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HAWTHORNDEN

A STORY OF EVERY DAY LIFE

BY MRS. CLARA M. THOMPSON

CHAPTER XXII.—CONTINUED

"The physician was there before her, and with her mother had succeeded in bringing her out of a protracted attack of fainting. She opened her blue eyes and put out her hand eagerly to Mrs. Benton, as if she would be once more taken to her heart; then, with a motion of her right hand, expressed a wish to be alone with her friend.

"I must tell you," she whispered as Mrs. Benton stooped to her pillow, after all had retired, "I must tell you, I am going to die. I have felt the chill of death creeping over me for many weeks. I must see Father Sheridan. I have a great deal to do; I have put it off, not because I was undecided; my decision was made months since, but—"

"I may tell you, I was afraid my motives for baptism, which he urged so solemnly upon me, might be mingled with earthly love. Her thin, white hands covered her face as she continued, "You must tell him when I am gone, why I did not sooner listen to his earnest words for my soul's good. As she spoke, the tears came slowly dropping from her closed eyelids. "It was because I could not help it, indeed I could not. I may say it to you, my mother, she added, pressing to her lips the dear hand that now held hers; "he was so kind to me, taught me so sweetly, led me along so gently—indeed I could not help loving him—and it will do no harm now."

"My poor, dear child!" said Mrs. Benton, kissing her fondly, and parting her disordered locks. By the instinct which God had given the tender-hearted, she read the tale of unrequited love through these broken sentences; read the fact that Dr. Nelson had unwittingly won the young girl's affections, and her fond heart ached for the sufferer. The countenance of the girl brightened as she felt that her secret was known to her companion. "You see, my own friend, she must not press in her religion with my dying hour; your presence alone will be necessary when I take the vows of a Christian. I feel that I can live but a few days, and O, let me do what I have to do, quickly and peacefully." Her look was sadly imploring.

"It shall be as you wish, Alice," replied Mrs. Benton, "calm your spirit by trust in your dear Lord, who never falleth those who cast their care upon Him. I will send for Father Sheridan at once, and for the rest, you shall not be disturbed."

"And you will tell him when I am gone," urged the invalid, the faint pink tinge passing over her cheek; "he might otherwise feel hurt, that I refused his presence at such a time, when he has been so interested in bringing me to this sacrament."

"All shall be as you wish, dear," replied her friend, kissing the pallid brow. Mrs. Benton's errand was in part a difficult one, to open first to the mother, the resolve of her child (perhaps not unexpected, and yet in all cases sudden at the last) to leave the religion of her parents, and to bear the blame of undue influence; but these were the lightest part of her task. To keep Dr. Nelson from Alice's room, where he had a right as her physician, was more difficult. Her husband had often said, that under that mild and gentle exterior she possessed a degree of promptitude and energy mingled with delicacy, for the most trying occasions. After dispatching a messenger to the office of Dr. Nelson, where she found him pale and dejected.

"That poor child is going fast, she cannot live a week," he said, as Mrs. Benton closed the door; "O, if I could help her to a decision!"

"You have helped her, Doctor; you have done more for her than minister to her bodily ills; you have led her to ask for baptism, and I have dispatched a messenger for the priest."

"Thank God, thank God!" exclaimed the young man, "this is what I have prayed for most earnestly; O, it will be to me a most welcome sight!"

"But she has specially requested that no one may be present but her mother and myself; she is afraid of the intrusion of worldly thoughts and distractions at such a time, and has not even asked for my daughter's presence." Dr. Nelson looked surprised, and understood her wishes, continued Mrs. Benton, looking out of the window as she spoke, "and you will know by and by, perhaps, why she wishes to be so secluded. I am persuaded it is from no fear of man, but only as I have said, fear of distractions. But I see my messenger returning; yes, and here is Father Sheridan following close in his wake. I must go over and prepare for the ceremony; in the meantime you know very well what is the best thing you can do for us."

"You are always right, always judicious, my dear counsellor," he replied; then rising and going to an inner room, he brought out a small silver crucifix. "Give this to Alice for me, and tell her I am praying for her."

Mrs. Benton sought no opportunity to give either the message or the gift till the solemn scene was over. Alice lived but two days after the reception of the sacraments, but the crucifix was never out of her hand; she sel-

dom spoke, and calmly and peacefully fell asleep in her baptismal innocence. After the burial, Mrs. Benton returned the crucifix to Dr. Nelson, and reposed in him the secret entrusted to her by the dead.

"I can do me no harm now," he said sadly, repeating Mrs. Benton's words—"but I could have sympathized with her—yes, I think I could have loved her very dearly, but it would have been only the remnants, not the dear first love she gave me. Ah! she is far better with that love which is eternal and unchangeable—to go direct from her baptism to the embrace of her dear Lord, what could we ask for her!"

The mourning mother brooded over her dead daughter's journal of the past year, and a voice of gentle wailing, like a dirge, ran through every page. It was an unfathomable mystery to her even, when she came to a withered bunch of violets among its leaves, with the initials, J. N., and the date of the last May day, when Dr. Nelson had proposed her Queen of May, and on his knee had presented her with the flowers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SISTERS

Marion and her lover had settled down, after the first flush of their betrothal, "a heap like old folks," Sobriety said, as in absence came the regular letter, and when present the regular visit, and always the regular newspaper, which Marion studied with great diligence.

Rosine had heard of the engagement in her city home, and talked it over with Colonel Hartland, who pronounced Leighton as promising a young man as he had met for years. But the business-like courtship was not to be continued unbroken; late in the autumn came a pressing letter from Colonel Hartland, urging his friend to allow Marion to pass the winter at the east. He was coming to St. Louis on government business, and would bring her back with him. It was only right, he said, that she should have a few glimpses of life before taking her place among the matrons. Mr. Benton and his wife looked at each other wistfully, as if waiting for a question, when they had read the letter.

"What do you think of it, Lucy?" he said, leaning towards her, and clasping her hand in his; "it is hard, to ask you only remaining daughter."

"It is not that alone makes me hesitate, Philip; while I have you I can never be lonely. I am thinking separation and contact with the world might be the best test of her love for Mr. Leighton."

"Better now than after marriage," quickly replied Mr. Benton, "I have often doubted the depth and endurance of her love for him, but never his."

"Perhaps it would be well to leave the decision entirely with Marion," said the wife; "such a visit might benefit her in many ways, and be a comfort to Rosine."

"Yes," replied the father, in a tone of relief; "a winter together would be wholesome for both the girls. It is really a pity that Hartland has no daughter of his own; his son's marriage does not promise much comfort; but I trust the Doctor, if he ever marries, will do better."

Mrs. Benton answered only with a half-suppressed sigh, changed to a smile as Marion entered, ruddy and glowing, from a sharp center with her lover across the prairie.

"O, beautiful! glorious!" she exclaimed, as her quick thought took in the contents of the letter her mother had put into her hand, saying, "We shall leave the answer to my daughter."

"But can I go?" she inquired, eagerly, and then blushing crimson, as she met the earnest look of her father.

"Your mother and I think it best to leave the decision with you," said her father.

"Then I shall surely go," she cried, clapping her hands and running to the door to meet Mr. Leighton. "Think of it, Horatio! a winter in—"

the other held the strands of the yet untied knot. "Can't you tie a knot as can't untie?" said Rice, looking quizzically at Marion. "You know that's many a slip."

The young couple blushed crimson, and the words sank deep into Leighton's heart. It was evident to him, self that he did not fully trust Marion; perhaps the fervor and strength of his own affection made him more doubtful of hers.

Harold was at home for a few weeks at this time, a fine grown young man, nearly as tall as his father, with his mother's brown eyes, and Rosine's golden hair. He was filled with high hopes and great expectations, having chosen his profession as civil engineer, and was determined, with the strength of a powerful will, to be among the first there. He had made warm friends through the city, and his desire to go east; he never cared to see any thing east but Rosine and Willie; the great growing west was his Eldorado. He turned and annoyed Marion by asking her, if when she was Mrs. Governor of Illinois, she would use her influence to give him the laying out of the railroads.

A little depression came over Marion, and her mother before she left home, and her mother was relieved by even this symptom of heart; for it had been a surprise to her how, with the chosen object to be left behind, there should be such readiness for a separation. Horatio and Harold accompanied her on her way as far as Chicago, where they were to meet Colonel Hartland, who by some change of plan was to go to that city instead of St. Louis, as at first proposed, and therefore could not come to Athlaca.

It was with a heavy heart Leighton returned to his now lonely life, when the last wave of the white signal disappeared with the retreating steamer. His energetic and untiring nature could only be satisfied by constant unwavering efforts for the position he was determined to occupy.

Marion was welcomed by Colonel Hartland's family, not as a stranger, but for Rosine's sake, like one belonging to themselves, and but few days passed, when with her pushing nature she had impressed upon Mrs. Hartland with a sense of her energy and power; to her sister she made known the state of things at Inglewood, gave her a description of Leighton, caricatured Dr. Nelson, and talked so much about herself, as to leave such an impression of her importance upon Rosine's mind, as to lead her to wonder how she could very well be spared from Athlaca.

"Rosa," she said, a little reproachfully, after noting for one week in silence, the net ways and fond expressions of Doctor Hartland toward her sister, "I told you without reserve all about Horatio, our engagement, and plans, and you have never even hinted to me that Dr. Hartland, or Ned, as he bids me call him, is a lover of yours, and that you are as good as engaged."

"What possibly put that into your head?" replied Rosine, with eyes dilated with surprise, and with a start and almost a scream. He is old enough to be—not quite my father, as he once said, but he has fifteen years older, and I never had a thought or dream of him except as a younger sister."

"Nor you of him?" inquired Marion, with a slight touch of sarcasm in her tone.

"No," replied Rosine, hurt by the tone and the implied suspicion; "never, I love him to be sure; how could I help it? he is so kind to me, but not in that way. Why, Marion it is absurd!" she added eagerly.

"By no means absurd," said the sister, laughing at her earnestness and evident indignation; "he is a splendid fellow; he isn't ugly; but he's so genial, funny, and sensible; and then of course he's rich, all these years in his profession, here, and high up in it too; I wonder he has not married before; if I were you—"

"O don't, sister!" exclaimed Rosine, tearfully, putting both hands over her sister's mouth; "don't say any more. I don't like to have such thoughts about him, they would mar the freedom of our intercourse, and I am afraid now, I shall think of them when we meet."

"What a funny child you are," said Marion, putting her arm affectionately about her waist; "but I reckon it papa were to see you together, you might have one of his severe lectures on coquetry and flirting, such as he gave me."

"Coquetry! flirting!" exclaimed Rosine, withdrawing a little from the snug embrace; "I think they are both wicked; and I am sure this is no such thing."

"Tell me about this Miss Greenwood and her brother," said Marion, seeing how deeply she had wounded her sister, and desirous of changing the subject. "I heard the Doctor joking you about him, when the note came to you today from her."

Rosine was glad of any change in the conversation, and though her feelings were smarting under the imputation of a flirt, she was still desirous to conciliate her sister, therefore she drew from her pocket the paper, questioning if she really had a right to read Dora's note to Marion. The sister observed the hesitation with which she moved, and said petulantly, "I wish I had staid at Inglewood; you are afraid to confide in me; new friends have taken the place of old."

"How supremely silly!" replied Marion. "You worry yourself about trifles with an intensity worthy of Dr. Nelson. He was scrupulous, a degree; tormenting himself about little scraps of conduct, and would hardly trust himself to look at me, or speak to me, after my engagement; ceased his visits almost entirely, and made himself observed by every one; underwent all kinds of self imposed penance, to punish himself for failing in love with me."

"Mamma writes as if papa were very fond of him," said Rosine.

"Merely, yes!" replied Marion; "I never saw him take to any one else, he is kind to him. I suppose he was the means of saving his life, and I think he would have been glad if I could have looked at him with his eyes; but dear me! a country doctor's wife! there's only one thing worse—a country minister's wife. One might like to be the lady of a notable city physician," she added, pinching Rosine, "the first of the faculty; and I can imagine a position worthy of it, were I a Protestant preacher or a wife of a country doctor or a country minister's companion—one must be devoid of ambition, surely!"

Rosine did not reply, her mind was wandering back through the two years of separation, and the reflection, "How changed!" seemed to strike her dumb; she feared they could never come together again as when they were children. In Marion's heart, she was relieved by even this symptom of heart; for it had been a surprise to her how, with the chosen object to be left behind, there should be such readiness for a separation. Horatio and Harold accompanied her on her way as far as Chicago, where they were to meet Colonel Hartland, who by some change of plan was to go to that city instead of St. Louis, as at first proposed, and therefore could not come to Athlaca.

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the summer. Funny, isn't it, to think of Shirley's being chaperon, just because she has a Mrs. Hitched to her name?"

Miss Stiffen agreed without reservation that it was extremely funny, and they parted in the hallway. Miss Stiffen went on up to the third floor, but Jessica turned in at a comfortable kitchenette apartment on the first. She had really not been able to afford the apartment, but she had taken it because Shirley "hated stairs."

Jessica tried to deny to herself that she was either extremely tired or extremely hungry, but she could not forbear thinking longingly of a supper table spread with hot things. What would Shirley be doing? Occasionally Shirley took a great interest in their housekeeping.

Shirley was still trimming the hat. "Just in time, Jess! I can't decide between the black bow and this red silk rose. These fifty for that snippy flower—simple robbery! But I ate a lemon pie from the delicatessen—never again, my dear! I'll be munching barley and hot water for a week to pay for it. Do what you please in the kitchen; I haven't been inside the horrid place since morning. See to your clothes when the inspiration is upon you—that's my motto. O Jess, I found the darlingest suit at Reynard's, and there was a sale at Lowe's & Swift's, and I just blew myself to silk stockings."

For a dizzy second Jessica tried to rearrange in her head various items in the household budget. Then her thoughts veered sickeningly. Everyone knows what a kitchen looks like when the breakfast dishes have not been washed. Perhaps it was that—or the thought of a whole lemon pie when she wanted hot tea more than anything in the world! at any rate, as she turned something happened inside her; before she could reach the door she was engulfed by a great wave of nausea, she seemed to see a huge black curtain moving toward her; she felt herself slipping and decided that she must lie down on the floor for a minute.

As if she were very far away indeed, Jessica heard Shirley sobbing and calling to her wildly: "O Jess, Jess, you're not dead, dearest—say you're not dead!" She tried to laugh, to move her head, to speak. "You goose, I'm all right!" she gasped out with a tremendous effort. "I'll be up in a minute—don't cry—I'll get supper!"

And then, as she went floating away into blackness again, she heard Shirley scream, "Miss Stiffen! Miss Stiffen!"

It is very uncomfortable to faint; that was Jessica's first awakening thought. She found herself on the couch, and she did not care about opening her eyes, because if she did she would have to say something, and she did not feel like saying anything. Miss Stiffen was in the room with Shirley, and she was holding forth in the tone of one who never has duty and her opportunity. Jessica was familiar with Miss Stiffen's holdings forth; she often held forth at teachers' meetings, and then even the principal kept very still. In the classroom there was no youth hardy enough to live through the process without blanching. Jessica was able to feel sorry for Shirley, but still she did not want to say anything. Then through the sick confusion of her mind pierced the word "parade"—oh, that would never do. Trying to shout at them, Jessica made a noise like the moan of a sick baby.

Instantly Shirley was kneeling beside her. "My dearest dear," she sobbed, "George's darling sister! What have I done to you? I'm a selfish brute, and you're an angel! But just get well, and I'll never charge another thing! I'll stay home—and you go to the lake instead of me. O Jessica, please say you will!"

"O course you will go," Miss Stiffen put in firmly. "That's decided. Stop crying and run and get hot milk—that will be better for Jessica than any amount of tears. She's been killing herself with worry and examination papers, but we'll look after her now. Don't open your mouth, Jessica, until that milk comes."

"You'll be good to yourself—you'll write if you want me to come home, won't you?" Jessica pleaded.

A hundred times she had declared that she would—no—go—no—inch! She could not be so selfish! But here she was in a new linen suit, ready to start on her way; and although her mind was tremulous with anticipation, worry did brood in her heart. Was Shirley hiding anything? She had cried a good deal, but in spite of the tears she would not for a minute hear of Jessica's not going. Jessica thought she had made some pretty good arrangements; she thought there would be plenty of money—if Shirley were careful—yet the little frightened look had come into her eyes.

"If you run out of money, or if you want me for anything, of course you will let me know," Jessica had said; and then Miss Stiffen had come in, and she had had no time to say more. Miss Stiffen had hovered near constantly in those days.

"If you are lonely, you can go to Miss Stiffen," was Jessica's last word.

She'll be at the Elwood until August, anyway."

"If I were dying of loneliness, I shouldn't go to Miss Stiffen!" Shirley cried with sudden resentment and then began to cry again.

"Forgive me for going off and leaving you, dear," Jessica whispered in a tender embrace. "Forgive me for taking your good time—I'll never again be so selfish!"

"You mustn't have a nervous breakdown!" sobbed Shirley, and so they parted.

"I shouldn't have believed," said Jessica to herself, "not if anyone had told me—that I could put on ten pounds in as many weeks! And tanned—my! Stretched out luxuriously on the sun-warmed grass, she patted one plump brown hand with the other and gazed at the gleaming blue lake and dark green forest. "Heavenly—heavenly! Oh, if it weren't so selfish of me to be having all this!"

That was the nagging thought which kept pricking its way into Jessica's mind; a mental picture of Shirley pining in the hot city could almost succeed in bringing back the old careworn expression to Jessica's face. But Shirley wrote cheerfully, and Jessica found it hard to work herself into a very thieving state of anxiety—it was one of the effects of selfishness, she supposed—selfishness, or a whole quart of milk every day, rambles through wild, pine-scented woods, cool splashes in the lake at sunrise, fishing trips along wonderful little streams and quiet rows in the evening light over the gleaming lake. Had a tired little history teacher ever had a vacation like this? Why, she felt young, younger then she had believed she could ever feel again. She smiled to herself as she lay behind the big grey rock.

Voices reached her. Two or three of the girls had a visitor from the city and were showing her choice bits in the surrounding landscape; but Jessica decided that she was too lazy to move, and the big rock hid her.

"The peachiest hat I ever saw—it can't be your old one! Tell me where you had it done?"

"Burchell's. They have a trimmer who's simply a whirlwind, I took in three old wrecks, and I wish you could see what she made of them. I say she has genius, and she's a dear, too—a little war bride, pretty as an apple blossom. And as for style! I tell you there's one lucky man over in France, Shirley Wrenn's the name. Write it down, Madgie, and if you want a real creation you'll know where to go."

The girls passed on, but Jessica lay on the grass as if stunned. Joy shivers ran through her. This—this—was what she had forced darling Shirley into! George's wife—a milliner's trimmer! Could she ever forgive herself?

"I knew I had no business having such a good time!" she said aloud, and then, turning her face to the grass, she cried bitterly.

At seven o'clock the next evening Jessica stood in the hallway of the Elwood. In spite of her efforts to be composed she found that she was trembling. She had rehearsed many times what she was going to say: "Do not suppose that I blame you in the least—it is only myself that I blame—and when we talk George I shall take the full responsibility. I can never forgive myself for my selfishness—for robbing you of your good time—for deserting you and leaving you alone. Whatever was the matter, you should have told me. O Shirley, you should have told me!"

Jessica always choked at this point—even in rehearsal. She had fashioned also some stern remarks for Miss Stiffen's benefit, but, as she reflected, they would have to be deferred until Miss Stiffen's return in September.

After debating inwardly whether to walk right in or to rap on the door, she decided on the formal method and knocked, to the accompaniment of a fluttering heart. After an interminable period of waiting she heard a dragging footstep. Her heart leaped and stood still. That could not be Shirley, unless hideous and humiliating toll had weighed even more heavily than she feared. Then a young woman dressed in a neat blue checked gingham appeared at the door with a toddler clinging to her skirts. No, Mrs. Wrenn didn't live here—she couldn't say where she might be, she'd just moved in the week before herself—no the janitor hadn't said.

The door closed on the neat young woman with her toddler, and Jessica leaned limply against the wall. Her thoughts flew from one wild conjecture to another, always coming back to panic to the question. Where was Shirley?

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