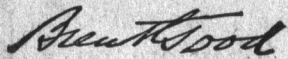


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Old Hagar's Secret...

By Mrs. M. J. Holmes...

An audible groan from the depths of the satin hood, as Betsy Jane passed out and the cars passed on, showed plainly that the mother and sister of George Douglas were recognized, particularly as the former wore the red and yellow calico, which, having been used as a "dress up" the summer before, now did its own service as a garment of every day wear. But not long did Madam Conway suffer her mind to dwell upon matters so trivial. Hilda was not far away, and she came each moment nearer. Two more stations were reached—the haunted swamp was passed—Chicopee River was in sight—the bridge appeared in view—the whistle sounded, and she was there.

Half an hour later, and Theo, looking from her window, started in surprise as she saw the village omnibus drive up to their door.

"Tis grandmother!" she cried, and running to meet her, she asked why she had returned so soon. "They are coming at noon," answered the excited woman; then, hurrying into the house, and throwing off her hood, she continued, "He found her at the Falls; they are between here and Albany now; tell everybody to hurry as fast as they can; tell Hannah to make a chicken pie—Maggie was fond of that; and turkey—tell her to kill a turkey—it's Maggie's favorite dish—and ice cream, too! I wish I had some this minute," and she wiped the perspiration from her burning face.

No more hysterics now; no more lonesome nights; no more thoughts of death—for Margaret was coming home—the best-loved of them all. Joyfully the servants told to each other the glad news, disbelieving entirely the report fast gaining circulation that the queenly Maggie was lovingly born—a grandchild of old Hagar. Up and down the stairs Madam Conway ran, fitting room to room and tarrying longest in that of Margaret, where the sunlight came in softly through the half-closed blinds and the fair summer blossoms smiled a welcome for the expected one.

Suddenly the noontide stillness was broken by a sound, deafening and shrill on ordinary occasions, but falling now like music on Madam Conway's ear, for by that sound she knew that Margaret was near. Wearily went the half hour by, and then, from the head of the tower stairs, Theo cried out, "She's coming!" while the grandmother buried her face in the pillows of the lounge, and asked to be alone when she took back to her bosom the child which was not hers.

Earnestly, as if to read the inmost soul, each looked into the other's eyes—Margaret and Theo—and while the voice of the latter was choked with tears, she wound her arms around the graceful neck, which bent to the caress, and whispered low, "You are my sister still."

Against the vine-wreathed balustrade a fairy form was leaning, holding back her breath lest she should break the deep silence of that meeting. In her bosom there was no pang of fear lest Theo should be loved the best; and even had there been, it could not surely have remained, for stretching out her arm, Margaret drew her to her side, and placing her hand in that of Theo, said, "You are both my sisters now," while Arthur Carrollton bending down, kissed the lips of the three, saying as he did so, "Thus do I acknowledge your relationship to me."

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FAINT AND DIZZY SPELLS.

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"Why don't she come," the waiting Madam Conway sighed, just as Theo, pointing to the open door, bade Margaret "go in."

There was a blur before the lady's eyes—a buzzing in her ears—and the footfall she had listened for so long was now unheard as it came slowly to her side. But the light touch upon her arm—the well-remembered voice within her ear, calling her "Madam Conway," sent through her an electric thrill, and starting up she caught the wanderer in her arms, crying imploringly, "Not that name. Maggie darling; call me grandma, as you used to do—call me grandma still," and smoothing back the long black tresses, she looked to see if grief had left its impress upon her fair young face. It was paler now, and thinner, too, than it was wont to be, and while her tears fell fast upon it, Madam Conway whispered, "You have suffered much, my child, and so have I. Why did you go away? Say, Margaret, why did you leave me all alone?"

"To learn how much you loved me," answered Margaret, to whom this moment brought happiness second only to that which she had felt when on the river bank she sat with Arthur Carrollton, and heard him tell how much she had been mourning without her—and how sad were all their hearts.

But that was over now; no more sadness—no more tears, the lost one had returned; Margaret was home again—home in the hearts of all, and nothing could dislodge her—not even the story of her birth, which Arthur Carrollton, spurning at further deception, told to the listening servants, who, having always respected old Hagar for her position in the household as well as for her education, so superior to their own, sent up a deafening shout, first for "Hagar's grandchild," and next for "Miss Margaret forever."

CHAPTER XXV.

By Theo's request, old Hagar had been taken home the day before, yielding submissively, for her frenzied mood was over—her strength was gone—her life was nearly spent—and Hagar did not wish to live. That for which she had sinned had been accomplished, and though it had cost her days and nights of anguish, she was satisfied at last. Margaret was coming home again—would be a lady still—the bride would be Arthur Carrollton, for George Douglas had told her so, and she was willing now to die, but not until she had seen her once again—had looked into the beautiful face of which she had been so proud.

Not to-day, however, does she expect her; and just as the sun was setting, the sun which shines on Margaret at home, she falls away to sleep. It was now this hour that Margaret was wont to visit her, and now, as the treetops grew red in the day's departing glory, a graceful form came down the woodland path, where for many weeks the grass had not been crushed beneath her feet. They saw her as she left the house, Madam Conway, Theo, all, but none asked whether she was going. They knew, and one, who loved her best of all, followed slowly after, waiting in the woods until that interview should end.

Hagar lay calmly sleeping. The servant was, as usual, away, and there was no eye watching Margaret as with burning cheeks and beating heart she crossed the threshold of the door, passing not, until the bed was reached—the bed where Hagar lay, her crippled hands folded meekly upon her breast, her white hair shading a whiter face, and a look about her half-shut mouth, as if the thin pale lips had been much used of late to breathe the word "forgive."

Maggie had never seen her thus before, and the worn-out, aged face, had something touching in its sad expression, and something startling, too, bidding her hasten, if to that woman she would speak.

"Hagar," she essayed to say, but the word died on her lips, for standing there alone, with the daylight fading from the earth, and the life light fading from the form before her, it seemed not meet that she should thus address the sleeper.

There was a name, however, by which she called another—a name of love, and it would make the withered heart of Hagar Warren bound, and beat, and throb with untold joy.

And Margaret said that name at last, whispering it first softly to herself, then bending down so that her breath stirred the snow-white hair, she repeated it aloud, starting involuntarily as the rude walls echoed back the name "Grandmother!"

"Grandmother!" Through the sashes locked in sleep it penetrated, and the dim eyes, once so fiery and black, grew large and bright again, as Hagar Warren woke.

Was it a delusion, that beautiful form which met her view, that soft hand on her brow, or was it Maggie Miller?

"Grandmother," the low voice said again. "I am Maggie, Hester's child. Can you see me? Do you know that I am here?"

Yes, through the films of age, through the flimsy of coming death, and through the gathering darkness, old Hagar saw and knew, and with a scream of joy, her shrunken arms wound themselves convulsively around the maiden's neck, drawing her near, and nearer still, until the shrivelled lips touched the cheek of her who did not turn away, but returned that kiss of love.

"Say it again, say that word once more," and the arms closed tighter round the form of Margaret, who breathed it yet again, while the childish woman sobbed aloud: "It is sweeter than the angels' song, to hear you call me so."

She did not ask her when she came—she did not ask her where she had been; but Maggie told her all, sitting by her side with the poor hands clasped in her own; then, as the twilight shadows deepened in the room, she struck a light, and coming near to Hagar, said, "Am I much like my mother?"

"Yes, yes, only more winsome," was the answer, and the half-blind eyes looked proudly at the beautiful girl bending over the humble pillow.

"Do you know that?" Maggie asked, holding to view the ambrotype of Hester Hamilton.

For an instant Hagar wavered, then hugging the picture to her bosom, she laughed and cried together, whispering as she did so, "My little girl, my Hester, my baby that I used to sing to sleep, in our home away over the sea."

Hagar's mind was wandering amid the scenes of bygone years, but it soon came back again to the present time, and she asked of Margaret whence that picture came. In a few words, Maggie told her, and then for a time there was silence, which was broken at last by Hagar's voice, weaker now than when she spoke before.

"Maggie," she said, "what of this Arthur Carrollton? Will he make you his bride?"

"He has so promised," answered Maggie. Hagar continued: "He will take you to England, and you will be a lady, sure. Margaret, listen to me. 'Tis the last time we shall ever talk together, you and I, and I am glad that it is so. I have greatly sinned, but I have been forgiven, and I am willing now to die. Everything I wished for has come to me, even the hearing you call me that blessed name; but, Maggie, when to-morrow they say that I am dead—when you come down to look upon me lying here asleep—you needn't call me 'Grandmother'; you may say 'poor Hagar,' with the rest. And, Maggie, it is too much to ask that your own hands will arrange my hair, fix my cap, and straighten my poor crooked limbs for the coffin? And if I should look decent, will you when nobody sees you do it—Madam Conway, Arthur Carrollton, nobody who is proud will you, Maggie, kiss me once for the sake of what I've suffered that you might be what you are?"

"Yes, yes, I will," was Maggie's answer, her tears falling fast, and a fear creeping into her heart, as by the dim candle light she saw a nameless shadow settling down on Hagar's face.

The servant entered at this moment, and glancing at old Hagar, sunk into a chair, for she knew that shadow was death.

"Maggie," and the voice was now a whisper, "I wish I could once more see this Mr. Carrollton. 'Tis the nature of his kin to be sometimes overbearing, and though I am only old Hagar Warren, he might heed my dying words, and be more thoughtful of your happiness. Do you think that he would come?"

(To Be Continued.)

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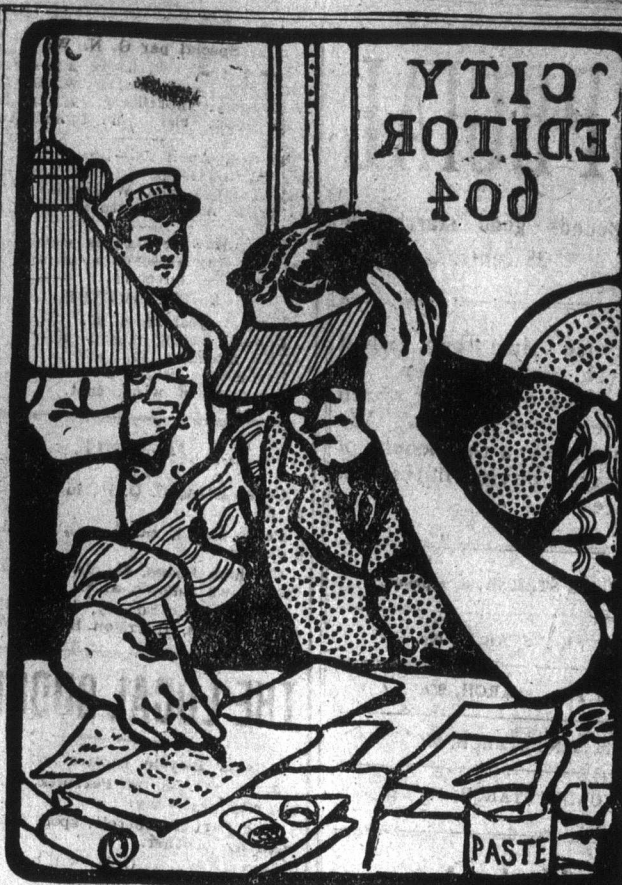
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