

## Choice Literature.

## A DESECRATED MEMORY.

A Story in Two Parts.

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

"I had it on the day—the day I last saw him," she faltered. "But I don't think he regarded it as you do. He said that I looked" she dropped her poor old faded head—"that I looked like a flower plucked where bees were thickest."

Reginald raised his eyebrows in great amusement.

"Hullo. He wasn't too primitive to make speeches, was he? Well go on. What was he like? What was his name?"

Miss Ann hesitated a long, long moment. To say his name aloud was like yielding up her very soul.

"It—was Hiram," she answered at last—"Hiram Jones." The loving inflection of her tone lent the name a certain pathos of ugliness.

"Jones? One of the Floyd-Joneses?" asked Reginald briskly, kicking a tattoo against the clumsy white-washed pillars of the little porch. "He must have been. Jones is too awful a name with no redeeming hyphen."

Miss Ann stared at the boy blankly.

"A hyphen? What's that?"

"Oh well, it's just a mark of family, that's all. It's the American form of title. He must have had it if he was anybody. What family was this especial Mr. Jones of yours of?"

Miss Ann looked more puzzled than ever.

"Why as to family, dear, he was an only child and an orphan. Still he may have had other relatives; indeed, now I come to think of it, it was unlikely he should have had none at all. But I am afraid we rather neglected his relatives in our talk. We discoursed a great deal too much, I daresay, just about ourselves. But young people are often very thoughtless; and love, my dear," added Miss Ann with suddenly widened mental vision—"love, I fear, is very selfish."

Reginald allowed this great moral axiom to pass unassailed as of no account.

"Poor and no family. Must have been good-looking to make up for it," he said, idly flapping away a misguided bee that was buzzing hungrily about a sweet clover head just within reach of his handkerchief. "What did he look like, Cousin Ann? But never mind; I'll have to make him dark anyway as you're a blonde."

"But he wasn't dark, Regie. He was as fair a man as could be. His hair was as light as mine, soft and fine as silk, and it curled all over his head. He had the prettiest hair I ever saw. And his eyes were as blue—oh, as blue as anything."

"I can't help that, Cousin Ann, unless I reverse it and make you dark. One of you two has got to be a brunette. No man ever falls in love with a girl of his own type."

"But he fell in love with me, you know, Regie."

"Then he did fall in love with you, did he? So it was not a case of unrequited affection, blighted heart, and the rest of it? I beg your pardon, but I haven't heard the story yet, you know. Did he offer himself to you at Ithaca?"

"No, he did not declare himself there, although I thought—I feared—I couldn't help perceiving that he had come to esteem me greatly." Miss Ann's voice was very sweet and low. "But I had to come home unexpectedly, because our hired girl took offence at my being away and leaving her to do all the work, and just departed early one morning on baking day, saying she was going to make her folks a visit the same as I was doing, and mother might make what shift she could. So, of course, I had to return in haste, and when I bade him good-by he held my hand fast in a fashion I was unused to, and said that with my permission he should very shortly call upon me in Meadowville, as he had that to impart to me which could only fittingly be said under my own roof. And he looked at me as he spoke, and his look gave a significance to his words that I could hardly miss of understanding."

"And then the fellow never came?"

Miss Ann looked up, her eyes full of grave reproof.

"I told you he said he would come. How could he not come?"

Reginald imperturbably hit out at the bee again, just as it was settling comfortably down to its dinner.

"I thought it might be that that made the story, you see, Cousin Ann. There isn't any story to it thus far. Something has to happen. And evidently something did happen since you didn't marry him. Why didn't you marry him? You just adored him, didn't you?"

A lovely look came over the sweet old face that even the ungainly bonnet, with its monstrous silk ruche and its flapping strings could spoil.

"No creature may adore anything but the Creator," she said, reverently. "But I reciprocated his sentiments toward myself, certainly, and, as I told him in reply, I felt that his request did me honour, and that I would be proud to bear his name."

"Humph," said Reginald, cruelly check-mating the bee by plucking the clover-head and thrusting it down a crevice between the boards; "it must take a precious lot of love to reconcile one to becoming a Mrs. Hiram Jones. However, some of those Joneses are uncommonly good families, even without the hyphen. I say, Cousin Ann, was that the first time he ever came here?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Had you ever told him what the place was like?"

"Why, my dear, what should I have told him about it?" It's a sweet, homelike place to be sure, and always was, tho' less lively may be for strangers than Newtown; but I don't know that I made any special remarks to him about it."

"You hadn't then. By George, how it must have struck him just to come on it all of a sudden!" cried the boy, striking his hand against his knee. "I am used to Meadowville, you know. I've been educated up to it by degrees, as it were. But just fancy a swell New Yorker meeting you first in your best bib and tucker in your cousin's fine house, and never imagining but what that was the sort of style you had always been used to, and then being suddenly set down in this stuffy little parlour here on a slippery horse hair sofa that he couldn't stick to if he tried, to make love to you in a horrible sunflower gown! Dear, dear! I wonder what he thought! But why don't you marry him, Cousin Ann? Was he too poor? Too wicked? Did it turn out that he was an

escaped jail-bird or that he had another wife already? That would work out capitally. Say, was that it?"

Miss Ann had grown very pale. The young fellow's flippant speech had made a sudden sharp discord within her as when a violin is rudely struck by an untaught hand and its strings jar.

"He left here that same day," she replied in a constrained, hard voice; "and when he left he took with him my promise that I would be his wife that day six months. I walked down to the stage with him and saw him off for Newtown. He was to take the train there that night for New York. The driver brought me back a note from him written at the station. I doubt if even you, with all your skill, could have written a prettier letter, Regie, though as he hadn't any wafer by him, he had to be careful that he said in it, knowing that the driver might very well read it on the way back, if he choose, to enliven the time, and, indeed, one couldn't blame him if he did. It's a tedious way to Newtown."

"And then the wretch jilted you, after all, Cousin Ann? Was that it? How was it?"

There was a pause. Miss Ann moistened her dry lips before she spoke.

"There was an awful accident on the line that night," she said at last, growing whiter as an old scar throbbled anew in the faithful heart that had been so sorely wounded a whole lifetime before. "There was a collision. One of the cars was completely wrecked. Ten people were killed on sight—and two of them were mangled and crushed beyond recognition; their own mothers could not have known them. The people just buried them where they lay. One of those two was my Hiram."

Reginald sat up and looked at Miss Ann with eyes sparkling with interest—interest in her story, not her suffering. He was not listening to it from the sympathetic side but from the literary standpoint. Besides, it had all happened so long ago that by this time he felt it must have come to have an impersonal sort of flavour even to herself.

"By Jove," he exclaimed: "there's a chance for the sensational! I never thought of an accident. But if those two couldn't be recognized, how did you know for certain that he was one of them?"

"Of course I did not know at first. I didn't even hear of the accident for some days. And when I did—he was so strong, so young, so full of life, I thought he must have escaped somehow—that he would still come back, or write, and that I should some day still be his wife. But I never saw him again. That note he sent me from Newtown station was the last word I ever had from him. He would have come back if he had not died."

"And was that your only proof, Cousin Ann? Didn't his people ever send you any word about it?"

"How could they, Regie? I knew nothing about his people, and they knew nothing about me. There was not time for him to have told. We were only affianced that very afternoon. And what was there for them to tell me? I knew it already. He died in that awful night, and he and an unknown companion lie buried in one grave."

There was a long silence. Miss Ann sat with her ringless hands clasped together, and two tears trickling slowly over her withered cheeks. It was fresh to her yet, that old, old past, and the memory of its short rose-time was passing sweet to her; yet the shock and bitter pain of its ending were no less vivid in recollection, and outweighed the joy. Finally she got up and went to Reginald and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"There, dear," she said, simply; "that is all my story. It is a sad one, and it was hard to tell it even to you. I should not have told it only you said you needed it, and that it was selfish of me to refuse because of my own pain."

Reginald turned his head and lightly touched her wrinkled finger-tips with his warm, red lips.

"Poor Cousin Ann!" he murmured, suddenly realizing the part she had borne in her tale. "Poor, old Cousin Ann! It was hard."

Then he gathered himself together and rose, stamping his feet to shake his strong young legs out of their cramped position, and nodded his head sagaciously two or three times, with a brilliant smile at his cousin.

"I tell you what, Cousin Ann," he cried, joyously, "I'll work you up such a story out of that as you have never read yet. You can't think how inspired I feel. Just wait and see. And in the meantime, tell me, you sweetest, dearest, prettiest of all dear, sweet, pretty, little old cousins—he came nearer, and, stooping his young face to the level of hers, kissed her coaxingly on brow and chin—"tell me, dear, couldn't we have some of those wonderful waffles again to-night for tea?"

For the next few days Reginald went about with a scowl of deep abstraction, wrinkling his boyish forehead, and innumerable half-sheets of loosely scrawled and badly blurred foolscap crumpled in his hand or protruding significantly from his pockets.

"It's going to be a stunner!" he observed confidently, whenever any one inquired of his story's progress, as every one did continually. "It's the best work I've done yet."

All Meadowville watched and waited with breathless interest. Here was a thing of fame—a second Iliad—being produced in their very midst, laurel springing into absolute leaf and blossom under their actual eyes. They were so near to it all that it gave them the sensation of being over-spattered with the dew of glory from some of its outermost petals, and they began to take on airs of importance and mystery, while they treated Miss Ann with greater distinction than ever. She alone showed no sense of elation in this sudden immortality that was being bestowed upon her. On the contrary, there was a wistful, pathetic look in her face, and something in her manner as of embarrassment and shame. She had done only what she felt to be her duty, but she could not forget that in so doing she had lifted the curtain from her life's holy secret and bared it to an irreverent gaze. It seemed to her as if she had been uprooting flowers from round her lover's grave.

Eventually the last word was written, the last revision given, and Reginald, his manuscript neatly copied and ready for the press, graciously announced to Miss Ann that he would read it aloud to herself and her friends as soon as she could call them together. Miss Ann dropped her knitting and looked up at him in evident agitation.

"Yes, of course, dear," she said, hurriedly. "They all want to hear it and—of course so do I. You must read it to us of course, Regie. I will ask them all here to-morrow."

"Oh, no, not here, Cousin Ann. Don't do that," begged the young fellow. "Get Miss Araminta to let us all come

there. I never could do myself justice reading the story here."

Miss Ann sat looking up into Reginald's handsome gypsy face.

"But it was here that it happened, you know, Regie."

"Oh, well, perhaps," assented the boy, impatiently; "but it doesn't do to read all histories on the field of battle, you know. My voice would crack in ten minutes reading aloud in such a contracted, suffocating, little place as this. I have it all planned. The reading shall be at Miss Araminta's. She has the best house and grounds here, and we'll sit out under those old oaks in the front. They are really fine old oaks. It's as ideal a spot for the purpose as one could ask. The story will sound another thing out there."

Miss Ann gave an uneasy glance around her little room. Those four narrow walls inclosed the dearest place in all the world to her. She did not appreciate Reginald's objections. However, perhaps, the afternoons were getting rather hot, and the windows fronted full west. It might be cooler out-doors.

"We will sit outside certainly, Regie dear, if you wish it," she said. "Only we needn't go to Miss Araminta's. We can sit in my own front yard. There's a good deal of shade under that big lilac tree."

Regie burst into a laugh.

"It's a dear, old lilac bush," he said, merrily. "It does its very best to pass itself off as a tree, and gives itself the most umbrageous airs as possible. Some day I'll write a poem on it. But to sit in your cramped front yard with the vegetable-garden just the other side of the tan-road—fancy Dickens giving a reading there, if you can! No, Cousin Ann, I can't have your applause all mixed up with the smell of cabbages and black currant bushes. You don't know what insidious impressions one's surroundings make on one. So my plan is the best, if you please. We'll meet at Miss Araminta's to-morrow."

## PART II.

Reginald's will of course carried the day, and on the following afternoon all the old ladies of Meadowville assembled under the shade of Miss Araminta's beautiful old oaks on her front lawn, if one might dignify by that name the sloping ground stretching from the front door to the gate, and covered with short, coarse, stubby country-grass never mowed more than twice the entire summer through. Reginald had coaxed Miss Araminta's carriage rug from her (a brilliant blood-red robe which she only used on state occasions, spending the rest of the year in airing it on her back piazza), and having spread this in the most comfortable spot of combined shade and breeze that he could find, he threw himself picturesquely down upon it in an attitude of enviable ease, smiling affectionately at each of the gentle old dames in turn as they drew their conglomeration of chairs into a circle around him, and peered at him through expectant, pleased spectacles. They were not at all used to sitting out-doors in this way. No one of them had ever before had the inspiration to take a chair farther than the porch. So what with the novelty of the procedure and the nature of the entertainment, they felt excited and fluttered from the outset. Only Miss Araminta, being the cleverest and having the coolest head of them all, was able to preserve her usual calm, though even she rather overdid it, thus betraying that it was with an effort that she maintained it. Miss Ann sat behind Reginald, somewhat hidden from general sight by a friendly shrub, her head bent very low and a feeling of desperate strangeness upon her. She felt that it would have been easier to hear her story read on the spot where it had happened. It could not sound natural anywhere else. Miss Araminta, coming out strongly in her character of critic was, naturally, next to Reginald, the most conspicuous figure in the small audience, and sat leaning forward with head stiffly erect, and wearing an impressive benignity of aspect intended to convey fullest encouragement to the young author.

But Reginald was not timid by nature, and did not show himself in the very least bashful or nervous under the present trying ordeal. He lightly turned over the leaves of his manuscript, smiling approvingly to himself as certain lines here and there caught his appreciative eye; then threw back his head to toss his black locks from his forehead, struck a still more artistic pose, smiled around with impartial and indulgent amiability, and began to read in resonant, dramatic tones that gave immense effect to even his most commonplace periods.

The story opened with a grandiose description of the house at Ithaca where Miss Ann had met her fate. Upon this description, Reginald lavished the riotous wealth of a youthful and undaunted imagination, ransacked the entire known world for one luxury after another, till for profuse and daring magnificence there was not a place in the "Arabian Nights" to compare with it. The little old ladies almost stopped breathing for wonder and delight, and Miss Araminta gave low grunts of approval such as might be expected from an intellectual member of the porcine family, finding itself suddenly immersed knee-deep in a troughful of swelling metaphors, high-sounding, bombastic phrases, and an over-spreading flood of tumultuous, foamy adjectives.

"Attention!" she said, authoritatively, raising a mitted forefinger like a freckled exclamation-point. "There is nothing like it in Richardson, nor Goldsmith, nor in that new writer Thackeray; no, nor in all dear Mrs. Opey. Attention!"

Miss Ann looked more and more bewildered as Reginald's sentences rolled along. Her cousin's house, as it stood out sharply defined in her memory against a golden background of happiness, had fewer windows and only one piazza, and as to domes, turrets and broad marble terraces, there had been nothing of that sort about it at all. It was a thoroughly, comfortable house, she recollected and to her mind its best carpets, with their big bunches of vivid and perfectly recognizable flowers strung together with garlands of lively green, were pleasanter to the eye and to the foot than such mosaic floors as Reginald described, covered over with loose rugs to an extent that must make it a marvel if one could walk there without tripping. It was queer to hear of a splashing fountain inside the house; it struck her as peculiarly out of place there as the village pump would have been; and she felt sure that Cousin Josiah would never have had one there to spatter harmfully over all his beautiful velvet chairs. And as to Cousin Betsey, she would have had a fit to see those gorgeous embroidered cushions that Reginald spoke of thrown so promiscuously abroad and would have picked them up and covered them with calico in less than no time; for wealthy