



[Written for the NEWS.]

## COMING HOME AT CHRISTMAS.

AN ORIGINAL STORY BY  
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## I.

I do not suppose that ever two sisters were more affectionately attached than Euphemie and myself. Though now so many years ago, it seems but yesterday that I, a child of five years old, was led softly into a darkened bedroom, to see and kiss a little something that nestled in my mother's bosom, and to find a new love awakening within me which at first I did not recognize. It seems but yesterday I was trusted to hold in my arms a plump, soft bundle just for a minute, and know it for Baby Phemie. It seems but little more than yesterday that we children grew and grew, always fond, always together, until at last I knew with a new knowledge, and could see with new vision, that, while united, we were apart, and, though loving each other dearly, wide as the poles asunder.

Yet we were a firmly united family. There were only four of us—father, mother and we two girls. He was a most affectionate, genial parent, who never found fault with us. I think indeed that it might have been better if he had, but there some natures so confident in final adjustments, so full of hopeful life, that they really do not see why troubles should weigh down the spirits of those around them, and so, as we fancy, sympathize or criticize but lightly if at all. Our mother was just the reverse—anxious, and perpetually seeking for thorns and brambles in her own path and that of everybody else. We lived in a pleasant house with a small but pretty garden—just the sort of a nest suitable for people of moderate though assured means; had comfortable neighbours who interchanged visits without fuss, and were friends in the ordinary social sense. No matter where this home was, I shall not say, except that it was not a hundred miles from Montreal Island, "the Garden of Canada." Imagine a long low-built cottage, covered with ivy, from which a dozen little diamond-paned windows glittered in the evening sunshine, clustering flowers and velvet grass and shady walk in front, and beyond these a belt of trees wherein the breezes sang, and whose fluttering leaves discoursed like murmurings from a distant shore. Beyond all this, a vista, half lane, half street, at the end a garden gate.

Every home is a kingdom; a world in itself, but there are, as our father used to say, territorial alliances. He used also to laugh at the close alliance we had formed with the kingdom whose domain lay beyond that little rustic barrier. For the two inhabitants, the queen who reigned and the prince who governed, were very dear to us. Mrs. Deroche, a stately widow and her

only son. The word "stately" expresses all I want to say of her, except that she was a very kind woman also, and doted on "Prince Hugh," ruled him with a rod of iron and obeyed his every word and wish. How shall I describe him? There is no need. We women have I suppose "a bright ideal of our dreams," and even I, black-browed, stern and cold, may have



"He pressed Phemie to his heart."

figured to myself some fair Apollo in a half shame-faced, disagreeable manner. That "he" was handsome, noble of aspect even, generous—well, well!

As may be guessed, we three young people, "through daisied meads of childhood wandering," were seldom apart. Our little sports, our little hopes and fears, our little quarrels, how all important then, how trifling now though forgotten! Would I live them all over again? I do not know. I am not much given to receive confidences upon such matters, but I do know that of the few whose experiences have been related to me by themselves, not one sincerely wished to retrace the old pathway, for that the shadows of later times could never wholly pass away, and would cloud the fairest sunshine. What we have lived we have lived. What is done is done. We would not be children again, for some prophetic mysterious instinct would tell us, "children though we were again, of pains and sorrows yet to be repeated."

And so, like the boy in the fairy wood, we travelled and travelled from year to year, reaching at last a strange country, an unknown land. Alas it was we who were changed, and not the landscape. We were older. The child was

child no more. "The frank simplicity that gave its kiss" was gone forever, and we became shy, furtive, sometimes a little sad. Why dwell upon all this, which is the experience of all? Why not confess at once—yet what?

Phemie was the sunshine of our household, so light of heart, so fair, so playful was she. With this there was in her character—I wish

all about it. Hugh and she were plighted to each other;—what should she do, she was so terrified! I calmed her, told her I was happy for her sake, and undertook—yes I even did that too—to smooth matters with our dear father and mother.

Not that there was anything to smooth over. The gentleman was quite "eligible;" there was no one provided with a reason against the match; and there was no secrecy, no excitement, no romance about the affair at all. Only, there was to be some delay. Hugh had been placed in the office of one of our greatest Montreal lawyers, and shown high promise of distinction. But he had not earned the robe which would alone make him visible to the Court's eye, and till then our father could not see the propriety of his marriage to our Phemie. And so of the two families for a time,—

"Along the cool, sequestered vale of life,  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."

## II.

At the beginning of the year 1864, the great war which had desolated so many fair fields and brought anguish to so many homes of our neighbouring cousins, was still raging. While numerous victories had been gained by the Union armies, there was still great anxiety among the loyal States, and it was felt that greater efforts than ever must be employed before the contest could be terminated by their final success. At the same time the sentiment in favour of their cause had become strong among ourselves. The abolition of slavery no doubt added to this feeling—at all events there were numerous young men in the Province who longed to identify themselves with the struggle for free institutions, and among these was Hugh. How it came about no one could quite accurately say, though I had my own thoughts upon the subject. He said he wanted some relief from legal drudgery, and certainly he did spare little time with us. Then his talk was continually, when he did come to the house, about politics upon what he called the grand scale. Phemie did not appear to enter into his feelings, and rather laughed at him than otherwise. "What had he to do with such matters?" and so on. I thought he chafed at her manner, and, indeed, did not like it myself. What would the world be without heroism for the sake of principle! Then Hugh grew more and more restless, until we could all see that a strong determination was

there were a more analytically expressive word—a something which even now I hardly understand. Selkiah she was not, yet her sense of possession was a sort of instinct. Loving she was, yet I doubt whether she knew the meaning of self-sacrifice. Passionate she never

was, but her will, obstinacy, less kind judges would wrongly call it, bent those who opposed her down. At all events she grew to love Hugh. That is certain. She *did* love him. It was I alone who found it out first, nor am I ashamed to say how or why. Love honest, true love is not a thing to be ashamed of; and why should I conceal the truth? Who was harmed if I kept my own heart under lock and key and never told what was treasured there? I don't believe in "Viola." In the first place I haven't got a "damaak cheek," and if I had would never "let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud" feed on it. I could be silent, and did. But I found her out. I say "found her out," because—still, she was only keeping her secret as well as I, who should be the last to judge her for so doing.

It happened very simply. A stolen meeting witnessed by me only, and lovers' vows overheard, upon my solemn word of honour without intention. Having heard, however, I must for all our sakes invite her confidence, and then with blushing face upon my breast she told me



"Here."

forming in his mind. The result appeared before long in his announcement that he intended "to have a look at a battle or two." That was his way of putting it. We all objected, argued and pleaded. But to no avail. He would listen to no one, and, with a gayety too evidently assumed, made his preparations for departure. Phemie was heart-broken, of course.

