

"Do you know, my friend, I had said each day to myself, 'It will be a good day for you, Paul, when you are in Paris absorbed in your art, and have forgotten all about this girl; yes, it will be a good day for you, and you will be glad when it comes,' and it was now already so near at hand and I was sorry. Yes, my friend, when I stood that evening for the last time in the little studio where she had so often sat; when I remembered her pretty ways, her many little graces, the pleasant good fellowship, with which she had so many times related to me her little store of village news; I felt more than sorry; I felt a great dread of the darkness that would be mine, when the bright little ray of sunlight, which had crept so graciously into my life, should die out of it forever.

"In looking over my sketches I found one which could scarcely be called completed, and had just sat down to put a few finishing touches upon it, when I heard a timid little knock at my studio door. Indeed it was so faint that I was not quite sure I had not been mistaken. It was repeated, however, and I called out 'Come in.'

"The door opened slowly and a slight little figure in a very familiar dark red gown slipped noiselessly into the room. It was certainly Winnie; there couldn't be any mistake about that, though I could hardly believe it. As she stood there a few steps from the door, her cheeks were very red and her eyes were cast down upon the floor.

"What could it mean?

"I said nothing, but turned to my easel and continued touching up my sketch.

"Presently a very tremulous little voice said slowly: 'Aren't you going to speak to me, Paul?'

"Yes, Winnie; won't you come over here and sit down?"

"She came slowly over and seated herself in a large arm chair close to my easel.

"Now, Winnie," I said, "something is the matter; what is it? You will tell me all about it, won't you? You know you said once before, that it always did you good to tell someone when you were in trouble; won't you tell me this time?"

"The tears had begun to roll slowly one by one down her cheeks, and it was a very choked little voice that spoke as she said:

"Oh, Paul. I have been so miserable, so very miserable, ever since that day in the field. I was so unkind to you, and any other girl would have been glad to know you liked her. Oh, I shall never forgive myself; no, I know I never shall."

"Her voice was choked with sobs, and the tears were rolling rapidly down her face.

"I said soothingly: 'Poor little Winnie; it wasn't your fault at all; it was my fault; but she interrupted me.

"No, it wasn't your fault a bit; it was all my fault, and the next day I felt so sorry, oh, so sorry, about it all, and I was going to ask you to forgive me, but when I came home you were gone, and I thought my heart would die. Then I counted each day until you would come back again so I could tell you, and when you came you were so angry with me that I couldn't, but to-day when you said you were going away for good, I knew I couldn't bear it any longer; oh, Paul. I am so sorry, so very sorry."

"She ceased speaking, and sat pulling nervously at her handkerchief, which was wet with her tears.

"Winnie," I said, "I was never angry with you; I thought you didn't want to see me, that was all."

"But I never said I didn't want to see you, did I?"

"No, perhaps not, but I thought so, and then I added slowly,

"Did you want to see me, Winnie?"

"She was silent for a moment; her fingers still continued to work nervously with her handkerchief; her eyes were cast down upon the floor, and her cheeks, which had become pale, during her fit of crying, became slowly very red again. Her voice was almost a whisper when she spoke, but it was a whisper which I would have given my life rather than lose as she said:

"Yes, Paul, I think I did."

"We sat in silence for some moments, and then I spoke.

"Winnie, I wanted to tell you something that day in the field, but you wouldn't let me; may I tell you now?"

"A little nod was her only reply, and I continued:

"It was this, Winnie: I wanted to tell you that I thought you were the dearest little girl in all the world, and that I loved you most. Winnie, I still love you most. I know I am not worth liking by any girl, and least of all by you; but if you do like me, even if it be only just a little better than any one else, I wish you would tell me so; I wish it very much. Do you Winnie?"

"She hesitated a moment, and then said:

"I don't know, Paul; I like you as well as any one."

"Then she added dubiously:

"Don't you think it would do if I said I would try to like you best?"

"No, Winnie," I answered, "I wouldn't ask you to do that; it wouldn't be for your own good to do it. Perhaps you haven't thought of this enough; would you rather wait until to-morrow night before you tell me?"

"Yes, Paul," she said eagerly, "I would rather wait; I think I would know better then."

"Very well, Winnie," I replied, "it shall be as you wish, and I shall expect to see you again to-morrow."

"She rose without replying, and walked slowly over to the door; when she had reached it, however, she stood for a moment as if still in doubt about something, and then turning again towards me said:

"And you are quite sure, Paul, that you won't go to-morrow."

"No, Winnie," I answered, "I will never go if you tell me to stay."

"A bright little smile broke over her face, lighting it up as I had so often seen it before.

"She said quietly, 'You are very good to me, Paul; good night,' and before I could reply she was gone."

At this point in his narrative, the old man paused for a few moments and then said:

"No doubt, my friend, you think I might well spare you the weariness of listening to all these details, but I feel sure you will forgive me, when I again remind you that these were almost the only happy days that I have known."

When he had said this he again resumed his narration.

"My friend," he continued, "every woman born into this world has it in her power to be either the sunlight or the shadow in some man's life, and what Winnie was to be in mine this day should decide. I thought the day never would pass; it dragged along so slowly. At length, however, I found myself again seated in my studio, and this time I was waiting anxiously for that timid little knock, which had so nearly escaped me on the previous evening, and which I felt sure I would hear before long.

"At last it came, and I called out:

"Come in, Winnie."

"She entered, and without once looking at me, walked slowly over to the arm chair, and resting her arm upon the back, remained stationary beside it.

"Well, Winnie," I said, "what are you going to do with me; am I to go or stay?"

"I waited for a few moments, but she still remained silent, so I continued. 'Winnie, you said you would tell me to-night if you liked me a little better than anyone else; do you, Winnie?'

"While I was speaking her eyes remained cast upon the floor, and when I had finished I saw that the little white crucifix, which hung down upon her bosom, was rising and falling very rapidly. She was still silent for a moment, and then, raising her eyes to mine, she said slowly:

"Yes, Paul, I love you most."

"I arose, and walked over to where she was standing, took her hand in my own, and said:

"Winnie, you are good, very good to me, and I never felt so much how unworthy of it all I am until now; but I will try and be better; I will try very hard."

"She said nothing, and I continued.

"Winnie, if I should ask you to kiss me now, would you?"

"She hesitated for a moment, and then broke out impulsively:

"Oh, Paul, it is awful the way you own me; I think if you told me to do anything, I would do it."

"Yes," I said, "that is because you love me, Winnie; but listen, I am not going to ask you to kiss me, because I don't think I have any right to until I have first asked you to marry me. You are too young for that yet, and even if you were older, I couldn't do so while I am only a student. Do you understand me, Winnie?"

"She nodded her head, and I continued.

"But some day I will come and ask you, and when that day comes, Winnie, what will you say?"

"It was a very low little voice that spoke as she answered:

"I think I will say, yes, Paul."

"Don't you know it, Winnie?" I questioned.

"No, Paul; we don't any of us know what is in the future, but I feel very sure it will be yes."

"I must go now," she continued, "I am afraid it is already quite late, but we understand each other now, don't we, Paul?"

"I think we do, Winnie," I replied, "and if anything comes that you don't understand, you will ask me about it, won't you?"

"Yes, Paul; good night."

"Good night, Winnie," and she had passed through the doorway and gone upstairs.

"The next day after dinner, while we still lingered at the table, my aunt mentioned my proposed journey, and said:

"I thought you were going to leave us, Paul?"

"Yes, Aunt Hilda," I replied, "I had intended going, but I have now altered my purpose for the present."

"As I said this my aunt quickly glanced from me over to Winnie. Poor Winnie, she could not encounter my aunt's look, and dropped her eyes to the table, while a guilty flush slowly dyed her cheeks.

"Aunt Hilda did not seem surprised, but quickly remarked:

"You have done nothing to be ashamed of, Winnie; if your mother had lived, I think she would have wished so."

"I arose, and going round the table to where my aunt sat, kissed her affectionately, and then left them alone together.

"Ah, my friend, I could easily relate to you each little incident that helped to spend all too quickly the happy days that followed, but this I must not do lest I should weary you. No, my friend, I will now be content to draw my village history to a close.

"I rarely went out sketching during those days, without asking Winnie to accompany me, and as she was such an earnest little pleader, her aunt was usually won over to give her consent. I mention this because it was upon one of these occasions that some events of a former day were re-enacted, and this time had a happier termination. I had been sitting some time at my easel engaged in

sketching, when she again came running over to where I sat, holding up a daisy in her hand, and offering it to me as she had done before. I knew this time what she wanted me to do with it, but I only said,

"What can be the use of pulling it now, Winnie, it won't be any good, will it?"

"Oh, but you must pull it if I want you to; besides, if you had pulled it before perhaps it would have told you different from what you thought, and—and saved us all that trouble."

"Well," I replied, "I suppose if you say must, it means must, so let me have it, and I began to slowly pull the petals."

"She loves me, loves me not; she loves me, loves me not."

"Oh, Winnie," I exclaimed, with feigned horror, "she doesn't love me; what shall I do?"

"She was a very dubious little maid for a moment, as she said slowly, 'Oh, well, I suppose it couldn't really make any difference now,' and then, as though recollecting something, her face brightened up, and breaking into a smile, she added gaily, 'Why, of course it couldn't make any difference now, because we know she does, don't we, Paul?'

"Ah, Winnie," I said, "I think I could paint great pictures some day, if I always had you near."

"The next Sunday was the one which I had decided should be my last in the village. I had not yet informed Winnie of my intended departure, because I knew her too well to think for a moment that she would wish me to stay, when she knew that it was best for me to go, and besides, I did not wish her to be unhappy in knowing its approach, for a longer time than was really necessary. I remember well that Sunday, how we all went to the little village church together, and how beautiful I thought Winnie looked, as she sang in the anthem with the little choir. Ah, my friend, I will never forget it. And I will always remember, how as I joined her afterwards, she put on such a contrite look and said:

"Oh, Paul, I felt so very wicked all through the service that it didn't do me any good; no, not a bit."

"Why, Winnie, I watched you a great deal, and you always looked good."

"Ah," she replied, "that was it; it was because you were looking at me that I felt so wicked."

"Well," I replied, "it may perhaps have been wrong for me to look at you so much instead of at the minister, but really, Winnie, I can't see how it could possibly be wrong in you also."

"Oh, yes, it was; it was wicked for me too, very wicked; because, you see, I couldn't help thinking all the time how sorry I would be if you didn't look. You won't do it any more, will you, Paul?"

"No, not if you feel so very wicked about it, but then, of course I may look at you sometimes; I couldn't help that you know. How often may I look, Winnie?"

"Well," she said reflectively, "let me see," and she began counting them off on her fingers; "there would be once after the hymns—just once, mind—and that's one; and once after the prayer, that's two; and once after scriptures, and once after the sermon, and then once after the hymn again, and that's all."

"After a moment's pause, she continued.

"Oh, Paul, that's too many; it is five times, and I feel sure five is too many. No, we must go over it again. It must be only once after the prayer, and then once each after the hymn, the anthem, the scriptures, and the last hymn. Now, how many is that?"

"That is five Winnie," I said, laughing.

"She stood for a moment in grave doubt, and then said slowly:

"Well, I am afraid it can't be helped; there doesn't seem to be one we could leave out, does there, Paul?"

"And so her conscience was at rest for a little while, though it was easy to predict that it wouldn't remain so very long, for a busier little conscience I never knew."

"It was on this same Sunday in the evening, as we sat together before the fire in my aunt's sitting-room, that I first told her of my intention to return to Paris. We had been sitting for some time without speaking, when I said gently:

"Winnie, you wouldn't want me to do anything if you knew it wouldn't be for my good, would you?"

"She looked up quickly with a startled expression upon her face, as though she apprehended something, and said:

"No, Paul, you know I wouldn't; but why do you ask? What is it that you are going to do?"

"Don't you remember the first evening that we met each other, Winnie, how you said you thought I should have stayed in Paris and painted a better picture, that would not fail? Well, I am going back to Paris to paint that better picture, and I feel sure it won't fail this time, because I have a new inspiration now."

"The tears slowly gathered in her eyes, as she sat looking into the fire after I had finished speaking, and presently she broke out impulsively:

"Oh, Paul, I am sorry I ever said that!" Then, after hesitating a moment, she brushed away the tears, and looking into my face said:

"No, Paul, I was wrong; I am not sorry I said it. It was right for me to say it, and it is far better that you should become a great artist than that I should always have you with me. Yes, it is far better, Paul, and I am glad you are going."

The old man had been gazing steadily into the fire all