

A Golden Sorrow.

Oh, mother mine, I brought my sorrow sore And laid it at thy feet, and in that hour...

ZEKI.

Matt Crin, in Century Magazine for September.

He lived alone in a weather-beaten log cabin built on the roadside at the edge of a rocky, sterile field...

But Zeki Morgan's ambition seemed satisfied when he came into possession of the house, the unproductive clearing around it, and the narrow strip of woodland bounding the richer farm beyond.

Very little of Zeki's past history was known in Zion Hill settlement. He had walked into Mr. Davy Tanner's store one spring day, a dusty, penniless tramp...

"I tell you this, not because I think it's anything to boast of, but because I don't want to 'pear like I'm deceivin' folks," he said in a dejected, melancholy tone...

Mr. Davy Tanner was postmaster as well as merchant, and his store was the general rendezvous for the settlement. The women came to buy snuff, and thread, and such cheap, simple materials as they needed for Sunday clothes...

They looked on Zeki Morgan with distrust and contempt, and held coldly aloof from him. But at last a farmer, sorely in need of help, ventured to hire him, after talking it over with Mr. Davy Tanner.

"I tell you there ain't a mite o' harm in him."

"I'll stand for him if he does," said Mr. Davy Tanner, firmly. "I don't know any more 'n you about him, but I'm willin' to trust him."

"That's the way you treat most o' the folks that come about you," said his neighbor, smiling.

All the year Zeki filled a hireling's place, working faithfully; but the next year he bought a steer, a few sticks of furniture, and, renting the cabin and rocky hillside from Mr. Davy Tanner, set up housekeeping, a yellow cur and an old violin his companions.

As the years passed openly expressed distrust and prejudice died out, though he was never admitted to the inner life of the settlement. He did not seem to expect it, going his way quietly, and ever maintaining an impenetrable reserve about his own private history.

But he seemed a kindly natured man, with a vein of irrepresible sociability running through him, in spite of his solitary ways of life. There were glimpses of humor occasionally, and had it not been for that cloud of shame hanging forbiddingly over him, he would have become a favorite with his neighbors.

Across the road, opposite his house, he set up a small blacksmith shop, and much of his idle time he spent in there,

mending broken tools, sharpening dull plows, hammering patiently on the ringing red-hot iron. The smallest, simplest piece of work received the most careful attention, and the farmers recognized and appreciated his conscientiousness.

"Good evenin', Zeki," said the man, mounting to the top of the fence, and sitting with his heels thrust through a crack in the lower rails.

"Howdy you do, Marshall? What's the news down your way?" Zeki inquired, drawing his shirt-sleeve across his face, and leaning on the plow-handles.

"I don't know as there's much to tell. Billy Hutchins an' Sally Ann McNally run away an' got married last night, an' old Miss Gillis is mighty high dead with the ja'nders. A punkin couldn't look yelliner." He opened his knife, and ran his fingers along the rail in search of a splinter to whittle.

"Yes, I met him down at the store, an' he said the trade had been made."

"Well, old Georgy is good enough for me," Zeki remarked, with a pleased glance at his sterile fields.

"An' for me," said Marshall, heartily. "Wanderin' round don't make folks rich. Biggers owns the best place in this settlement, an' he'd better stay on it. It won't do to believe all the tales they tell about these new States. I had a brother to go to Louisiana before the war. Folks said: 'Don't take anything with you; why, money might nigh grow on bushes out there. His wife took the greatest pride in her feather beds, but what would be the use o' haulin' them beds all the way across the Mississippi, when you could rake up feathers by the bushel anywhere?'"

"Well, they went, an' for the whole durin' time they stayed they had to sleep on moss mattresses. An' my brother fowed it was about the meanest stuff to hill he ever struck. If you didn't bill it, an' hang it, an' do the Lord only knows what it, it would grow an' burst out of the beds when you were sleepin' on them."

Zeki's attention did not follow those reminiscent remarks. "Who bought the Biggers' place?" he inquired, as soon as Marshall ceased speaking.

"A man he met in Atlanta when he went down the last time, a man from one of the lower counties, an' his name—why, yes, to be surh, it's Morgan, same as yours—Lijy Morgan. Maybe you know him?" with a sharp, questioning glance.

But the momentary flush of emotion that the stranger's name had called to Zeki's face was gone.

"I don't know as I do," he slowly replied, staring at a scrubby cotton-stalk the muzzled ox was making ineffectual attempts to eat.

"I fowed may be he might be some kin to you," said Marshall, in a baffled tone.

"I don't know as he is," said Zeki, still in that slow, dry, non-committal tone, his eyes leaving the cotton-stalk to follow the swift, noiseless flight of a cloud-shadow across a distant hill-side.

"Morgan isn't an uncommon name, you know."

"That's so," reluctantly admitted Marshall.

"When does Mr. Biggers think o' goin' to Texas?"

"Oh, not until after crops are gathered."

"The other family isn't to come then right away?"

"No; not till fall."

After Marshall had whittled, and gossiped, and gone his way, Zeki stood a long time with his hands resting on the plow-handles, his brows drawn together in deep thought. Some painful struggle seemed to be going on.

The crickets chirred loudly in the brown sedge bordering a dry ditch, and a vulture sailed majestically round and round above the field, his broad black wings outspread on the quivering air. The cloud shadows on the river-hills assumed new form, shifted, swept away, and others came in their places, and the vulture had become a more speck, a floating mote in the upper sunlight, before he turned the patient ox into another furrow, murmuring aloud:

"I didn't go to them, an' if they come to me, I can't help it. I am not to blame; the Almighty knows I'm not to blame," and his overcast face cleared somewhat.

That night when Mr. Davy Tanner closed his store and went home he said to his wife:

"Zeki Morgan must be lonesome, or pestered about somethin'. You'd think that old fiddle o' his could talk an' cry too from the way he's playin'."

The season advanced; crops were gathered, and the shorn field looked brown and bare. A serene, withering frost touched the forests, and the leaves fell in drifts, while the partridge called to his mate from the fence and soddy court. A light snowfall lay on the distant mountains when the Biggerses started to the West and the new family of Morgans moved into Zion Hill settlement.

It was the third day after their arrival. Zeki leaned over the front gate with an armful of corn, feeding two fat pigs, when Lijy Morgan passed along the road on his way to Mr. Davy Tanner's store. He was a strong-looking, well-built man, with rugged features and hair partly gray.

He looked curiously at the solitary, stooping figure inside the gate, his steps slackened, then he stopped altogether,

a grayish pallor overspreading the healthy, ruddy hue of his face.

"Zeki!" Zeki dropped the corn, and thrust open the gate.

"Howdy you do, Lijy?" Their hands met in a quick, close grip, then fell apart.

"I like not to have known you, Zeki, it was so unexpected seein' you here," said Lijy, huskily, scanning the worn, deeply lined face before him with glad yet shrinking gaze.

"An' twelve years make a great difference in our looks sometimes, though you are not so much changed," said Zeki, quietly. He had been prepared for the meeting, and years of self-mastery had given him the power of concealing emotion.

"Twelve years? Yes; but it has seemed like twenty to me since—since it all happened. Why didn't you come home, Zeki, when your time was out?"

"I fowed the sight o' me would'n't be good for you, Lijy; an'—an' the old folks were gone."

"Yes; it killed them, Zeki, it killed them," in a choked voice.

"I know," said Zeki, hastily, his face blanching; "an' I thought it would be best to make a new start in a new settlement."

"Do the folks here know?"

"That I served my time? Yes; but that's all. When I heard that you had bought the Biggers' place I studied hard about movin' away, but I like it here. It's beginnin' to seem like home."

Lijy stared at the poor cabin, the stunted, naked peach trees, so cold and dreary-looking in the wintry dusk.

"Is it yours, Zeki?"

"Yes; it's mine, all mine. Come in and sit awhile with me, an' warm. It's goin' to be a nippin' cold night."

He turned, and Lijy silently followed him across the bare yard and into the house. A flickering fire sent its warm glow throughout the room, touching its meager furnishing with softening grace, but a chill struck to Lijy Morgan's heart as he crossed the threshold, a chill of desolation.

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes; all alone, except Rover and the fiddle."

The cur rose up from the hearth with a wag of his stumpy tail, and gave the visitor a glance of welcome from his mild, friendly eyes.

There were only two chairs in the room, and Zeki placed the best one before the fire for his guest, then threw on some fresh pieces of wood. Outside the dusky twilight deepened to night, and the stars shined brilliantly through the clear atmosphere. The chill wind whistled around the chimney-corners and through the chinks in the long walls.

Between the men a constrained silence fell. The meeting had been painful beyond the open acknowledgment of either. The dog crept to his master's side and thrust his nose into his hand. The touch roused Zeki.

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"Will you smoke, Lijy?"

"I believe not; but I'll take a chew."

He cut off a liberal mouthful, and then Zeki filled and lighted his pipe. It seemed to loosen his tongue somewhat.

"Is Martha Ann well enough?"

"She's tolerable."

"How many children have you?"

"Three; the girls, Cynthia an' Mary."

"I remember them."

"A little Zeki."

"Zeki's face flushed."

"Named him for me, Lijy?"

"Yes; for you. Cynthia's about grown now, an' a likely girl, I can tell you."

His face softened; his eyes grew bright with pride and tenderness as he spoke of his children. Zeki watched him, noting the change in his countenance, and, perhaps, feeling some pain and regret that he had missed such pleasure. Lijy reached out his hand and laid it on his knee.

"Zeki, you must come live with us now. I'll tell these folks we are brothers, an'—"

"I don't know as I would," said Zeki, gently. "It would only make talk, an' I'm settled here, you know."

His unimpassioned tone had its effect on his brother. He protested, but rather faintly, finally saying:

"Well, if you'd rather not."

"That's just it. I'd rather not."

They both rose, and Lijy groped uncertainly for his hat.

"Your life ain't worth much to you, Zeki. I know it ain't," with uncontrollable emotion.

"It's worth more'n you think, Lijy, more'n you think."

waited for you, till the supper was spoiled."

"I met a man I used to know," he said, evasively, casting a wistful, troubled glance towards the corner where Elizabeth, his wife's sister, sat knitting, a crutch lying at her side.

Cynthia, a rosy, merry-eyed girl, laughed.

"Pa is always meetin' a man he knows."

Mrs. Morgan began hastily removing the covered dishes from the hearth table.

"Well, where is the sugar you went over to the store to get?" she demanded with some irritation.

"I forgot it, Marthy, I'll go for it in the mornin'." In a confused, propitiatory tone.

She stared at him.

"I never! Forgot what you went after! You beatt! Lijy Morgan? you certainly do beat all."

"The man must 'a' sent your wits wood-gatherin', pa," cried Cynthia, jocosely.

Elizabeth leaned forward. Her face was long, thin, and pale, and the smooth hair framing it glittered like silver in the firelight; but her dark eyes were wonderfully soft and beautiful, and her mouth had chastened, tender lines about it.

"Are you sick, Lijy?" she inquired, in a gentle, subdued voice, a voice with much underlying, patient sweetness in it.

Morgan gave her a grateful look.

"No; but I don't think I care for any supper," he said slowly. "I'll step out an' see if the stock has all been fed."

When he returned Mrs. Morgan sat by the fire alone. He looked hastily about the room.

"Where is Cynthia?"

"Gone to bed."

"An' Elizabeth?"

"She's off too."

He drew a sigh of relief, and stirred the fire into a brighter blaze.

"Marthy Ann, it was Zeki I saw this evenin'."

She dropped the coarse garment she was mending.

"Hush! Yes; he lives up on the hill between here an' the store," and then he went on to tell her about their meeting and conversation. Her hard, sharp-featured face softened a little when he came to Zeki's refusal to live with them or to have their kinship acknowledged.

"I'm glad to see he's got that much consideration. We left the old place because folks couldn't forget how he'd disgraced himself; an' to come right where he is! I never heard of anything like it. Why didn't he leave the State if he wanted to save us more trouble?" wiping tears of vexation from her eyes. "You spent nearly all you had to get him out of prison, an' when he had to go to the penitentiary it killed his pa an' ma, an'—"

"Be silent, woman; you don't know what you are talkin' about," he said sternly, writhing in his chair like a creature in bodily pain. "God Almighty forgive me!" He paused, smote his knee with his open palm, and turned his face away.

"Well, if I don't know what I'm talkin' about, I'd like to know the reason," she cried with the same angry excitement. "You ain't been like the same man you were before that happened, you know you ain't. I'll never be willin' to claim kin with Zeki Morgan again, never. Folks may find it out for themselves; an' they'll do it soon enough, don't you be pestered, soon enough."

But not a suspicion of the truth seemed to occur to Zion Hill settlement. The Morgans were welcomed with great friendliness, and Zeki alone failed to visit them. Children sat around his brother's fireside, a wife ministered to him; but he had forfeited all claim to such heavenly joys. The girls had evidently been informed of his relationship to them, for they looked askance at him as they passed along the road, pity and curiosity in their eyes. Once he came out of the blacksmith shop, and, meeting his sister-in-law in the roadway, stopped her, or she would have passed with averted head.

"You needn't be so careful, Marthy Ann," he said, without the slightest touch of bitterness in his calm tone.

"It is for the children's sake, Zeki," she said, her sorrow face flushing with a feeling akin to shame. "I must think o' them."

He gave her a strange glance, then looked to the ground.

"I know; I thought o' them years ago."

"It's a pity you didn't think before—"

"Yes, so it is; but some deeds aren't to be accounted for, nor recalled either, no matter how deeply we repent."

"We sold out for the children's sake, but, Lord! I'm pestered now more than ever."

"Because I'm here?"

"Well, it is not reasonable to think we can all go right on livin' here an' folks not find out you an' Lijy are brothers."

"What would you like for me to do, Marthy Ann?"

She hesitated a moment, then drew a little nearer to him.

"Couldn't you go away? You've got nobody but yourself to think about, an' I know in reason Lijy would be glad to buy your place, with a careless, half-contemptuous glance at the cabin."

A dull flush passed over his face; his mouth twitched.

"Does Lijy want me to go?"

"He ain't said so; but—"

"I'll think about it," he said slowly, turning back to the smithy, where a red-hot tool awaited his hammer.

to the arid spot he called home. He had looked forward to spending all the remaining years of his broken, ruined life there, far from the world and from those who had known him in the past. Then a great desire had risen within him to remain near Elizabeth. He shrank from the thought of meeting her, speaking to her, and felt rather glad that she did not appear at church.

A few times in passing he had caught a glimpse of her walking about the yard or garden in the winter sunshine, leaning on her crutch, and the sight had sent him on his way with downcast face. He had just sat down before the fire to smoke one evening when there came a timid knock on the door. It was just between daylight and darkness, and he supposed it to be some neighbor on his way to or from the store who wished to drop in to warm himself and gossip a little.

"Come in," he said hospitably, and, reaching out, drew the other chair nearer the fire.

The latch was slowly lifted, the door swung open, and then he started to his feet, pipe and tobacco falling to the floor, while his face flushed and paled and his breath came in a sharp sigh. It was Elizabeth, her bonnet pushed back, her shawl hanging loosely around her shoulders.

"I've been to the store for Marthy Ann. I wanted to go to get out away from the house a little while, and I thought I'd step in for a minute, Zeki, to see you."

"You are tired; come an' sit down," he said huskily, and led her to the chair.

What emotion those simple, commonplace words covered! They looked at each other, silently noting the changes time and sorrow had wrought. They had never been openly declared lovers, but words were not needed for them to understand each other, and they knew that they would marry when she had finished her term as teacher in the county school, and he had built a house on the lot of land his father had given him. But that shameful, unadmitted accusation of horse-stealing, followed swiftly by trial and conviction, had put an end to all hopes, all plans.

"You see I'm a cripple now, Zeki," she said, to break the silence.

"An' I've grown old," he replied, and their eyes met again in a long, eloquent, steadfast gaze, and they knew that neither age, nor affliction, nor shame, nor separation had wrought any change in their love. It had only grown stronger and deeper. Her thin face flushed, her trembling fingers gathered up a fold of her gown.

"Why don't you come to see us, Zeki?"

"I can't, Elizabeth; I can't. It wouldn't be right. Don't you know I've been longin' to come, an' hungerin' for the floor at her feet, his face hidden against her knees. "You don't know all; you don't know all." The words were wrung from him by an almost uncontrollable desire to tell her the story of his sufferings. She had not turned against him nor forgotten him. It was almost more than he could bear, to read in her eyes her faith and her pardon. He felt the touch of her hand on his bare head, and tears gushed from his eyes.

"Can't you tell me?" she whispered, her face, her eyes, illumined by a pity and tenderness divine in their beauty.

"No, honey; it's somethin' I must bear alone, I must bear alone."

He rose to his feet again, brushing his sleeve across his eyes, and she stood up also, leaning on her crutch, the transient glow of color fading from her face.

"You shouldn't bear it alone if I didn't have this lameness. You—"

"Hush!" he said, and taking her hand, pressed it against his breast. "Make any difference? Wouldn't I love you all the more, take care o' you all the better for it? It's the disgrace, the shame, standin' between us. I'll never outlive it, get rid of it, an' I'll never ask any woman to share it. I couldn't."

Her physical infirmity held her silent. She would be a care and a burden to him rather than a help. She drew up her shawl.

"The Almighty comfort you, Zeki."

"An' take care o' you, Elizabeth."

He took her hand in a grasp painful in its closeness, then he turned and leaned against the mantel, and she went softly out of the room.

Winter passed. The frost-bound earth sent up faint scents and sounds of spring in fresh-plowed fields and swelling buds. Zeki wandered about his fields in idleness, striving to make up his mind to go away. It would be best, yet the sacrifice seemed cruel.

"It is more than I can bear," he cried aloud one night, and strained one of the violin-strings until it snapped asunder. He laid the instrument across his knees and leaned his head upon it. The candle burned dimly, and a bat flew in through the open door, circled around the room, at last extinguishing the feeble light with one of its outspread wings. But the unhappy man did not heed the gloom. Why should he care to have a light for his eyes when his soul was in such darkness? He groped his way to the bed, and fell down upon it. Rover came back from a nightly prow, barked to let his master know of his presence, then lay down on the doorstep.

The sound of music vibrated through the air, and Zeki remembered that the young people of the settlement were to have a "singing" at his brother's that evening. He raised his head and listened. They were singing hymns, and many of them were

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associated youth. ye discon ite was born Earth has lay And dush heating a smith sho open door "Will ing? I I'm a skil try." Zeki I forge sh brought form in b "Why walking "Yes; voice, Mi without n tion. They I had nev and less n his ragge He had e ing in vi impressed But a heart. I lessn' ment. C had been "Sit kindly, I forge to "That hungry a with you, Zeki ity grate "When quired. "Oh, just out." "Why be up in Miller "Yes; b escape th time to m He sat work. "You well," he scanning "Only Two dropped i another t stared c able com them that chum. Zeki the shop, house. down an good deal about the but at las on the b bench, r keeping When wa Grest wa