay at home, to save the mortgage from being foreclosed on the farm to save the old homestead for his mother. And for this she had called him—coward!

"How did he look, Mary?"

"Splendid! magnificent! all but the coat. But think, Nettie, how many young men of our acquaintance, with five hundred dollars cash in hand, would have come into town with an old faded coat? Into Toronto above all places in the world, where he was so well-known. Yes, sir, Nettie Worth; I call John Stewart a man, a fellow worth consideration. He is to work all this summer on the farm, chop down timber in the fall and drive it into market whenever it comes good sleighing. He says another summer after that will square him up, and then he will be back to finish his arts course in October. Say, Nettie, how is it I never see him at your house now? I thought he was your humble adorer?"

"Oh! did you?" answered Nettie, evasively.

"I did, indeed," pursued Mary, nothing daunted, "and I wondered why he didn't inquire for you."

"Did he not?"

"Not he. But he looked as happy as a big sunflower for all that, so you needn't think he is pining for you—no, indeed—ta-ta."

Mary bounded off after having thus got even with her friend for withholding her confidence regarding the mysterious estrangement of John Stewart. For everyone knew of their engagement, and everyone wondered what had happened, and continued to wonder, since both kept their own counsel. Nettie was glad Mary was gone, even though it was in a huff. But she had got some information—some important news—he was after all coming back to the city and the College. She would wait patiently till then; it was a long time, it is true, but he would come back to her—she was sure of that. Oh, yes—of course he was angry, he had good cause to be; but he would forgive her when they met again—indeed, she felt it would be right and proper to solicit his forgiveness for her thoughtless and cruel words.

So Nettie went home and waited, and on the second October from then she heard he was back, and as usual studying hard—so very hard he had no time to call and renew their friendship. Perhaps he would come during the Christmas holidays—the blessed Christmas tide which healed all wounds, which renewed broken friendships and brought peace and good-will to all. But on Christmas eve John went home to the farm, and Nettie heard rumors of jolly sleighing parties out there in that neighborhood and sighed wearily. Easter came, and she heard that he never once budged out of his room except for a smart constitutional of an evening, so busy was he trying to win honors at exams. It was hard to punish her so for these hasty and foolish words of hers.

CHAPTER III.

The Fenian raid had become a thing of the past. It had been a brief but disagreeable episode in the country's history, an incident to blame Americans for ever permitting, an act of wilful aggression for which statesmen might demand reparation, or condone, as future circumstances or future policy might direct.

But, alas! no amount of reparation could bring back the brave young fellows who, worn-out with a long winter session of hard study, had at a moment's notice, in the dead of night, sprung to arms and set forth to repel that wicked and senseless invasion. Thrice had October shed her wealth of crimson and gold above their honored graves; thrice had the spring returned and the old woods flourished green again since their names had become sacred through that baptism of blood and death. Of those who had returned many still lay on beds of languishing, disabled by wounds, their careers ended so far as earthly hope and work was concerned. With voices softened by sympathy and sorrow, the students and alumni spoke of them as they strolled up through the trees to-day on the way to Convocation.

Among these walked John Stewart, looking more mature, it is true, but certainly more at peace with himself and all the world than on that day three years ago when Nettie Worth had condemned him for his lack of patriotism. He had come back to take his degrees of B.A., and notwithstanding the interruption of his attendance at lectures, he had come off with first-class honors, Gold Medalist in Classics.

The little group of capped and gowned students with whom he was in conversation dispersed as they neared the portico of the University, and he was hurrying past, evidently in search of some one, when he was arrested by a voice ailing

"John—Mr. Stewart!" and turning, he beheld Nettie Worth, flushed and quite out of breath.

A shadow of disappointment flitted over his face for a moment, but he doffed his hat and offered his hand with all his old geniality of manner.

"Oh! I am so glad to have seen you," said Nettie; "you have been too hard and unforgiving, altogether. Why did you never come to see me all these months you have been in town? After all that had come and gone, too?"

John looked slightly embarrassed, but answered hurriedly:

"O, well, you know, I couldn't very well; my conge was too decided for that. I did once or twice think of calling shortly afterward when I happened to be in town, when I wasn't sure how I might be received. That was three years ago, however, and of course everything is changed now."

"Oh, yes, John—time heals all wounds; you can surely forgive me now."

"Don't mention it, Nettie. I am quite pleased to have things different; I really have nothing to forgive."

He said this with such sincere heartiness that Nettie's eyes glowed with renewed hope and happiness.

"But," she said, laying her little gloved hand on his arm in her old, coaxing fashion, "you must let me apologize for my cruelty that day. I was so silly and vain, and had no notion of what it cost you to remain behind when you wanted so much to go. If you had only told me."

John laughed dryly.

"How could I tell when you wouldn't listen to me? If I remember rightly, you would listen to no explanation—but—there—never mind, it is all happily over now. I managed by hard work and doing without to save the mortgage from being foreclosed, and somehow everything seems to have prospered since—a regular run of luck—good prices for both produce and timber—wonderful how the tide turned. You see, I had promised father on his death-bed to make mother my first care—always, and I feel I only did my duty, no matter how people might misinterpret my conduct."

"Don't speak of it John; I have been so ashamed of myself ever since I knew. It took a higher courage to stay that day than to go. But now that you have quite forgiven me, and—and—see what I have come to—I actually ask you to give me back the ring I returned you on that unlucky day."

"The ring!" said John, with a puzzled air, trying to recollect. "Oh, that ring—I had most forgotten all about it. Do you know I was so mad when I came out of your house that day that I pitched it into the creek on my way home?" Here John threw up his head and laughed heartily at the thought of it all.

"Oh, John, what a shame!"

"Never mind," he rejoined, jovially, "I guess you'll be getting another one before very long."

A swift flush of pleasure swept over Nettie's winsome face, which was thinner and far more thoughtful than of yore.

"What profession do you intend to follow after you take your degree today?"

"Farming!" answered John, with great content.

"Farming!" echoed Nettie, in dismay.

"Yes—why not? I like the life. I don't look upon University education as a mere apprenticeship to professional work, but as a means of mental development. I shall be none the worse a farmer, none the worse a citizen of this Dominion of ours, for a little mental training. I guess it won't hurt me or my farm to be able to take up a scientific or classical work and read it with understanding of an evening after the cattle are housed and the lamp lit, and we sit before a big fire and hear the snow driving outside. Eh? Feeling like Tam o' Shanter, but with a different kind of inspiration, you know. 'O'er a' the ills o' life victorious.' And who knows? We may, like Cincinnatus, have something to say in guiding the destinies of the country some day."

Evidently John was in the gayest of spirits just then, but Nettie only sighed. The home picture he had sketched touched her; life on a good farm of one's own seemed very desirable after all—with John.

The crowds now surging past to Convocation brought them back to the immediate present.

"I guess it is time you were going in now," said Nettie, "but I shall expect to see you down this evening, mind. Do come, and we'll have a nice chat over old times."

"I—ah—," began John, with a curious nonplussed expression, but Nettie held up a protesting hand, and, flashing on him a coquettish, happy smile, vanished amid the throng.

"Well, I'm blest!" ejaculated the astounded graduate, as a new idea dawned upon him. "I never thought of that. Great Scott! She must surely know by this time."

In a few moments Nettie was in Convocation Hall, and found herself seated by a lady whom she slightly knew, a lady from the country, who knew the Stewarts well, being a neighbor of theirs.

As usual the students marched in, roaring "Old Grimes" and the usual comic College ditties, but Nettie had eyes for only one.

With a bright smile on her face, she sat chatting with her neighbor until the President and the Professors took the platform, and the proceedings began. The Chancellor's speech was an excellent one, the best delivered for many a day, but this and all the other sayings and doings were a weariness to Nettie, until John Stewart was called to the platform, and amid a storm of cheers from his fellow-students, received the gold medal. She tried to catch his eye as he returned up the aisle, but to her surprise, instead of resuming his seat among his brother graduates, he leant over towards two ladies who sat smiling proudly up into his face, and handed the younger his medal. There could be no mistaking the look that accompanied it.

"Who is that lady?" asked Nettie, repressing a sharp pang of jealousy.

"Why, I don't you know? That's his wife, married a week ago. Daughter of the doctor up our way. Lovely woman, isn't she?"

"She is, indeed," answered Nettie, with Spartan bravery.

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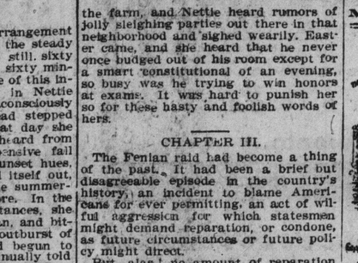

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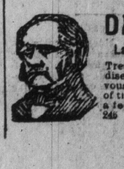
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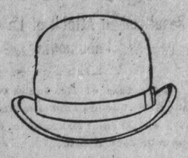
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