

The Deserter's Fate

By Hilda Richmond

"Aunt Margaret, you may as well make up your mind that I am going to the city the very day I'm eighteen," said Hester Blakesley, calmly. "My mind is made up and nothing can change it. It is too good a chance to lose, and there is really no reason why I should stay on this dead alive farm. Just look out there!" she went on, pointing to the dreary autumn rain driving down the dead leaves to the sodden earth. "I'd lose my mind if I had to stay here forever."

"You may be glad to get back to the farm some day," said Mrs. Hunt, sagely. "At least you might wait till Emily is a little older, if you must go to town. The poor child has cares enough now without adding to them, though goodness knows," she added under her breath as Hester left the kitchen for a few minutes, "you've done very little to lighten them." Then as Hester came back she renewed the endless arguments she had repeated over and over during the past few weeks.

"You know very well, Hester, it is your duty to stay here. Nobody ever was happy or successful running away from duty, and you'll find that out too late. What is wrong with country life, anyway? You expect to work after you get to the city, don't you? From all I've heard of your Aunt Fanny she's none too prosperous."

"Yes, I expect to work, but I expect to have some end to the hours I labor and I expect to get my wages at the end of the week. Out here I've slaved all my life and got nothing for it, and in the country a woman never knows when her work is done. I'm sick and tired of the doing without everything pleasant, and I'm going to leave. Besides, they are not my real brothers and sisters and they have no claim on me."

"Emily will have that much more to do," went on the elderly lady. "Her mother was as good to you as any mother could be, and if old Mrs. Peters with her meddlesome ways had not told you you would never have known she was not your mother. I suppose it's as you say that I'm wasting my breath, but I can't help it. I'm doing it for your own good, Hester, as much as anything else. They say girls that work in offices lose their health, and I've heard tell that it makes them restless and discontented with home life. Every girl ought to get married to the right man and have a nice home, and they say when a girl has once had a salary she don't want to give it up. Of course, I don't know, but lots of people say such things."

"I suppose you'd want me to marry Mark Asbury and settle down to make butter and gather eggs," said Hester, with fine scorn.

"Yes, I would, though you're too young to get married. Mark is a good boy and he thinks well of you. In three or four years it would be nice to marry some good man and have a good home," said Mrs. Hunt, who was extremely old fashioned in her views, according to Hester. "There aren't many young men as trustworthy and hard-working as Mark Asbury."

"O, he's good enough, but I don't want to get married. I've seen too much hard work and skimping to want anything of the sort. I want to earn money and plenty of it. I mean to be a stenographer and a good one, and I'm going to enjoy myself. Aunt Fanny goes in society and I'm going to have some good times before I'm old and gray. Mark will soon forget all about me and marry some woman without ambition."

At that moment Emily Blakesley came in glowing from the walk home from school with three little ones hanging about her. Emily was just sixteen, but for two years she had been the mainstay of the family and the children loved her devotedly. Hester was always too discontented and too cross to do much for the family or herself, but Emily cheerfully and patiently bore the burdens and created a home atmosphere that was pleasant and sweet in spite of the older girl's grumbling. Mr. Blakesley had been what his neighbors termed a careless farmer, and the run-down farm barely kept them in clothes and supplied food for all. Aunt Margaret Hunt was nominally the head of the household, since the father and

mother passed away within a few days of each other, but she was so crippled with rheumatism that she could do little in the way of actual work. She gave directions which Emily tried to follow, and she did wonders with her needle in keeping the family in whole clothes and the household supplies at their best, but beyond that the burdens fell upon Emily. Fourteen-year-old Rob was a dependable boy, but he was busy with chores out of doors most of the time he had out of school, and the little ones, while good-tempered and willing were too small to count much except when it came to planning for food and clothes.

In the midst of Hester's bewailing her fate one day a letter came from a city aunt who had not seen her from babyhood—a sister of her dead mother's—offering her a home and assistance in getting a business education, so she could become self-supporting. It was as if a door in heaven had opened to the soured, unhappy girl, and her spirits rose as if by magic. In a few weeks she would be legally of age and could do as she pleased, and visions of the splendors of city life filled her with delight. Her aunt had said she was to make no preparations but come as soon as she could, and Hester was charmed to obey.

"I think I'll give the family hot corn bread to-night," announced Emily, putting on a big kitchen apron. "It is cold and disagreeable and we need something

Maybe there will be some way for you to come to the city in a year or two."

"I must stay with the children," said the weeping Emily. "Papa and mamma said so."

At that a guilty feeling tugged at Hester's heart. "Papa and mamma" had told her to stay with the little ones just as they had told Emily, and she remembered with shame how glibly she had promised. However, a minute later came the thought that she had promised not knowing what was in the future and not knowing that the dying woman was her stepmother, so no one in his senses would expect her to keep such a promise. "I was only a child then," she said easily. "If papa and mamma were here they would say it is all for the best. There will be one less to feed and clothe, and when I get to earning money I can help them wonderfully." Then she fell to dreaming of the things she would do with her money, and how pleased they would be at home with the wonderful things she would buy and take to them, so that she hardly realized that the conductor was warning her that in a few minutes they would reach the city.

Mrs. Daniels was a very worldly wise woman, and she waited until her niece recovered from the first wave of homesickness before laying down her laws. In fact she waited until the young girl was completely fitted out with stylish, pretty garments and she was started in a

ing to these children they will want to come and visit you, and that is entirely out of the question. This flat is too small to take in any more people. I don't expect you to break with them immediately, but by degrees stop writing, and everything will be well. They are not related to me, and you have no place to entertain them."

In spite of the sound sense at the bottom of the woman's argument about not caring to entertain people she had never seen and was not in any way related to, Hester was sadly disappointed. Conscience had been telling her plainly that she might have stayed on the farm and helped Emily a little longer, and also that she might have done more for her while she was there, and the only relief she found was in planning what she would do for them all. Now that hope was cut off, though she tried to console herself by thinking when she was independent she would help the struggling family on the old farm, and she sat nibbling her penholder—very thoughtfully.

"If your letters are finished we will go to look at that fur scarf you liked yesterday," said Mrs. Daniels, craftily. "I think it will be beautiful with your new blue suit."

The fur scarf drove all thoughts of the old home out of her head, and soon she settled down to study in a most satisfactory way, gradually giving up her long letters to Emily and neglecting to answer the loving messages the little ones wrote out with elaborate care. In less than six months the new life, the luxury, the busy duties and rush of existence and the prospect of earning money almost made the old life seem like a dream.

"I simply couldn't live back there," she said to herself one day as she hurried home from school. "Emily likes it and I don't, so that makes all the difference. I can never be thankful enough to Aunt Fanny for rescuing me from such a fate."

Ten years flitted rapidly by and in that time Hester completely lost track of her country relatives. Of course she knew they still lived on the farm, and that Aunt Margaret Hunt had long since passed away, but beyond the general facts she knew nothing. Emily lovingly excused her shortcomings for many months when Hester pleaded work and study to keep her from writing, but in time even her loyal heart felt sure that there was some other reason for the silence and she stopped sending letters. The little ones, now tall and sturdy, had forgotten her very existence, almost, and even the neighbors had ceased to ask curiously about her. It was almost as if she had never existed, though Emily still had a sore spot in her heart over the coldness and neglect that broke off the correspondence.

Then one day Hester was forced to seek a doctor to find relief from some disease that was sapping her vitality, and she heard some plain truths. "Miss Blakesley," said the doctor, "I'm going to be very plain with you. It isn't over-work at all, as you say, that is causing your trouble, but lack of exercise, too much devotion to society and improper food." The doctor had met her socially many times, and he knew how incessant was the strain upon her health and nerves in trying to keep pace with Mrs. Daniels in her butterfly career, for Mrs. Daniels could sleep all day if she cared to, and Hester had to keep regular office hours. "You came to town a healthy country girl, and your health would have lasted a lifetime if you had cared for it. Hard work hurts no one, provided attention is paid to the laws of health. This is plain language, but exactly what you need."

"And must I give up society?" she asked anxiously.

"You must give up everything for a time. Giving up social affairs will be only half enough. Get your firm to give you a vacation and go back to the country for six or eight weeks. Do nothing but live in the open air as much as possible and eat simple food. Rest and don't worry. You will come back all right at the end of that time, but you must take society in moderation afterwards."

Very slowly Hester went home and tearfully told the doctor's verdict to her

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to warm us up. Hester, did you put the potatoes into the oven at four-thirty, as I asked you to do this morning?"

"No, I forgot," cried Hester springing up genuinely sorry. She was so busy with her own plans and ideas that she forgot almost everything else. A wave of pity for the young girl swept over her, and she determined to be as patient and helpful those last few weeks as possible. "I'll do it right now, Emily, and hurry up the fire as much as I can. Then I'll be ready to help with anything else you have on hand."

True to her resolve Hester gave every waking minute to the comfort and help of the household until she started, and the little ones almost deserted Emily for her, so pleasant and entertaining was she. She brought out and divided her childish treasures, saying she could not take them with her to the city, and when not working in the kitchen she devised games and good times for the children. Altogether the last few weeks flew by and very quickly, as she was so busy and so determined to be happy even in her longing to be away, and all of them shed tears of regret when she set out to seek her fortune. "I'll write to you often," she said, kissing the wet faces all around, "and every vacation I get I'll be back home. Don't work too hard, Emily, and don't forget all about me

thorough school for stenography, before doing anything very radical. In spite of her joy at being released from the bondage of the country, Hester was very homesick and her pillow was wet with bitter tears for a few nights after reaching the city, but that soon passed and she was ready for study and enjoyment. "My dear," she said one day as Hester was writing a long letter to Emily, "your success in town—in fact the length of your stay here—depends greatly upon whether you are obedient and teachable. I take it that you are anxious to get along well and get into paying work just as soon as possible."

"That is exactly what I want, Aunt Fanny."

"Well, then, I'm going to give you a little good advice. You must not be hampered by your country relatives. How much time have you spent today writing to the children?" she asked hastily, seeing signs of an outbreak.

"About two hours," faltered Hester. "And those two hours should be put in in study, my child. You are deficient in arithmetic, spelling and punctuation, your teacher told me, and he urged me to see that you make up that work as soon as possible. If you take two hours every day or every few days to write letters you will have little time for study. And there is another thing. If you keep writ-