

STORIES IN THE LIFE OF A MAN AND A WOMAN.

The Revealing Desk.



MR. COTTON closed the door softly. He went straight to his revolving chair and sat down, leaning his cheeks in his hands and peered without seeing anything into the quaint openings of his desk.

Josiah Cotton was the product of six generations of self-restraint; he was the extract of a hard-headed, warm-hearted Puritan ancestry. There was no bend in his square chin, and there was no quarter in his rapier-steel eyes. There comes a time when the iron bands of habit which confine emotion must break. To Josiah Cotton the time had come now. How could he blame his wife? His was the fault. The system in which his family had trained him was the assassin of love. A wall of steel had been cast before him, and advance was an impossibility. He saw no outlet. He could not forgive himself therefore he could not forgive her. Mechanically he fumbled at the drawers of his desk, trying in vain to order his mind. The young lawyer would not have acknowledged it to himself, but he was blindly groping for a solution of his difficulties and relief for his distress.

The desk had once belonged to his grandfather, Josiah Cotton, after whom he had been named, and whom he was said to resemble when he was in his sternest moods. It was one of those mahogany desks, the object of modern mania, filled with many secret drawers and unexpected receptacles. As a boy he remembered discovering these in turn. He knew there were just twenty-one places in it where a burglar would not be apt to find a document. One by one he opened these. Some were cunningly hidden behind obvious drawers, some responded to a secret touch, and there were a few that seemed to be a part of the solid, carved woodwork itself. Years ago in one of these latter he had discovered a bundle of old letters. They were yellow with age, and written in a crabbed hand, hard to decipher. He had not read them, but had replaced them carefully, with the instinct of reverence due his family belongings.

As Josiah's hand passed from one secret drawer to another it fell upon the quaint carving which separated the pigeonholes. It was like the back of an octavo volume and was made to pull out. As he drew this to him his eyes dropped upon the familiar package of dusty letters. Wearied with conflict and languid with curiosity, ready for any momentary diversion, he untied the faded ribbon and spread the papers before him. Casually he selected one from the many in the bunch and opened it. It was one of those almost antiquated letters in which the envelope and the missive were one and the same sheet. These were much used before the days of postage-stamps, and were sent on a personal frank.

It was dated "Boston, June 25, 1756, Hancock Tavern," and read as follows: "My Honored Wife:

"It is my duty to advise you of my safe arrival in the town of Boston after a long and perilous journey. Although in hourly danger from Indians and wild beasts, I have had time for self-examination. I know that I am a hard man and have an unbending nature, and I can see with some clearness that a young female who has not a prayerful nature might find it hard to conform to my austerity. While I have rejoiced in the ways of the Lord you have rejoiced in the ways of man. It may be that I am too old or that you are too young for the sacrament of marriage. But, like Saul of Tarsus, even as I journeyed with great anger in my heart toward you, a light from Heaven smote me in the eyes and blinded me for a moment, but now I see clearly. God has dropped the scales from my vision, and the long and perilous journey has not been in vain. This letter I write to tell you that I do not blame you for your innocent pleasantries with that young man. Had I made my own home more agreeable possibly it would not have occurred. But, Abigail, my dear wife, I took you to my bosom because I loved you. I love you more to-day than ever, and I shall always love you and pray for your best happiness, wherever it may be found. May the blessing of God rest upon you. I am, your obedient husband, Josiah Cotton."

The young man turned the yellow paper over. It was addressed to Mistress Abigail Cotton, South Street, Andover, Massachusetts. The letter drop-

ped from his nerveless fingers and fell upon the polished mahogany. The husband started at this voice from another world as if it were the whispering of a ghost. From out of his fixed stare the handwriting of the next letter below arose as if it were embossed. It was different script from that of his great-grandfather. Instinctively he felt that here was the answer to the heart-throb that he had just touched. At first he dared not handle the letter. It seemed a desecration to disrobe a heart long dead, a heart that had erred, that had suffered the anguish of remorse, possibly the penalty of a disrupted home. He knew nothing of it. Ah, here was tragedy like his own. No matter in what century one lives, love is the same, vanity is the same, fidelity is the same and the anguish of their combination is the same.

Josiah reached out his hand and touched the letter tenderly. It was addressed to "Josiah Cotton, Esquire, Hancock Tavern, Boston," and began: "My Honored Husband:

"I have received your esteemed letter. I find it hard to answer. You never told me before that you loved me. Why did you not let me know of it? I thought you married me because it was the Word of the Lord. If I had known that you loved me I would not have been so frivolous. I have loved you since I was a little girl of ten, and all I wanted was to make you jealous. The strawberries are beginning to ripen. Jennie has a little calf, and something else may happen some time. Your loving and obedient wife, Abigail."

Josiah Cotton kissed the letter and put it sacredly back in the hiding-place where it had long rested. This cry from a past century moved him greatly. He went to the window and drummed upon the pane, and looked out upon the green trees. The strawberries were ripening, the buttercups and the daisies were blooming, and all the birds nesting. He felt a queer sensation in his heart, and wondered if he were going to be ill. Then all at once the cap of the mountain was blown off; the volcano had burst.

"Great God!" he cried aloud: "what a brute I've been! and like a river of lava he rushed from the room."

He found his wife in her own room, staring distractedly out of a window. She was in that desperate state when she might have done anything. She felt it in her to commit undreamed-of crimes. In such a consciousness of frenzied injury a woman may fling herself away, body and soul. She stared at her husband haughtily as he burst into the room.

"What is the matter?" she said coldly.

"Have I done anything else?"

"No!" he exploded.

He seized his wife in his arms and carried her to the sofa, laid her down tenderly upon it, and then knelt beside her.

"No," he repeated, "you haven't done anything else—you have never done anything I wanted to tell you that I love you—I love you, and I want you to forgive me if you can."

Then with great reverence he bent over and kissed her wedding-ring. He did this with the ardor of an Oriental lover.

His wife, amazed, stared at him.

"Why, Mr. Cotton?" she said faintly.

Why, Josiah?

This was one of the inadequate replies which great emotional scenes often arouse. But it seemed to mean all that it did not say.

"I love you! I love you!" he urged with the embarrassment of a man who has repressed expression until it becomes almost impossible.

She lifted her trembling face.

"I thought lately you married because it was convenient. And I made a good figurehead in your house. I tried so hard."

"It is all my fault," interrupted Josiah fiercely. "I couldn't—I was brought up not to show my feelings. Can't you understand?"

The wife looked at her husband with fast brimming eyes. His reserve had been an impenetrable steel grille against which she beat in vain for admittance up the stairway of his heart. Now it was open before her.

"Oh, Josiah!" she cried, her arms rigid for so long, curled themselves tenderly about his neck; "if you had only told me this before! Do you suppose"—she started up—"that I would have flirted with that callow fool, or that I would have looked at any other man but you—"

The sentence was never finished, for the man took his wife madly in his arms.

The Message in the Chair.



MRS. COTTON strolled along the street, his smooth face, usually so firm and uncompromising, was vacillating and relaxed. To his keen insight, as he walked, the whole world seemed easy, almost unmoral. The women he met looked as if they would sell their souls for diversion or dress. The men had little or no conscience in their countenances.

"Poor creatures!" Josiah Cotton thought; "storm-driven driftwood in the whirlpool of life!" He seldom indulged in metaphor. To-day his imagination, or what passed for it, was active. In vain he looked for one man or woman who dared to stem the maelstrom. If he could only catch a glimpse of a single noble personality, the product of honor, independence and of a simple life! What he craved was an island in this sea of moral fotsam. He was tired—tired with the eternal struggle of probity without income. Why not drift? It was easier so. He had only one life to live, and would be a long time dead. Why not live comfortably, and let the next world care for itself?

Ideals do not clothe the wife and feed the child. They do not extend a law practice—especially—

For to Josiah Cotton, attorney-at-law, a temptation had come. Every successful lawyer knows them. To yield meant a corporation practice and an increasing income. In this case his duty would be to protect his clients by legal chicanery in committing a manifest wrong. To yield meant independence. It meant all the things his wife needed and that he desired for her. It meant a ceasing from the fear of tomorrow. It meant—why everything that a professional man craved. To deny meant years and years of grinding at the office, and economy at home. It meant the torture of seeing care carve a dear wife's face. It meant possible failure in the end; but it also meant the holding fast to those ideals for which his father had lived and his mother had prayed.

As the man strolled and argued he glanced into a shop window. This was stocked with oric-a-brac of an auctioneer's store—china of doubtful rarity, mahogany of questionable antiquity, and Oriental rugs made in Lyons. On one side, flanked by andirons, he noticed an old armchair. The longer he looked at it the more it assumed an air of familiarity. Could it be? It looked like the chair that stood in the parlor in his father's house; the chair his father had always sat in when he led family prayers. What memories cushioned themselves in its capacious seat. In that he used to curl like a dog when he came home from school to read. How often he read the things he should not! And when a family step drew near he used to tuck the reprehensible book or paper away in that depth where the seat and the back cushion met.

A fresher of tender memories assailed him as he looked at that dear old chair. He was sure now, for he knew it by a nicked cross on the left arm, that he had made with his jack-knife one rainy Sunday. No one else must ever use it again—his father's chair. Why, one of the deepest humiliations of his life was connected with that chair.

He couldn't have been more than fourteen, and he was surreptitiously absorbed at the time in the "Jack Harkaway" series in a lurid story paper given over to Indians, and murders, and detectives, and impossible boys.

He had come down early before breakfast, and, tucked up in his father's chair, he was whirling over a cataract in an Indian canoe, with a United States detective on his tracks, when a descending step sounded on the stairs. His grandmother, an old-fashioned, orthodox saint, was visiting the house at the time, and also his two aunts, his father's maiden sisters.

The lad had just time enough to tuck the lurid periodical into the depths of the chair when his grandmother entered.

Prayers always came after breakfast. The boy had no chance to rescue his contraband literature, and trembled lest it should rustle when his father took his accustomed seat.

After they had knelt down, and repeated as usual in unison the Lord's Prayer, his father drew from the back of his chair the guilty sheet and held

it up in full view. How grotesque and vulgar the pictures looked!

"Mother," said the good man, looking at the old lady with apparent surprise, "I am shocked that you should read such literature at your age—you with your godly training!"

"Why, John!" exclaimed the pious lady indignantly.

"Martha"—shifting his spectacles, the catechist turned to his older sister—"did you hide this paper here?"

"Oh, no, John, I did not."

"Did you, Mary?" he addressed the younger lady.

"Certainly not; I never saw it before."

Then, turning to his only son as he folded the paper, with tenderness the father said: "I know that my son could never stoop to anything as low as this," and went out of the room.

The matter was not mentioned again, and from that day the boy never had anything to hide.

Decidedly Josiah Cotton could not lose that armchair—at any cost it must be his.

That evening the family inspected the new purchase with interest. The expressman brought it up after dinner, and it was the bedtime of the boy, Josiah's only son, named after the grandfather who used to offer up daily prayers, kneeling beside this relic of a God-fearing, stern home.

Josiah Cotton absorbed himself in the return of the prodigal armchair. He tried to forget that other matter. The decision that might make his future and mar his character he deferred with alacrity; yet it must be made by morning.

Meanwhile, Johnny, the child, was disporting himself like a puppy in the possession of a new plaything. He danced and cavorted, and then would take a running leap and land in the soft seat of the chair, and, curling himself, would pretend to hide between the high-cushioned arms and back. His parents watched his antics with pride, exchanging tender looks that relieved the man of his natural austerity.

But every now and then the woman cast upon her husband a troubled glance.

"Josiah," she whispered, "something is on your mind. What is it? Can't I help you?"

"Not this time, dearest."

"Oh, papa!" the boy's voice vibrated with excitement, "see what I have found way in at the bottom of the chair."

The boy held up a fluttering bit of paper that looked like a letter. Josiah Cotton took it and opened it slowly. His boy peered over his arm, while his wife tried to pretend an interest she did not feel. Her heart was groping after the thing that worried her husband.

But Josiah Cotton stared at the handwriting. He knew that precious lettering. It came from the pen of the sternest, the tenderest, the best man he ever knew. It was the writing of his father. For thirty years it had lain there, and now, brought to light by a freak of chance—Providence, some prefer to call it—it lay in his hand, a message from the dead. It was short, and in a dazed way he read it.

"To my dear son Josiah:

"I am sure that never again will my boy do anything that he is ashamed to have me know."

"Your loving father,

"John Cotton."

Now, John, the boy, had never seen tears in his father's eyes before, and, frightened, he turned to his mother and began to whimper. She led him quietly from the room to bed.

The man was left alone. He grasped the paper as if it were a spirit and might melt from him. An awe fell upon him, as though he had received a summons from an unknown world. It was a conscription. He felt that he was draughted into honor. He was forced into that high integrity which had made his father's name respected wherever it was known.

Josiah Cotton paced the floor. He no longer looked irresolute; he was resolved. He no longer groped; he had found. He was not worried; he was content. It amazed him that he should ever have vacillated for an instant, for he seemed to stand upon granite.

He felt upon his arm a touch that always made him thrill. He clasped his wife silently.

"I am so troubled!" she sobbed. Then she looked up at the dear face which she delighted to honor. "Why," she gasped, "why, Josiah! It's gone."

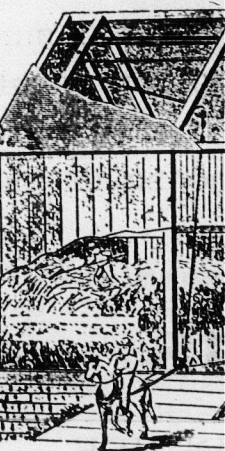
"Yes," he said solemnly, "it's gone."

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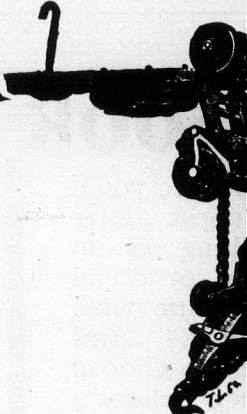
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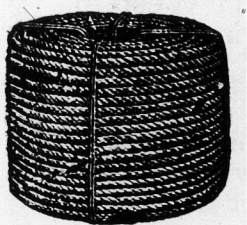


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