



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.

My story? my life? Oh, it has been too uneventful, too simple in its incidents—

I could tell you the sorrows of others, but my own—well, well! as you will. You shall hear. The wound has never healed, and if I put my hand above it, the place still throbs, even as it will beat and ache till kindly nature says to me, "Sleep, poor weary one, and rest." And then peacefully, trustingly, and with a simple hope of forgiveness, may I sleep that long sleep which they say so flippantly has no waking; but which has a waking, as every lesson which we learn in life persists in teaching us.

You will smile, perhaps, when I tell you that I was once what people called pretty—that this pale-hued face was once plump and rosy, these sad eyes bright, and this grey scant hair golden brown, long and flowing. But why should I think you should smile? Do I know that you must have seen the gay young plant putting out its tender leaves in spring, growing green and luxuriant of foliage in summer, ripe and ruddy in autumn, and grey, bent, and withered in age? And should I be pitted because I have but followed in the way of nature? Surely not. It is not for that I ask your sympathy, but for the blight that fell upon the young plant, and seared and scorched it so that it seemed for months as if it would die; but it lived, as I have lived to tell you this.

Do you know that wondrous feeling which comes in the early year, and that strange sense of keen delight, that elasticity of spirit, when, full of youth and hope, the very tears of joyous sensibility start to the eyes as you wander amidst the trees and flowers in spring? I remember how I felt, oh! so well, even though it is now forty years ago, and I was twenty. Jack and I were engaged. It was all such a simple homely affair. We had known one another for years—the children of neighboring farmers. Jack—I still call him by the simple old pet name of those days—Jack had been away at a good school, and being bright, and shrewd, and clever, he had won his way on, taking to engineering instead of his father's farm life; and now it had come to this, that he had been staying at home for a month, previous to going out to a good appointment in Melbourne.

That month, in spring, how it passed! We had met again and again, and in his honest, manly way, he had asked me to be his wife.

"You know, Grace, that I have always loved you," he said; "and now I have hopes and prospects, it cannot be wrong to ask you for your promise."

We were walking by the river-side as he said this, and how well I can picture it all—the soft gliding water mirroring the trees on the opposite bank, the young green buds just breaking from their cases, and, above all, the soft tender blue of the spring sky—the blue, he told me, that was like my eyes.

"Do you want me to promise, Jack?" I said simply, as I looked up in his face.

"No, darling; I am satisfied," he cried, as his strong arms held me to his broad breast, and that was all. No oaths could have bound me more tightly to him. I felt that I was his wife when he should come to claim me.

We were late that evening, and entered the house shyly, for there had been so much to talk of and plan. In a month's time Jack was to sail for Melbourne; then he was to work very hard for three years, and come and fetch me to be his wife.

That month glided by, and the last day had come. It was, as I told you, spring-time—joyous spring-time, with the Hawthorn's snowy blossoms, the apple-trees pink, and the pear-trees pearly with their pyramids of flowers. Every meadow I passed was starred with golden buttercups, and from every spray the birds trilled or jerked forth their merry songs of hope and love.

I could not feel sad, even though I was going to meet Jack for the last walk before he went away; but, as I said, mingled with the feeling of ecstasy there was a strange tearfulness of eye, and my breath would come at times with a sob.

He was by the stile, waiting for me—the stile down by the long mead, half-way between the two farms—and as he took my hands in his, we neither of us spoke, but stood gazing away over woodland and meadow, all clad in their wondrous beauty, and listened to the birds. Now it was the soft tender coo of the stock-dove from the wood, now the jerked-out twittering song of the linnet; then soft and mellow, from the thick hedgerows floated towards us the fluty notes of the black-bird, while far on high trilled away the larks, singing one against the other to their mates, settling in the tall grass of the golden meads.

We could not talk, our hearts were too full, for Jack was to be off at daybreak the next morning. But there was no need for words. We loved each other in the simple nature-taught way that has been since the world began, and we knew that every joyous song around that thrilled upon our ears meant love, and even in our sorrow we were happy.

"Only three years, darling," Jack whispered to me, "and then—"

The tears rose to my eyes as I tried to answer him, but I could not speak a word.

"And you will let me find a long letter when I get there?" he said tenderly.

"Yes, Jack, I promise," I said, and then it was time to return, for the hours had glided by, how we could not tell.

Jack spent the evening with us at home, and then he left us hurriedly, for our farewells had been said in the wood, and

it was one hearty kiss, given and taken before the old people, and then good-bye.

But I saw him pass soon after daybreak, and he saw me, and waved his hand, for I had sat by the window all night, lest I might let him go by, and I asleep.

And then time glided on sadly, but pleasantly as well. Mine was a busy life, for soon my father took to his bed, ill—a bed he never left again, for he gradually sank and died, leaving my poor mother in very indifferent circumstances.

It was a hard blow for us both, for he had been one of the kindest and truest of men, but while poor mother pined and waited, I had my hopeful days in view, and from time to time letters from dear Jack, all so true and honest, and full of trust in the future, that I felt as if I could not repine, even when greater troubles fell upon me.

For at the end of two years I was standing by the bed-side where lay poor mother, sinking fast. She had had no particular ailment, but had literally pined and wasted away. The bird had lost its mate of many years, and when at last she kissed me, and said, "Good-bye," it seemed to be in a quiet rest seeking spirit, and she spoke like one looking hopefully forward to the meeting with him who had gone before.

But she could think of me even then, and almost the last whispered words were—

"Only eleven months, Grace, and then he will be back to fetch you."

Poor mother! she would not have passed so peacefully away if she had known that which I withheld, namely the news that came to me from our lawyer. For, through the failure of the enterprise in which my father's savings had been invested, and which brought us a little income of sixty pounds a year, I was left penniless—so poor in fact that the furniture of the cottage in the little town, to which we had moved when we left the farm, had to be sold to defray the funeral expenses.

It was very hard to bear, and for a month I was terribly depressed; but there was that great hopeful time ever drawing near—the end of the three years, when Jack would come to fetch me to be his wife.

It was now for the first time that I remember feeling particular about personal appearance, and I studied my glass to see if Jack would find me looking careworn and thin, and my glass told me truly—yes.

But I had to be up and doing, and before another month was over, through the kindness of people whom we had known, I was placed where I could work contentedly for the bread I must earn till Jack should come to fetch me away.

It was at a large West-end dressmaker's, and it was hard work to get used to the hurry and excitement of the place, where there were twelve girls living in the house, and as many more came every day.

There were all kinds of petty pieces of tyranny to submit to at first, and I suppose some of the foolish girls were jealous of me and my looks, so much so that I found they nicknamed me "The Beauty." Poor girls! If they had only known how little store I set by my looks, they would have behaved at first as they did later on.

The first thing that won them to me was when Mary Sanders was taken ill with a terrible fever. Madame Grainger was for sending her away at once, on account of her business, and the infection; but the doctor who was called in, a young, impetuous, but very clever man, told her that it would be at her peril if she did so, for Mary Sanders' life was in danger. So the poor girl was shut up in her bed-room, without a soul to go near her except a hired nurse, and after the first night this woman stayed away.

No one dared go near the poor girl then, so I timidly asked leave to nurse her, for I felt no fear of the infection, and it seemed so hard for her to be left there alone.

I obtained leave, and went up-stairs, staying with her till she recovered; and from that day there was always a kind look for me, and a kiss from every girl in the place.

What was more, oddly enough, perhaps because I was so quiet and restrained, first one girl and then another came to make me confidante of her love secrets, and ask my advice.

I gave it, such as it was, though heartless myself, for Jack's letters to me had suddenly ceased. We had corresponded so regularly; but it had struck me that his last two letters had been formal and constrained; they were full of business matters, too, and he had hinted at its being possible that he should not be able to keep time about the three years, in consequence of some contract.

I did not think this when I first read these letters, for then I had kissed and cried over them; but when no reply came to my last, I re-read them, and the coldness seemed apparent.

But I waited, and waited, and then the news came from the country. Jack's father, a widower, had died suddenly; and I said to myself, with throbbing heart, as I longed to be at his side to try and comfort him in his affliction, "Poor Jack, he will come home now."

But he did not come, neither did I get any reply to my last two letters. Another month; and the three years would be up; and as I sat over some work one spring morning by the open window, with a bunch of violets that one of the girls had brought me in a glass, the soft breeze that came floating over the chimney-pots and sooty roofs, wafted to me the scent of the humble little blossoms, and my eyes became full of tears, for in an instant the busy work-room had passed away, and I was down home by the river-side, listening to dear Jack, as he asked me to be his wife.

Only a month! only a month! my pulses seemed to beat; and as it happened we were all busy upon a large wedding order, and I was stitching away at the white satin skirt intended for the bride.

I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, the rush of feelings was too great. Another month, and he was to have fetched me to be his wife, and I had not an answer to my last two fond and loving letters.

As I said, I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, and stifling a sob, I hurried out of the work-room to reach my attic, threw myself upon my knees by the bed, and burying my face in my hands, I sobbed as if my heart would break.

For the terrible thought would come now, fight against it as I would—"Jack has grown tired of waiting, and has married another."

I fought so hard with the disloyal thought, but it would come, and I was sobbing passionately, when I felt a soft arm steal round my neck, a tender cheek laid to mine, and I found my poor tear-dewed face drawn down upon the bosom of Mary Sanders, who had stolen out of the work-room, and come up to try and comfort me.

"Pray, pray, don't fret, my darling," she whispered. "Madame will be so cross. Those wedding things must be in by to-night, and they want you to help try them on."

I don't know how I got through that day and night, but I believe I did such duties as were expected from me mechanically, or if I had been in a dream, and at night I lay wakeful and weary, with aching eyes and heart, thinking of that dreadful idea that was trying to force itself upon me.

I waited till the three years had expired, and then, with what anguish of heart no words could tell, I wrote to Jack again—my fourth letter—begging him, imploring him to answer me, if but to tell me he was weary of his promise, and wished to be set free; and then, making a superhuman effort over myself, I waited, month by month, for an answer, though I knew that it must be at least six months before one could come.

I had given up expecting one in the interim, and I was too proud to send to his relatives—distant ones, whom I had never seen, and who I had probably never heard of. The thought had taken root now, and grown to a feeling of certainty; but I waited for my answer.

Three months—six months—nine months passed away, and hope was dead within my heart. They said I had grown much older and more careworn. Madame said I worked too hard, and the sharp business woman became quite motherly in her attentions to me. But I would not take any change, for work was like balm to me, it blunted my thoughts; and knowing that I was daily growing pale and thin, I still waited.

I knew the girls used to whisper together about me, and think me strange, but no one knew my secret—not even Madame, who had more than once sought my confidence; and so twelve months passed away—four years since Jack had left me.

It was not to a day, but very nearly to the time when he had parted from me, and it was almost two years since I had heard from him. I was trying hard to grow patient and contented with my lot, for Madame Grainger had gradually taken to me, and trusted me, making me more and more her right hand, when one glorious spring morning, as I was coming out of the breakfast-room to go up-stairs to work, she called me into her little snuggerly, where she sat as a rule and attended to her customers' letters, for she had an extensive clientele, and carried on business in a large private mansion in Welbeck Street.

"Grace, my dear," she said, taking me in her arms, and kissing me, "it worries me to see you look so ill. Now what do you say to a fortnight in the country?"

A fortnight in the country! and at her busiest time, with the London season coming on.

I thought of that, and then, as I glanced round at the flowers and inhaled their scents, the bright fields near Templemore Grange floated before my dimming eyes, a feeling of suffocation came upon me, and the room seemed to swing round. I believe that for the first time in my life I should have fainted, so painful were the memories evoked by the words, when a sharp knock and ring at the door echoed through the house, following instantly upon the dull fall of a letter, and the sharp click of the letter-box.

It was like an electric shock to me, and without a word I darted into the hall, panting with excitement, and my hand at my throat to tear away the stifling sensation.

But it was a letter. I could see it through the glass in the letter-box, and I seized it with trembling hands, inspired as it were by some strange power.

"Jack! dear Jack at last!" I gasped as I turned it over, and saw it was a strange, blue, official-looking letter, formally directed to me.

Even that did not surprise me. It was from Jack, I knew and I tore open the blue envelope.

Yes, I knew it! The inner envelope was covered with Australian post-marks, and, ignorant as I might be of its contents, I was rising it to my lips to cover it with passionate kisses, when I saw it was open.

Then a mist came over my mental vision for a moment, but only to clear away as, stupefied, I turned the missive over and over, held it straight for a moment; and then, with a sigh of misery and despair, I stood mute, and as if turned to stone.

"Grace, my child! In mercy's name tell me—" It was Madame, who passed her arm round me, and looked horror-stricken at my white face and lips. The next moment I dimly remember she caught the letter—his letter—my letter—from my hand; and read it aloud: "Mr. John Braywood, Mark-boro, R. County Melbourne," and then, in her excitement, the great official sentence-like brand upon it—"Dead!"

That was the beginning of my first and only illness, during which Madame tended me like a mother, even to giving up her business afterwards, and retiring to live with me here in this quiet street, where she died, and left me well-to-do, as you see. I have grown old since then, but I am not unhappy, great as was the trial, and it has led me into what has, I hope, been a useful life. And, besides, why should I sorrow, knowing as I do that which came to me years and years after—that Jack died with my name upon his lips—died true to her he loved? and I am but waiting till we shall meet again.

THE END.

For Low Spirits.

Take one ounce of the seeds of resolution, mixed well with the oil of conscience, infuse it into a large spoonful of salts of patience; distil very carefully a composing plant called "others' woes," which you will find in every part of the garden of life, growing under the broad leaves of disguise; add a small quantity and it will greatly assist the salts of patience in their operation. Gather a handful of the blossoms of hope, then sweeten them properly with the balm of prudence; and if you can get any of the seeds of true friendship, you will have the most valuable medicine that can be administered. Be careful to get the seeds of true friendship, as there is a seed very much like it called self-interest, which will spoil the whole composition. Make the ingredients into pills and take one night and morning, and the cure will be effected.