

Once in a while they hailed her. "See if there's anything for me, won't you Fidella?"

At last it was an understood thing that Fidella should carry the mail to the dozen families between her house and the post-office. She often had her black worked bag filled up with letters, but there was never one of her own. Fidella Almy never had a letter.

"That woman's been comin' here the last thirty years," the postmaster told a stranger one day, "an' she ain't never had a letter since I've been here, an' I don't believe she ever did before."

Fidella used to come in a little before the mail was distributed, and sit on an old settee near the door, waiting. Her face at those times had a wild, strained look; but after the letters were all in the boxes it settled back into its old expression, and she travelled away with her bag of other people's letters, nodding patiently.

On her route was one young girl who had a lover in a neighboring town. Her letters came regularly. She used to watch for Fidella, and run to meet her, her pretty face all blushes. Fidella always had the letter separated from the others, and ready for her. She always smiled when she held it out. "They keep a-comin'," she said one day, "an' there don't seem to be no end to it. But if I was you, Louisa, I'd try and git him to settle over here, if you ain't married before long. There's slips, an' it ain't always safe trustin' to letters."

The girl told her lover what Fidella had said, with tender laughter and happy pity. "Poor thing!" she said. "She had a beau, you know, Willy, and he went away thirty years ago, and ever since then she's been looking for a letter from him, and she's kind of cracked over it. And she's afraid it'll turn out the same way with me."

Then she and her sweetheart laughed together at the idea of this sad, foolish destiny for this pretty, courageous young thing.

To-day Fidella, with her black broadcloth bag, worked on one side with a wreath and the other with a bunch of flowers, walked slowly to the office and back. As the years went on she walked slower. This double journey of hers seemed to tire her more. Once in a while she would sit down and rest on the stone wall. The clumps of dusty way-side flowers, meadowsweet and tansy, stood around her over her head as the blue sky. But she clutched her black letter bag, and nodded her drooping head, and never looked up. Her sky was elsewhere.

When she came in sight of her own house, Lily, who was watching at the gate, came running to meet her.

"O Aunt Fidella," she said, "Aunt Sally's in there."

Did she take off her shoes an' let you brush 'em before she went in?"

"She wouldn't. She went right straight in. She jest laughed when I asked her to take her shoes off. An' Aunt Fidella, she's done something else. I couldn't help it."

"What?"

"She's been eatin' some of Mr. Lennox's plum-cake up. I couldn't stop her, Aunt Fidella. I told her she mustn't."

"You didn't say nothin' 'bout Mr. Lennox, did you?"

"No, I didn't, Aunt Fidella. Oh, did you get a letter?"

"No; I didn't much think I would to-day. Oh dear! there's Sally eatin' cake right in the front entry."

A stout old woman, with a piece of cake in her hand, stood in the front door as Fidella and Lily came up between the dahlias.

"How d'ye do, Fidella?" cried she, warmly.

"Pretty well, thank you. How do you do, Sally?" Fidella answered. She shook hands and looked at the other with a sort of meek uneasiness.

"Hain't you just as soon step out here whilst you're eatin' that cake?" asked she timidly.

"I've just swept the entry."

"No; I ain't goin' to step out there an' inch," said the other, mulling the cake vigorously between her old jaws. "If you ain't the worst old maid, Fidella! Ain't seen all the sister you've got in the world for a year, an' wantin' her to go out doors to eat a piece of cake. Hard work to git the cake, too."

"It don't make any difference," said Fidella. "I'm real kind o' used up every time I sweep nowadays, that's all."

"Better stop sweepin', then; there ain't no need of so much fussin'. It's more 'n half that's got your nerves out of kilter—sweepin' an' scrubbin' from mornin' till night, an' wantin' folks to take off their shoes before they come in, as if they was goin' into a heathen temple. Well, I ain't goin' to waste all my breath scoldin' when I've come over to see you. How air you now, Fidella?"

"I'm 'bout the same as ever," Fidella following her sister into the parlor, stooped shyly to pick up some crumbs which had fallen on the entry floor.

"Just as shaky, ain't you? Why, Fidella Almy, what in creation have you got this room rigged up so fur?"

"Rigged up how?"

"Why, everything covered up this way. What hev you got this old sheet over the carpet fur?"

"It was fadin' dreadfully."

"Fadin'? Good land! If you ain't got every chair sewed up in calico, an' the pictures in old piller-cases, an'—Fidella Almy, if you ain't got the solar lamp a-settin' in a little bag?"

"The gilt was gittin' real kind o' tarnished."

"Tarnished! An' every single thing on the table—the chiner card-basket and Mrs. Heman's Well, I've always heard tell that there was two kinds of old maids—old maids an' consarned old Why, what air you cuttin' on so fur?"

Fidella gathered up all her trembling meekness and weakness into a show of dignity. "Things are all fadin' and wearin' out, an' I want to keep 'em decent as long as I last. I ain't got no money to buy any more. I ain't got no husband nor sons to do for me, like you, an' I've got to take care of things if I hev anything. An'—I'm goin' to."

Her sister laughed. "Well, good land! I don't care. Cover up your things if you want to. There ain't no need of your gittin' riled. But this room does look eno'gh to make a cat laugh. All them flowers on the mantel, an' all those white things. I declare, Fidella Almy, it does look jest as if 'twas laid out. Well, we won't talk no more about it. I'm goin' out to hev a cup of tea. I put the teapot on, an' started the fire."

Poor Fidella had a distressing day with her visiting sister. All her prim household arrangements were examined and commented on. Not a closet nor bureau drawer escaped inspection. When the guest departed at length, the woman and the child looked at each other with relief.

"Ain't you glad she's gone?" asked Lily. She had been pink with indignation all day.

"Hush, child; you mustn't. She's my sister, an' I'm always glad to see her, if she is a little tryin' sometimes."

"She wanted you to take the covers off an' let the things git spoiled before Mr. Lennox comes, didn't she?"

"She don't know nothin' about that."

"Are you goin' to make another plumcake to-night, Aunt Fidella?"

"I don't know. I guess we'd better sweep first."

The two worked hard and late that night. They swept every inch of floor which that profane dusty Fidella's confidante, and she repaid her confidence could exceed her innocent trust in Fidella's pathetic story and pathetic hopes. That sad human experience was her fairy tale of childhood. That sweetheart for California thirty years ago, and promised falsely to write and return, was her fairy prince. Her bright imagination pictured him beautiful as a god.

"He was about as handsome a young man as you ever see," said poor Fidella. And a young Apollo towered up before Lily's credulous eyes. The lapse of thirty years affected the imagination of neither; but Lily used to look at her aunt reflectively sometimes.

"I wish you could have some medicine to make you stop shakin' before that handsome Mr. Lennox comes," she said once.

"I'm in hopes that medicine I'm takin' will stop it," said Fidella. "I think, mebbe, it's a little better now. I'm glad I thought to put that catnip in; it makes it a good deal more quietin'."

On the narrow ledge of shelf behind Fidella's kitchen sink stood always a blue quart bottle of medicine. She prepared it herself from roots and herbs. She experimented and added new ingredients, and swallowed it with a touching faith that it would cure her. Beside this bottle stood another of sage tea; that was for her hair. She used it plentifully every day in the hope that it would stop the grey hairs coming, and bring back the fine color. Fidella used to have pretty golden hair.

Lily teased her to make the sage tea stronger.

"You've been usin' it a dreadful long time, Aunt Fidella," said she, "an' your hair's jest as grey as 'twas before."

"Takes quite a long time before you can see any difference," said Fidella.

Many a summer morning, when the dew was heavy, she and Lily used to steal out early and bathe their faces in it. Fidella said it would make people rosy and keep away the wrinkles.

"It works better on me than it does on you, don't it?" asked pink-and-white Lily, innocently once.

The two were out in the shining white field together. The morning lit up Lily as it did the flowers. Her eyes had lovely blue sparkles in them; her yellow hair, ruffled by the wind, glittered as radiantly between one and the light as the cobweb lines across the grasses. She looked wonderingly at her aunt, with her nodding grey head, plunging her little yellow hands into the dewy green things.

Those dull tints and white hairs and wrinkles showed forth so plainly in the clear light that even the child's charming faith was disturbed a little. Would the dew ever make this old creature pretty again?

But—"You can't expect it to work in minute," replied Fidella, cheerfully. And Lily was satisfied.

"I guess it'll work by the time Mr. Lennox comes," she said.

Fidella was always neat and trim in her appearance, her hair was always carefully arranged, and her shoes tidy; but summer and winter she wore one sort of gown—a purple calico. She had a fine black silk hung away in the closet upstairs. She had one or two good woollens, and some delicate cambrics. There was even one white muslin, with some lace in neck and sleeves, hanging there. But she never wore one of them. Her sister scolded her for it, and other people wondered. Fidella's

child-confidante alone knew the reason why. This poor, nodding, enchanted princess was saving her gay attire till the prince returned and the enchantment ceased, and she was beautiful again.

"You mustn't say nothin' about it," Fidella had said; "but I ain't goin' to put on them good dresses an' tag 'em right out. Mebbe the time'll come when I'll want 'em more."

"Mr. Lennox'll think that black silk dress is beautiful," said Lily, "an' that white muslin."

"I had that jest after he went away, an' I ain't never put it on. I thought I wouldn't; muslin don't look half so nice after the new look gits off it."

So Lily waited all through her childhood. She watched her aunt start forth on her daily pilgrimages to the post-office with the confident expectation that one of these days she would return with a letter from Mr. Lennox. She regarded that sacred loaf of plum cake which was always kept on hand, and believed that he might appear to dispose of it at any moment. She had the sincerest faith that the time was coming when the herb medicine would quiet poor Fidella's tremulous head, when the sage tea would turn all the grey hairs gold, and the dew would make her yellow, seamy cheeks smooth and rosy, when she would put on that magnificent black silk or that dainty girlish muslin, and sit in the parlor with Mr. Lennox, and have the covers off the chairs and the mantel-piece blooming with flowers.

So the child and the woman lived happily with their beautiful chimera, until gradually he vanished into thin air for one of them.

Lily could not have told when the conviction first seized her that Mr. Lennox would never write, would never come; that Aunt Fidella's grey hair would never turn gold, nor her faded cheeks be rosy; that her nodding head would nod until she was dead.

It was hardly until she was a woman herself, and had a lover of her own. It is possible that he gave her the final overthrow to her faith, that it had not entirely vanished before. She told him all about Mr. Lennox. She scarcely looked upon it as a secret to be kept now. She had ascertained that many people were acquainted with Fidella Almy's poor romance, except in its minor details.

So Lily told her lover. "Good Lord!" he said. "How long is it since he went?"

"Forty years now," said Lily. They were walking home from meeting one Sunday night.

"Forty years! Why, there ain't any more chance of hearing anything from him—Did he have any folks here?"

"No. He was a clerk in a store here. He fell in love with Aunt Fidella, and went off to California to get some more money before he got married."

"Didn't anybody ever hear anything from him?"

"Aunt Fidella always said not; but Aunt Sally told me once that she knew well enough that he got married out there right after he went away; she said she heard it pretty straight. She never had any patience with Aunt Fidella. If she'd known half the things—Poor Aunt Fidella! She's gettin' worse lately. She goes to the post-office Sundays. I can't stop her. Every single Sunday, before meeting, don't she go."

"Why, she can't get in."

"I know; she just tries the door and comes back again."

"Why, dear, she's crazy, ain't she?"

"No, she ain't crazy; she's rational enough about everything else. All the way I can see it is, she's been pointed one way all her life, and going one way, and now she's getting nearer the end of the road, she's pointed sharper and she's going faster. She's had a hard time. I'm going to do all I can for her, anyhow. I'll help her get ready for Mr. Lennox as long as she lives."

Fidella took great delight in Lily's love affair. All that seemed to trouble her was the suspicion that the young man might leave town and the pair be brought to letter-writing.

"You mind, Lily," she would say, "don't you let Valentine settle anywhere else before you're married. If you do, you'll have to come to writin' letters, an' letters ain't to be depended on. There's sips. You'd get sick of waitin' the way I have. I ain't minded it much; but you're young, an' it would be different."

When Valentine Rowe did find employment in a town fifty miles away, poor Fidella seemed to have taken upon herself a double burden of suspense.

In those days she was much too early for the mails, and waited, breathless, in the office for home radiant; she seemed to forget her own disappointment.

Lily's letters came regularly for a long time. Valentine came to see her occasionally, too. Then, one day, when Lily expected a letter, it did not come.

Her aunt dragged herself home feebly. "It ain't come, Lily," said she. "The trouble's begun. You, poor child, how air you goin' to go through with it?"

Lily laughed. "Why, Aunt Fidella!" said she, "what are you worrying for? I haven't missed a could't write Sunday, that's all. It don't trouble me a mite."

However, even Lily was troubled at length. Weeks went by, and no letter came from Valentine Rowe. Fidella tottered home despondent day after day. The girl had a brave heart, but she began to shudder, watching her. She felt as if she were looking into her own destiny.

"I'm going to write to Valentine," she said suddenly, one day, after Fidella had returned from her bootless journey.