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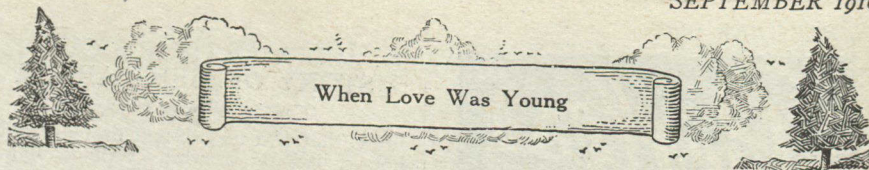
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LOVE AND A FAMILY FEUD

(Continued from page 10)

to Sam's son. The young folk were marrying off, and here and there new nests were a-building.

Presently he looked at his daughter again, and a queer little jealous spasm tugged sharply at his heart. Some day—it was not a very distant day perhaps—she, too, would be going. He shrunk from the thought; it frightened him. One by one he told off in his mind the young men of the neighbourhood—all save John Hains; there was no use considering a Hains, he told himself—and being dissatisfied, he shook his head at each. With whom, among them all, could he trust her? Even now, though she was grown to be a woman, he could still feel the pressure of her childish arms around his neck, the clasp of her baby fingers upon his own. She had been so little, so loving, and he had spoiled her, perhaps; and this man who would take her from him wouldn't know about that—and—and—how could it be possible that she should care for that one, more than she cared for "Daddy," who loved her so?

HIS soul was disquieted within him; and the broad sun slipped down and kissed the western hills, and the labourers came home from the fields singing and whistling along the paths. But the girl took no heed of the undertone of sadness and of vague regret in it all; nor was she conscious of the rich blaze of the fading sunset, and the dying light on the hills; neither did she see the shadows creeping up the village, nor hear the night birds calling from the orchard and the woods. True, the night had come, but Beth was thinking of the afternoon and of the spring and the man in the dark blue overalls. It was good, she thought, to live, and she went singing about her work.

The Battle

BETWEEN the man and the girl there were other meetings—such frequent meetings that the gossiping housewives of the neighbourhood wagged their heads sagely and, when "two or three gathered together in one place," indulged themselves freely in forecasts and adventured forth into prophecy. Did they not know Bill Norton, and was John Hains a man easily controlled or readily turned aside in his purpose?

But, regardless of these comments, the two continued to see each other on meeting days at the church, sometimes by accident as they travelled the country road, and, if Bill Norton suspected aught, he gave no sign—at least, none that his daughter or the public could read. To some it seemed that the old man had wistfully shut his eyes, not wishing to see. Others averred that such was Norton's hatred for a Hains that it had not even occurred to him that his daughter would look at John, much less tarry within the sound of the young man's voice or harken to his stammering speech.

"Bill'll waken up one o' these days," said one of the apologists.

"Dunno as I blames the young folks though. John Hains, he are a man—built like a steer. An' Beth, why, Beth, bless her heart, is as red-lipped as a young rose, an' sir, she's clean-limbed, an' as light in her pastern joints as a thoroughbred colt! I don't blame John—he's got a good farm, an' they'll git married one o' these days, an' ole Bill, he'll r'ar then an' pitch, but his gal'll be married all right enough, so it won't do a bit o' good. Yes, sree, Bill's got to wake up some time. I'm dang sorry fer Bill, I shore is."

In such fashion the community helped the matter forward and knew far more of its progress than old Bill did or, as for that, even Beth herself or John.

And yet, despite this absorbing adventure which was stirring the good folk up, Nature went her own way steadily and was neither to be checked nor diverted. But at last the summer passed and the sunlight grew slant and pale; the maples tinged the slopes with red, and the goldenrod shone yellow by the waysides, filling the long valleys with flame.

AND because the year was dying, and the old things were passing away, the young man grew lonely and came once more in the afternoon stillness to the creekside near the spring. This time he bore no rod and made no excuses—not even to himself—for his coming. And then the girl came, meeting him there. When he looked at her, he forgot all his shyness and awkwardness and went to her holding out his arms.

"Won't you come to me, Beth?" he asked.

"Won't you come, now?"

The girl drew back a pace. "John!" she remonstrated, "John!"

But he did not heed, scarcely had he even heard. The slanting light had transfigured her, and he could not give her up now. With a swift step he reached her side and caught her hands in his own. "I love you, Beth," he whispered, passionately; "will you come, dear—will you come?"

Almost forcibly he drew her to him, and she, resisting no longer, let her dark lashes droop, and hid her face against his arm. "John!" she whispered, and then again, "John!" The words were the same as before, but the intonation told him all.

But on the hillside above a leafy bush quivered, and Bill Norton, his heart beating fiercely, parted the obscuring foliage to see clearly who this man was who had come to steal away his child.

"HAINS!" he muttered. "John Hains, just like I knowed it would be. An' yet I couldn't believe—I had to just see it myself."

White-lipped and quivering, the old man loosed his hold on the branches, and they fell back into place. His breath came in gasps, and a spasm, half of passion, half of pain, distorted the muscles of his face. He did not wish to give his daughter up—not to any man; he had fought out that battle with himself. But to a Hains! The neighbors had hinted to him of this, but even in the face of that evidence he had forced himself to disbelieve.

He parted the leaves and looked down again. Beth was leaning against the man's arm now.

"No," he heard her say, hopelessly. "We can't tell him. He wouldn't understand—There was a tremulous break in her voice, and the listener was strangely moved.

"But you'll go with me?" interrupted the man.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, John—but Daddy—"

The old man turned stumblingly, not waiting to hear more. Over him, quelling his anger and frightening him, a very great change had come; she was about to leave him. What could he do, poor doddering old man that he was, to prevent her?—and she was all that life still held for him. How like her mother's eyes were hers, and just as long ago her mother had looked up to him, so the child was now looking up to John—to a Hains!

In such wise the memory of his own youth came upon him and softened him. Reaching the brow of the hill, he crossed the fence and the fields, and came with lagging footsteps to a little plot shadowed by tall, straight maple trees, and set with smooth white stones. Not often did he turn aside here, but now he was old and troubled, and it seemed to him that he stood alone.

Careworn and shrunken, he sat down on the grass. He was so clumsy, he thought, so tactless and so awkward, in the face of this crisis. But Mary—Mary, who slept so silently there—would have understood. He raised his head. Out along the roads wagons were passing, the fields were golden with grain, and rang with the song of the reaper. But under the maples there was quiet, and an infinite solitude.

The Decision

THE autumn night had come. There was no wind; and up in the vault of the sky a myriad of stars sparkled crisply and frostily. In her own room in the old brown house the girl moved about in stealthy yet nervous haste, for this was her wedding night. Her fingers trembled over her task, but their deft intuitive intelligence stood her in good stead as she folded some garments and packed them into her bag. Hurried she was and afraid, for already it was late, and she must slip out and go down the spring path to John, who was waiting for her there.

Presently the tears came into her eyes. The homely and familiar things about her seemed to say good-bye. Her father would never forgive her, she knew, and her mother's picture on the mantel seemed to gaze at her reproachingly. Yes, she was leaving it all—her little belongings, her memories and the sight of her father's face. She listened, almost longingly, for some sign of the old man's presence—a movement, a cough, a footfall. In a little while he stirred, passed across the kitchen floor, and she heard the back door creak as he stepped out into the yard.

It seemed strange to her that one of his years should venture abroad so late. It was not his custom, and it might be that in the darkness—almost she was minded to go and look for him. But she could not tarry, for John—henceforth and forever her John—would be delayed and wondering.

She caught up the satchel and stepped out into the light of the stars. A light breeze stirred, and she started nervously. From the shadows of the apple trees great shapeless forms seemed to reach blindly and gropingly. A nameless dread assailed her, and she shut her teeth hard, and fled.

For a space she ran on breathlessly. Then she recovered herself, stopped and looked back. Suddenly she turned and held out her arms appealingly.

"Daddy!" she whispered, "Daddy!" Almost as though in answer, there was a footstep on the path, and a voice, low and subdued, broke the silence that encompassed her.

"Daughter!"—the girl almost screamed, the strain had been so great—"Is that you, Daughter?"

"Y-y-yes," she stammered. "Yes, Father." He came to her and took her gently in his arms. "He's down there, Beth," he whispered. "Right down by the spring. I went down a minute ago, an' I found him there. An'—an'—I've sent fer the preacher, Beth. I want you to be married at home!"