

The Unbuilt Altar

Written for The Western Home Monthly by M. V. Hughes

EVELYN dear, will you please bring me Ken's picture?" The speaker turned a clouded face full of selfish sorrow toward the girl reading at a table on the opposite side of the room.

"Yes certainly, Mrs. Haslam," replied the girl and left the room.

Margaret Haslam continued to lean on her elbows at the open window gazing toward the clear blue jagged ridge silhouetted against the sky. Below the ridge, rosy fans of September sunlight were brightening the foothills that rolled like giant sea waves against the mountainous horizon.

When the girl reached the mantel where stood the picture, she loitered a moment, and her eyes filled. She well knew what was coming when that picture was asked for! Nevertheless she hastily wiped the corners of her eyes and the next moment stood by the mother's chair saying kindly:

"Here it is, Mrs. Haslam," in a voice that sounded singularly free from emotion of any sad type.

The girl much dreading what was to follow, instinctively entrenched herself in a big chair on the opposite side of the room.

The mother held the picture up before the window. The slanting rays of the evening sun illuminated the face of a boy of eighteen. It was an interesting face. A decidedly happy, daring expression was delineated by every line of the rugged countenance.

She gazed intently at the picture; a longer silence than was usual accompanied this not infrequent performance. Evelyn began vaguely to hope that the picture might be returned to its place without the habitual outburst of rebellious feeling on the mother's part. But not so.

Finally she again looked out over the indistinct serpentine trails that wound down and up through the hills, then the gathering doldrum broke:

"Never again, never again shall I see my own laddie cantering happily over the hills in the long summer evenings. Yes he's gone—no he can't be!—yes he is." And her voice sank beneath a whisper.

Kenelm Haslam, the only child of Henry Haslam the wealthy old rancher of the foothills, had gone "over seas" and now he slept peacefully in the cradle home of the race; while the flag of the insolent Turk was still retreating from the troops of the western world, till now their fulminating ordinances had been softened by distance into a faint mellow boom which chanted a fitting requiem over the sleeping heroes from the new world.

Evelyn Winters had been Ken's playmate and school chum from earliest childhood. When Ken passed over, his mother tragically implored for the companionship of the girl, so Evelyn had been a member of the Haslam household for several months.

This particular day which was drawing to a close had been one of those subdued corn yellow days such as are rarely seen anywhere save among the Albertan foothills. The grassy hills were golden, golden seemed the very air; the herds of sheep on the hills looked like golden patches of light on the still deeper golden landscape. In the late afternoon a band of Indians dressed in bright red and yellow and brown had meandered down across the hills—and they too seemed like a constituent part of all the goldenness of the day.

On many another such a golden day had the mother heard the voice of her son singing in rollicking happiness as he galloped wildly over the hills. And his song invariably was:

"The white moth to the closing vine,
The bee to the opening clover.
And the Gypsy blood to the Gypsy blood
Ever the wild world over.
Ever the wild world over lass,
Ever the trail held true.
Over the world and under the world
And back at the last to you."

And with a chilling whoop he'd dash up to the door, knock with his whip and when his mother opened it he'd say with all the severe seriousness imaginable:

"Would you like to have your fortune told madam?"

"Oh you young scamp! bringing your mother to the door for nothing!"

A loud boyish laugh would follow the mother's expostulation then—

"No, not for nothing mater; I'll leave as soon as you give me a piece of pie—please." And the pie was there in short order.

On one occasion his mother inquired: "But Ken, why do you always sing that particular song, The Gypsy Trail, when on horseback?"

"Well mother just listen the next time that you see me galloping over the hills singing it, and you'll notice that Pinto's canter swings perfectly to the rhythm of that song. In fact he has got so that now he won't canter well unless I sing it to help him along. He's completely spoiled! I simply have to sing it to keep him spurred up. So it has come to be my share of the locomotion job."

But those days were past. The mother still sat by the window; her eyes constantly roaming fretfully over the hills as she busied herself with reminiscences of her son's short life.

The deepest edge was gone from the goldenness of the day before she left her seat, and dried her eyes and went into the living room to replace the picture. In replacing it she drew from a sacred drawer another much worn picture of a cross above a mound in a far Eastern land.



REMARKABLE GROUP OF ALLIED HEADS TAKEN AT PRELIMINARY PEACE CONFERENCE IN LONDON.

This photograph was taken on December 7th in the courtyard of No. 10 Downing Street, London, the home of Premier Lloyd George, where Marshall Foch and some of the Allied heads gathered at a preliminary peace conference to discuss the terms of the Allies, to be proposed at the Peace Conference at Versailles. From left to right they are Marshall Foch, Commander in Chief of the Allied Armies; Premier Georges Clemenceau of France; Premier Lloyd George of Britain; Premier Orlando of Italy and Baron Sonnino, the Italian Foreign Secretary.

The mother's one determination in life manifestly was to keep the fires of anguish burning in her heart. And keeping her eyes hovering so constantly over those two simple pictures made fuel to feed those fires.

She gazed devotedly at the cross and mound murmuring to herself with a fanatical devotion:

"Brave, brave laddie! Thy mother named thee aright: Kenelm, meaning a defender of his kindred. But my hero you are not forgotten! Your deed of sacrifice shall be remembered and worshipped by your kindred!"

Then a wild agitated look flashed across her face and she sank into a deep chair as if some great weight had pushed her down. Presently she again broke feverishly into speech:

"Yes his deed is worthy of it. I will build an altar to his memory!" She bent over the picture for a moment then added conclusively:

"Yes I will! And with my own hands I will build it; beginning to-night."

She left the room instantly. As she passed Evelyn with her head bent over her book she exclaimed:

"Come with me Evelyn dear, come! I'm going to build an altar to Ken's memory."

Evelyn amazed, yet quite accustomed to conforming to the older woman's erratic notions, got up and followed asking no questions whatsoever.

Down through the garden plot they hurried: around a small pond that flanked

the garden fence and up to a large stone pile banked by a poplar and elm clump; a favorite spot of Ken's and Evelyn's when they were children.

The mother began her labor of love repeating softly "I will build an altar to his memory—the memory of his generous boy life."

At that point she observed a small heap of stones somewhat apart from the main pile. Some that Evelyn and Ken had pulled out years before and built into a fire-place, and where the playmates often coaxed the mother to the delightful task of coming out on summer evenings and sharing the supper they had prepared at their camp. As she looked at the dismantled fire-place, reflections of other days crowded in deflecting her mind from its course.

During that moment she realised for the first that she had kept Evelyn following her movements in comparative darkness; so she roused herself to an explanation.

Evelyn listened in awed silence, save for an occasional polite "yes" which served something like punctuation marks in the mother's impassioned speech.

In the midst of her speech she sprang up and began the carrying out of her plan; deciding that here she would erect the altar; a tangible signification of her love for him.

She began work again, Evelyn assisting; while she still roamed in articulate thought over all of her son's past doings and her own loss. That loss made im-

helplessly. But all unavailingly she covered her eyes and averted her face; the ghostly scene shifted with her every move.

At length she peered agonizingly, yet voluntarily over the field, then uttered a shrill scream as she recognized Ken's recumbent form.

At that unendurable point the panorama of horror vanished and Ken stood before her in all his radiant boyhood. The old ingeniously winsome smile played over his face making it realistic as life.

The mother was riveted to the spot; paralyzed with an unknown, unanalyzed fear. But the chimera form spoke words of assurance.

"Little mother mine, do not fear your own son."

The mother strove to reply, but her parched lips emitted no sound. So without further noticing her agitation the son continued in cadences as sweetly rhythmic as the winds among the hills:

"Mother dear, what are you building?" he interrogated inclining his head toward the partially constructed altar.

The mother regained her voice sufficiently to burst forth: "Oh, my boy! Defender of your kindred I'm—I'm building an altar to your memory."

When she finished speaking she timidly endeavored to approach him, but the unnamed fears possessing her held her back, and she threw a hasty furtive glance toward the altar; then again turned to face her son but saw only his evanescent form in the deepening dusk. She cried out "Ken! Kenelm!"

"Yes, mother," returned the boy clearly and again distinct before her, "what is it?"

She was utterly at loss to reply and still ached to catch him to her heart.

After a moment of oppressive silence the boy again linked up the severed chain of thought.

"An altar did you say, in memory of me mother?"

"Yes, little son."

The smile went out from the lad's face and for a time he seemed absorbed in deep thought, then slowly as if threading a maze continued:

"Mother mine, erect not an altar of dry stones to perpetuate my memory, if you will perpetuate it, let it be in a monument of kind helpful deeds for the restoration of Canada's wounded sons." He paused, adding somewhat as an afterthought: "Your own Ken might have been with you to-day had there been ample supplies—but there was not, accordingly we went into battle minus sufficient life saving necessities,—so I passed over."

The mother staggered forward with outstretched arms moaning: "Oh, my boy—and I have done nothing—nothing to help the wounded men live—live."

With her outstretched arms the mother now faced only an ethereal mist in the dusk. In an instant it too was gone. The big stone lay at her feet and the half built altar gleamed through the mournful darkness. But the veiled hills caught up the words "help live" and echoed and re-echoed them from hilltop to hilltop till the lone mother felt as if they were bombarding her brain and engulfing her soul with the inimitable strength of giant sea waves.

With a clutching pain she shrank into herself, and with a haunting fear glanced around her. Then her eyes rested on Evelyn sitting on the ground, her head buried deep in her arms and shaking with sobs.

At the sight of Evelyn she collected her scattered faculties enough to ask:

"Evelyn, did—did you see him?"

"The girl lifted a tearful awed face. 'See whom, Mrs. Haslam?'"

"Why Ken, Ken was here!"

And the mother wilted down beside the girl.

A silence followed during which a gentle breeze began to roll lazily in intermittent waves among the hills.

Presently the mother spoke again:

"I almost fancy I hear Ken's voice on that breeze singing:

"Follow the Romany patteran
West to the sinking sun
Till the Junk sails lift through the
homeless drift
And the East and the West are one."

The very winds seemed to have learned that wild song."

Evelyn signed as if preparing for a task and said:

"Mrs. Haslam, I do so long to be a comfort to you; but I much fear you are thinking too much about Ken. Don't you think it would be better if you endeavored to think of something else? I—I fear for you." She hesitated and