

A ROSE OF YESTERDAY.¹

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IX.



COLONEL WIMPOLE looked positively old that evening when he went down to dinner with his sister and Sylvia. His face was drawn and weary, and the lids hung a little in small wrinkles, but down in his gray eyes there was a far-off gleam of danger-light.

Sylvia looked down when she met him, and she was very silent and grave at first. At dinner she sat between him and Miss Wimpole, and for some time she scarcely dared to glance at him. He, on his part, was too much preoccupied to speak much, and she thought he was displeased. Nevertheless, he was more than usually thoughtful for her. She understood by the way he sat, and even by the half-unconscious shrinking of the elbow next to her, that he was sorry for her. At table, seated close together, there is a whole language in one's neighbor's elbow, and an unlimited power of expression in its way of avoiding collisions. Very perceptive people understand that. Primarily, in savage life, the bold man turns his elbows out, while the timid one presses them to his sides as though not to give offense with them. Society teaches us to put on some little airs of timidity as a substitute for the modesty that few feel, and we accordingly draw in our elbows when we are near any one. It is ridiculous enough, but there are a hundred ways of doing it, a hundred degrees of readiness, unwillingness, pride, and consideration for others, as well as sympathy for their troubles or in their successes, all of which are perfectly natural to refined people, and almost perfectly unconscious. The movement of a man's jaws at dinner shows much of his real character, but the movement of his elbows shows with fair accuracy the degree of refinement in which he has been brought up.

Sylvia was sure that the colonel was sorry for her, and the certainty irritated her; for

she hated to be pitied, and most of all for having done something foolish. She glanced at Wimpole's tired face just when he was looking a little away from her, and she was startled by the change in his features since the early afternoon. It needed no very keen perception to see that he was in profound anxiety of some kind, and she knew of nothing which could have disturbed him deeply but her own conduct.

Under the vivid light of the public dining-table he looked old; that was undeniable, and it was really the first time that Sylvia had ever connected the idea of age with him. Just beyond him sat a man in the early prime of strength, one of those magnificent specimens of humanity such as one sees occasionally in traveling, but whom one very rarely knows in acquaintance. He could not have been more than twenty-eight years old, straight in his seat, broad-shouldered, with thick, close golden hair and splendid golden beard, white forehead and sunburned cheeks, broad, well-modeled brows and faultless nose, and altogether manly in spite of his beauty. As he leaned forward a little, his fresh young face appeared beside the colonel's tired profile in vivid contrast.

For the first time Sylvia realized the meaning of Wimpole's words spoken that afternoon. He might almost have been her grandfather, and he was in reality of precisely the same age as her father. Sylvia looked down again, and reflected that she must have made a mistake with herself. Youth can sometimes close its eyes to gray hair, but it can never associate the idea of love with old age when clearly brought to its perception.

For at least five minutes the world seemed utterly hollow to Sylvia as she sat there. She did not even wonder why she had thought the colonel young until then. The sudden dropping out of her first great illusion left a void as big and as hollow as itself.

She turned her head and looked once more, and there again was the glorious, unseamed youth of the stranger, almost dazzling her,

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and making the poor colonel look more than ever old, with his pale, furrowed cheeks and wrinkled eyelids. She thought a moment, and then she was sure that she could never like such a terribly handsome young man, and at the same instant, for the first time in her life, she felt that natural, foolish, human pity which only extreme youth feels for old age, and she wondered why she had not always felt it; for it seemed quite natural, and was altogether in accordance with the rest of her feelings for the colonel, with her reverence for his perfect character, her admiration for his past deeds, her attachment to his quiet, protective, wise, and all-gentle manliness. That was her view of his qualities, and she had to admit that, though he had them all, he was what she called old. She had taken for love what was only a combination of reverence and attachment and admiration. She realized her mistake in a flash, and it seemed to her that the core had withered in the fruit of the universe.

Just then the colonel turned to her, holding his glass in his hand.

«We must not forget that that is your birthday, my dear,» he said, and his natural smile came back. «Rachel,» he added, speaking to his sister across the young girl, «let us drink Sylvia's health on her eighteenth birthday.»

Miss Wimpole usually took a little thin Moselle with the cold water she drank. She solemnly raised the glass, and inclined her head as she looked first at Sylvia and then at the colonel.

«Thank you,» said Sylvia, rather meekly.

Then they all relapsed into silence. The people at the big table talked fast in low tones, and the clattering of dishes and plates and knives and forks went on steadily and untunefully all around. Sylvia felt lonely in the unindividual atmosphere of the Swiss hotel. She hated the terribly handsome young man with a mortal hatred because he made the colonel look old. She could not help seeing him whenever she turned toward Wimpole. At last she spoke softly, looking down at her plate.

«Uncle Richard,» she said, to call his attention.

He was not really her uncle, and she almost always called him «colonel» half playfully, and because she had hated the suggestion of age that is conveyed by the word «uncle.» Wimpole turned to her quietly.

«Yes, my dear,» he said; «what is it?»

«I suppose I was very foolish to-day, was n't I?» asked Sylvia, very low indeed, and a bright blush played upon her pretty face.

The colonel was a courteous man, and was also very fond of her.

«A woman need never be wise when she is lovely,» he said in his rather old-fashioned way, and he smiled affectionately at the young girl. «It is quite enough if she is good.»

But she did not smile; on the contrary, her face became very grave.

«I am in earnest,» she said; and she waited a moment before saying more. «I was very foolish,» she continued thoughtfully. «I did not understand—or I did not realize—I don't know. You have been so much to me all my life, and there is nobody like you, of course. It seemed to me—I mean, it seems to me—that is very much like really caring for some one, is n't it? You know what I mean; I can't express it.»

«You mean that it is a good deal like love, I suppose,» answered the colonel, speaking gravely now. «Yes, I suppose that love is better when people believe each other to be angels; but it is not that sort of thing which makes love what it is.»

«What is it, then?» Sylvia was glad to ask any question that helped to break through the awkwardness and embarrassment she felt toward him.

«There are a great many kinds of love,» he said; «but I think there is only one kind worth having. It is the kind that begins when one is young and lasts all one's life.»

«Is that all?» asked Sylvia, innocently, and in a disappointed tone.

«All!» The colonel laughed softly, and a momentary light of happiness came into his face, for that all was all he had ever had. «Is not that enough, my dear?» he asked. «To love one woman or man with all one's heart for thirty or forty years? Never to be disappointed? Never to feel that one has made a mistake? Never to fear that love may grow old because one grows old one's self? Is not that enough?»

«Ah, yes! That would be, indeed. But you did not say all those other things at first.»

«They are just what make a lifelong love,» answered the colonel. «But then,» he added, «there are a great many degrees far below that. I am sure I have seen people quite really in love with each other for a week.»

Sylvia suddenly looked almost angry as she glanced at him.

«That sort of thing ought not to be called love at all!» she answered energetically. «It is nothing but a miserable flirtation—a miserable, wretched, unworthy flirtation.»

«I quite agree with you,» said Wimpole, smiling at her vehemence.

«Why do you laugh?» she asked, almost offended by his look. His smile disappeared instantly.

«You hit the world very hard, my dear,» he answered.

«I hate the world!» cried Sylvia.

She was just eighteen. Wimpole knew that she felt an innocent and instinctive repulsion for what the world meant to him, and for all the great, sinful unknown. He disliked it himself, with the steady, subdued dislike which is hatred in such natures as his, both because it was contrary to his character and for Sylvia's sake, who must surely one day know something of it. So he did not laugh at her sweeping declaration. She hated the world before knowing it, but he hated it in full knowledge. That was a bond of sympathy like any other. To each of us the world means both what we know and what we suspect, both what we see and the completion of it in the unseen, both the outward lives of our companions, which we can judge, and their inward motives, which we dimly guess.

But on this evening Sylvia felt that the world was particularly odious, for she had suffered a first humiliation in her own eyes. She thought that she had lowered herself in the colonel's estimation, and she had discovered that she had made a great mistake with herself about him.

«I hate the world!» she repeated in a lower tone, almost to herself; and her eyes gleamed with young anger, while her delicate, curling lips just showed her small white teeth.

Wimpole watched her face.

«That is no reason for hating yourself,» he said gently.

She started, and turned her eyes to him; then she blushed and looked away.

«You must not guess my thoughts,» she answered; «it is not kind.»

«I did not mean to. I am sorry.»

«Oh, you could not help it, of course. I was so foolish to-day.»

The blush deepened, and she said nothing more. The colonel returned to his own secret trouble, and on Sylvia's other side Miss Wimpole was silently planning a charitable institution of unusual severity, while she peeled an orange with the most scrupulous neatness and precision.

X.

HELEN HARMON went out alone to mail her letter. She would not have done such a thing in any great city of Europe, but there is a sense of safety in the dull, impersonal atmosphere of Lucerne, and it was a relief to her

to be out in the open air alone; it would be a still greater relief to have dropped the letter into the mysterious slit which is the first stage on the road to everywhere.

No one ever thinks of the straight little cut with its metal cover as being at all tragical; and yet it is as tragic as the jaws of death, in its way. Many a man and woman has stood before it with a letter, and hesitated; and every one has, at some time or other, felt the sharp twist at the heart, which is the wrench of the irrevocable, when the envelop has just slipped away into darkness. The words cannot be unwritten any more after that, nor burned, nor taken back. A telegram may contradict them, or explain them, or ask pardon for them; but the message will inevitably be read, and do its work of peace or war, of challenge or forgiveness, of cruelty or kindness or indifference.

Helen did not mean to hesitate, for she hastened toward the moment of looking back upon a deed now hard to do. It was not far to the post-office, either, and the thing could soon be done. Yet in her brain there was a surging of uncertainties and a whirling of purposes, in the midst of which she clung hard to her determination, though it should cost ever so dear to carry it out. She had not half thought over all the consequences yet, nor all it must mean to her to be separated from her son. The results of her action sprang up now like sudden dangers, and tried to frighten her from her purpose, tried to gain time against her to show themselves, tried to terrify her back to inaction and doubt. Something asked her roughly whence she had got the conviction that she was doing right at all. Another something, more subtle, whispered that she was sacrificing Archie for the sake of her own morbid conscience, and making herself a martyr's crown, not of her own sufferings only, but of her son's loss in losing her. It told her that the letter she held in her hand was a mistake, but not irrevocable until it should have slipped into the dark entrance of the road to everywhere.

She had still a dozen steps to make before reaching the big white building that stands across the corner of the street, and she was hurrying on lest she should not reach the door in time. Then she almost ran against Colonel Wimpole, walking slowly along the pavement, where there was a half-shadow. Both stopped short and looked at each other in surprise. He saw the letter in her hand, and guessed that she had written to her husband.

«I was only going to the post-office,» she said half apologetically; for she thought that he must wonder why she had come out alone at such an hour.

«Will you let me walk with you?» he asked.

«Yes.»

He made a step forward, as though expecting her to turn back from her errand and go with him.

«Not that way,» she said. «I must go to the post-office first.»

«No; please don't.» He placed himself in her way.

«I must.»

She spoke emphatically, and stood still, facing him, while their eyes met again, and neither spoke for a few seconds.

«You are ruining your life,» he said after the pause. «When that letter is gone you will never be able to get it back.»

«I know; I shall not wish to.»

«You will.» His lips set themselves rather firmly as he opposed her, but her face darkened.

«Is this a trial of strength between us?» she asked.

«Yes; I mean to keep you from going back to Henry Harmon.»

«I have made up my mind,» Helen answered.

«So have I,» said Wimpole.

«How can you hinder me? You cannot prevent me from sending this letter, nor from going to him if I choose. And I have chosen to go; that ends it.»

«You are mistaken. You are reckoning without me, and I will make it impossible.»

«You? How? Even if I send this letter?»

«Yes. Come and walk a little, and we can talk. If you insist upon it, drop your letter into the box. But it will only complicate matters, for you shall not go back to Harmon.»

Again she looked at him. He had never spoken in this way during all the years of their acknowledged friendship and unspoken love. She felt that she resented his words and manner, but at the same time that she loved him better and admired him more. He was stronger and more dominant than she had guessed.

«You have no right to say such things to me,» she answered; «but I will walk with you for a few minutes. Of course you can prevent me from sending my letter now. I can take it to the post-office by and by.»

«You cannot suppose that I mean to prevent you by force,» said Wimpole, and he stood aside to let her pass if she would.

«You said that it was a trial of strength,» she answered.

She hesitated one moment, and then turned and began to walk with him. They crossed the street to the side by which the river runs, away from the hotels and the houses. It was darker there and more quiet, and they felt more alone. It would seem easier, too, to talk in the open air, with the sound of the rushing water in their ears. He was the first to speak then.

«I want to explain,» he said quietly.

«Yes.» She waited for him to go on.

«I suppose that there are times in life when it is better to throw over one's own scruples, if one has any,» he began. «I have never done anything to be very proud of, perhaps; but I never did anything to be ashamed of, either. Perhaps I shall be ashamed of what I am going to say now. I don't care. I would rather commit a crime than let you wreck your whole existence; but I hope you will not make me do that.»

They had stopped in their walk, and were leaning against the railing that runs along the bank.

«You are talking rather desperately,» said Helen, in a low voice.

«It is rather a desperate case,» Wimpole answered. «I talk as well as I can, and there are things which I must tell you, whatever you think of me—things I never meant to say, but which have made up most of my life. I never meant to tell you—»

«What?»

«That I love you. That is the chief thing.»

The words did not sound at all like a lover's speech as he spoke them. He had drawn himself up, and stood quite straight, holding the rail with his hands. He spoke coolly, with a sort of military precision, as though he were facing an enemy's fire. There was not exactly an effort in his voice, but the tone showed that he was doing a hard thing at that moment. Then he was silent, and Helen said nothing for a long time. She was leaning over the rail, trying to see the running water in the dark.

«Thank you,» she said at last, very simply, and there was another pause.

«I did not expect you to say that,» he answered presently.

«Why not? We are not children, you and I. Besides, I knew it.»

«Not from me!» Wimpole turned almost sharply upon her.

«No; not from you. You wrote Henry a letter many years ago; do you remember? I had to read everything when he went to the

asylum, so I read that too. He had kept it all those years."

"I am sorry; I never meant you to know. But it does not matter now, since I have told you myself."

He spoke coldly again, almost indifferently, looking straight before him into the night.

"It matters a great deal," said Helen, almost to herself, and he did not hear her.

She kept her head bent down, though he could not have seen her face clearly if she had looked up at him. Her letter burned her, and she hated herself and loved him. She despised herself because, in the midst of the greatest sacrifice of her life, she had felt the breath of far delight in words that cost him so much. Yet she would have suffered much, even in her good pride, rather than have had them unspoken, for she had unknowingly waited for them half a lifetime. Being a good woman, she was too much a woman to speak one word in return beyond the simple thanks that sounded so strangely to him; for women exaggerate both good and evil as no man can.

"I know, I know!" he said, suddenly continuing. "You are married, and I should not speak. I believe in those things as much as you do, though I am a man, and most men would laugh at me for being so scrupulous. You ought never to have known, and I meant that you never should. But then you are married to Harmon still because you choose to be and because you will not be free. Does not that make a difference?"

"No, not that; that makes no difference." She raised her head a little.

"But it does now," answered Wimpole. "It is because I do love you just as I do, with all my heart, that I mean to keep you from him, whether it is right or wrong. Don't you see that right and wrong only matter to one's own miserable self? I shall not care what becomes of my soul if I can keep you from all that unhappiness—from that real danger. It does not matter what becomes of me afterward; even if I were to go straight to New York, and kill Harmon, and be hanged for the murder, it would not matter so long as you were free and safe."

The man had fought in honorable battles, and had killed, and knew what it meant.

"Is that what you intend to do?" asked Helen, and her voice shook.

"It would mean a great deal if I had to do it," he answered quietly enough. "It would show that I loved you very much. For I have been an honorable man all my life, and have never done anything to be ashamed of. I

should be killing a good deal besides Henry Harmon, but I would give it to make you happy, Helen. I am in earnest."

"You could not make me happy in that way."

"No; I suppose not. I shall find some other way. In the first place, I shall see Harmon and talk to him—"

"How? When?" Helen turned up her face in surprise.

"If you send that letter I shall leave to-night," said the colonel. "I shall reach New York as soon as your letter, and see Harmon before he reads it, and tell him what I think."

"You will not do that?" She did not know whether she was frightened or not by the idea.

"I will," he answered; "I will not stay here tamely and let you wreck your life. If you mail your letter I shall take the midnight train to Paris. I told you that I was in earnest."

Helen was silent, for she saw a new difficulty and more trouble before her, as though the last few hours had not brought her enough.

"I think," said Wimpole, "that I could persuade Harmon not to accept your generosity."

"I am not doing anything generous. You are making it hard for me to do what is right. You are almost threatening to do something violent to hinder me."

"No; I know perfectly well that I should never do anything of that sort, and I think you know it too. To treat Harmon as he deserves would certainly make a scandal which must reflect upon you."

"Please remember that he is still my husband—"

"Yes," interrupted Wimpole, bitterly; "and that is his only title to consideration."

Helen was on the point of rebuking him, but reflected that what he said was probably true.

"Please respect it then, if you think so," she said quietly enough. "You say that you care for me—no, I won't put it so—you do care for me. You love me, and I know you do. Let us be perfectly honest with each other. As long as you help me to do right, it is not wrong to love me as you do, though I am another man's wife. But as soon as you stand between me and my husband, it is wrong—wicked! It is wicked, no matter what he may have been to me. That has nothing to do with it. It is coming between man and wife—"

"Oh, really, that is going rather far!"

Wimpole raised his head a little higher, and seemed to breathe the night air angrily through his nostrils.

«No,» answered Helen, persistently, for she was arguing against her heart, if not against her head; «it is not going at all too far. Such things should be taken for granted, or at least they should be left to the man and wife in question to decide. No one has any right to interfere, and no one shall. If I can forgive, you can have nothing to resent; for the mere fact of your liking me very much does not give you any sort of right to direct my life, does it? I am glad that you are so fond of me, for I trust you and respect you in every way, and even now I know that you are interfering only because you care for me. But you have not the right to interfere, not the slightest; and although you may be able to, yet if I beg you not to, it will not be honorable of you to come between us.»

Colonel Wimpole moved a little impatiently.

«I will take my honor into my own hands,» he said.

«But not mine,» answered Helen.

They looked at each other in the gloom as they leaned upon the railing.

«Yours shall be quite safe,» said the colonel, slowly. «But if you will drop that letter into the river you will make things easier in every way.»

«I should write it over again. Besides, I have telegraphed to him already.»

«What? Cabled?»

«Yes; you see that you can do nothing to hinder me. He has my message already; the matter is decided.»

She bent her head again, looking down into the rushing water as though tired of arguing.

«You are a saint,» said the colonel; «I could not have done that.»

«Perhaps I could not if I had waited,» answered Helen, in a voice so low that he could hardly hear the words. «But it is done now,» she added still lower, so that he could not hear at all.

Wimpole had been a man of quick decisions so long as he had been a soldier, but since then he had cultivated the luxury of thinking slowly. He began to go over the situation, trying to see what he could do, not losing courage yet, but understanding how very hard it would be to keep Helen from sacrificing herself.

And she peered down at the black river, that rushed past with a cruel sound, as though it were tearing away the time of freedom second by second. It was done now,

as she had said. She knew herself too well to believe that, even if she should toss the letter into the stream, she would not write another in just such words. But the regret was deep, and thrilled with a secret aching pulse of its own all through her; and she thought of what life might have been if she had not made the great mistake, and of what it still might be if she did not go back to her husband. The man who stood beside her loved her, and was ready to give everything, perhaps even to his honor, to save her from unhappiness. And she loved him, too, next to honor. In the tranquil life she was leading there could be a great friendship between them, such as few people can even dream of. She knew him, and she knew herself, and she believed it possible, for once, in the history of man and woman. In a measure it might subsist even after she had gone back to Harmon, but not in the same degree; for between the two men there would be herself. Wimpole would perhaps refuse altogether to enter Harmon's door or to touch Harmon's hand. And then, in her over-scrupulousness, during the time she was to spend with Archie she knew that she should hesitate to receive freely a man who would not be on speaking terms with the husband whom she had taken back, no matter how she felt toward Wimpole.

Besides, he had told her that he loved her, and that made a difference too. So long as the word had never been spoken there had been the reasonable doubt to shield her conscience. His old love might, after all, have turned to friendship, which is like the soft, warm ashes of wood when the fire is quite burned out. But he had spoken at last, and there was no more doubt, and his quiet words had stirred her own heart. He had begun by telling her that he had many things to say; but, after all, the one and only thing he had said which he had never said before was that he loved her.

It was enough, and too much, and it made everything harder for her. We speak of struggles with ourselves. It would really be far more true to talk of battles between our two selves, or even sometimes among our threefold natures—our good, our bad, and our indifferent personalities.

To Helen, the woman who loved Richard Wimpole was not the woman who meant to go back to Henry Harmon; and neither, perhaps, was quite the same person as the mother of poor Archie. The three were at strife with one another, though they were one being in suffering. For it is true that

we may be happy in part, and be in part indifferent; but no real pain of the soul leaves room for any happiness at all, or indifference, while it lasts. So soon as we can be happy again, even for a moment, the reality of the pain is over, though the memory of it may come back clearly in cruel little day-dreams after years. Happiness is composite; pain is simple. It may take a hundred things to make a man happy, but it never needs more than one to make him suffer. Happiness is in part elementary of the body; but pain is only of the soul, and its strength is in its singleness. Bodily suffering is the opposite of bodily pleasure; but true pain has no true opposite, nor reversed counterpart, of one unmixed composition, and the dignity of a great agony is higher than all the glories of joy.

«Promise me that you will not do anything to hinder me,» said Helen, at last.

«I cannot.» There was no hesitation in the answer.

«But if I ask you,» she said; «if I beg you, if I entreat you—»

«It is of no use, Helen. I should do my best to keep you away from Harmon, even if I were sure that you would never speak to me nor see me again. I have said almost all I can, and so have you. You are half a saint or altogether one, or you could not do what you are doing. But I am not; I am only a man. I don't like to talk about myself much, but I would not have you think that I care a straw for my own happiness compared with yours. I would rather know that you were never to see Harmon again than—» He stopped short.

«Than what?» asked Helen, after a pause.

He did not answer at once, but stood upright again beside her, grasping the rail.

«No matter if you do not understand,» he said at last. «Can I give you any proof that it is not for myself, because I love you, that I want to keep you from Harmon? Shall I promise you that when I have succeeded I will not see you again as long as I live?»

«Oh, no! no!» The cry was sudden, low, and heartfelt.

Wimpole grasped the cold railing a little harder in his hands, but did not move.

«Is there any proof at all that I could give you? Try and think.»

«Why should I need proof?» asked Helen. «I believe you, as I always have.»

«Well, then—» he began, but she interrupted him.

«That does not change matters,» she continued. «You are right merely because you

are perfectly disinterested for yourself, and altogether interested for me alone. I am not the only person to be considered.»

«I think you are; and if any one else has any right to consideration, it is Archie.»

«I know,» Helen answered; «and you hurt me again when you say it. But, besides all of us, there is Henry.»

«And what right has he?» asked Wimpole, almost fiercely. «What right has he to any sort of consideration from you or from any one? If you had a brother he would have wrung Harmon's neck long ago! I wish I had the right!»

«I never heard you say anything brutal before,» said Helen.

«I never had such good cause,» retorted Wimpole, a little more quietly. «Put yourself in my position. I have loved you all my life,—God knows I have loved you honestly, too,—and held my tongue. And Harmon has spent his life in ruining yours in every way—in ways I know and in ways I don't know, but can more than half guess. He neglected you, he was unfaithful to you, he insulted you, and at last he struck you. I have found that out to-day, and that blow must have nearly killed you. I know about those things. Do you expect me to have any consideration for the brute who has half killed the woman I love? Do you expect me to keep my hands off the man whose hands have struck you and wounded you? By the Lord, Helen, you are expecting too much of human nature! Or too little—I don't know which!»

He had controlled his temper long, keeping down the white heat of it in his heart, but he could not be calm forever. The fighting instinct was not lost yet, and must have its way at last.

«He did not know what he was doing,» said Helen, shrinking a little.

«You have a right to say that,» answered the colonel, «if you can be forgiving enough. But only a coward could say it for you, and only a coward would stand by and see you go back to your husband. I am not a coward, and I won't.» Since you have cabled to him, I shall leave to-night, whether you send that letter or not. Can't you understand?»

«But what can you do? What can you say to him? How can you influence him? Even if I admit that I have no power to keep you from going to him, what can you do when you see him?»

«I can think of that on the way,» said Wimpole. «There will be more than enough time. I don't know what I shall say or do yet.

It does not matter, for I have made up my mind.»

«Will nothing induce you to stay here?» asked Helen, desperately.

«Nothing,» answered Wimpole, and his lips shut upon the word.

«Then I will go too,» answered Helen.

«You!» Wimpole had not thought of such a possibility, and he started.

«Yes. My mind is made up too. If you go, I go. I shall get there as soon as you, and I will prevent you from seeing him at all. If you force me to it, I will defend him from you. I will tell the doctors that you will drive him mad again, and they will help me to protect him. You cannot get there before me, you know, for we shall cross in the same steamer and land at the same moment.»

«What a woman you are!» Wimpole bent his head as he spoke the words, leaning against the railing. «But I might have known it,» he added; «I might have known you would do that; it is like you.»

Helen felt a bitter sort of triumph over herself in having destroyed the last chance of his interference.

«In any case,» she said, «I should go at once. It could be a matter of only a few days at the utmost. Why should I wait, since I have made up my mind?»

«Why indeed?» The colonel's voice was sad. «I suppose the martyrs were glad when the waiting was over, and their turn came to be torn to pieces.»

He felt that he was annihilated, and he suffered keenly in his defeat, for he had been determined to save her at all risks. She was making even risk impossible. If she went straight to her husband, and took him back, and protected him, as she called it, what could any one do? It was a hopeless case. Wimpole's anger against Harmon slowly subsided, and above it rose his pity for the woman who was giving all of life she had left for the sake of her marriage vow, who was ready, and almost eager, to go back to a state full of horror in the past and of danger in the future, because she had once solemnly promised to be Henry Harmon's wife, and could not find in all the cruel years a reason for taking back her word. He bowed his head, and he knew that there was something higher in her than he had ever dreamed in his own honorable life; for it was something that clung to its belief, against all suggestion of right or justice for itself.

It was not only pity: a despair for her crept nearer, and grew upon him every moment. Though he had seen her rarely, he

had felt nearer to her since Harmon had been mad, and now he was to be further from her than ever before. He would probably not go so far as she feared, and would be willing to enter her husband's house for her sake, and in the hope of being useful to her. But he could never be so near to her again as he was now, and his last chance of protecting her had vanished before her unchangeable resolution. He would almost rather have known that she was going to her death than see her return to Harmon. He made one more attempt to influence her; he did it roughly, but his voice shook a little.

«It seems to me,» he said, «that if I were a woman, I should be too proud to go back to a man who had struck me.»

Helen moved and stood upright, trying to look into his face clearly in the dimness as she spoke.

«Then you think I am not proud?»

He could see her white features and dark eyes, and he guessed her expression.

«You are not proud for yourself,» he answered rather stubbornly. «If you were you could not do this.»

She turned from him again, and looked down at the black water.

«I am prouder than you think,» she said. «That does not make it easier.»

«In one way, yes. When you have determined to do a thing, you are ashamed to change your mind, no matter what your decision may cost yourself and others.»

«Yes, when I am right. At least, I hope I should be ashamed to break down now.»

«I wish you would!»

It was a helpless exclamation, and Wimpole knew it; for he was at the end of all argument and hope, and his despair for her rose in his eyes in the dark. He could neither do nor say anything more, and presently, when he had left her at the door of her hotel, she would do what she meant to do to the letter. For the second time on that day he wished that he had acted instead of speaking, and that he had started upon his journey without warning her. But in the first place, he had believed that she would take more time to consider her action, and again, he had a vague sense that it would not have been loyal and fair to oppose her intention without warning her. And now she had utterly defeated him, and upheld her will against him in spite of all he could do. He loved her the better for her strength, but he despaired the more. He felt that he was going to say good-by to her as if she were about to die.

He put out his hand to take hers, and she met it readily. In her haste to come out with her letter she had not even taken the time to put on gloves, and her warm, firm fingers closed upon his thin hand as though they were the stronger.

«I must go,» she said; «it is very late.»

«Is it?»

«Yes; I want to thank you for wishing to help me—and for everything. I know that you would do anything for me, and I like to feel that you would; but there is nothing to be done. Henry will answer my cable, and then I shall go to him.»

«It is as though you were dying, and I were saying good-by to you, Helen.»

«That would be easier,» she answered, «for you and for me.»

She pressed his hand with a frank, unaffected pressure, and then withdrew her own. He sighed as he turned from the dark water to cross the quiet street with her. The people who had been walking about had gone home suddenly, as they do in provincial places, and the electric light glared and blinked upon the deserted macadamized road. There was something unwontedly desolate, even the air, for the sky was cloudy, and a damp wind came up from the lake.

Without a word the two walked to the post-office, and as Wimpole saw the irrevocable message dropped into the slit his heart almost stopped beating. A faint smile that was cruelly sad to see crossed Helen's white face—a reflection of the bitter victory she had won over herself against such great odds.

XI.

THE two walked slowly and silently along the pavement to the hotel, the damp wind following them in fitful gusts, and chilling them as they went. They had no words, for they had said all to each other; each knew that the other was suffering, and both knew that their lives had led them into a path of sadness from which they could not turn back. They walked wearily and unwillingly side by side, and the way seemed long, and yet too short, as it shortened before them.

At the lighted porch of the hotel they paused, reluctant to part.

«May I see you to-morrow?» asked Wimpole, in a dull voice.

«Yes; I must see you before I go,» Helen answered.

In the light of the lamps he saw how pale she was, and how very tired; and she looked at him, and knew from his face how he was

suffering for her. They joined hands, and forgot to part them when their eyes had met. But they had nothing to say, for all had been said, and they had only to bid each other a good night which meant good-by to both, though they should meet ever so often again.

The porter of the hotel stood in the doorway a few steps above them, and watched them with a sort of stolid interest. The lamplight gleamed upon his gilt buttons, and the reflection of them made Helen aware of his presence. Then he went into the entrance, and there was nobody else about. Voices came with broken laughter from the small garden adjacent to the hotel, where there was a café, and far away, at the end of the entrance-hall, the clerk pored over his books.

Still Wimpole held Helen's hand.

«It is very hard,» he said.

«It is harder than you know,» she answered.

For she loved him, though he did not know it, and she felt as well as he did that she was losing him. But because she was Harmon's wife, and meant to stand by her husband, she would not call it love in her heart, though she knew her own secret. She would hardly let herself think that it was much harder for her than for Wimpole, though she knew it. Temptation is not sin. She had killed her temptations that day, and in their death had almost killed herself.

The sacrifice was perfect and wholehearted, brave as true faith, and final as death itself.

«Good night,» said Wimpole, and his voice broke.

Helen still had strength to speak.

«Neither you nor I shall ever regret this,» she answered; but she looked long at him, as though she were not to see him again.

He pressed her hand hard, and dropped it. Once more she looked at him, and then turned slowly and left him standing there.

The porter of the hotel was facing her on the steps. Neither she nor Wimpole had noticed that he had come back, and was waiting for them to part. He held a telegram in his hand, and Helen started slightly as she saw it, for she knew that it must be Harmon's answer to her word of forgiveness.

«Already!» she exclaimed faintly, as she took it.

She turned back to Wimpole, and met his eyes again, for he had not moved.

«It is Henry's answer,» she said.

She opened the envelop, standing with her

back to the light and to the porter. Wimpole breathed hard, and watched her face, and knew that nothing was to be spared to either of them on that day. As she read the words, he thought she swayed a little on her feet, and her eyes opened very wide, and her lips were white. Wimpole watched them, and saw how strangely they moved, as if she were trying to speak and could not. He set his teeth, for he believed that even the short message had in it some fresh insult or injury for her.

She reeled visibly, and steadied herself against one of the pillars of the porch; but she was able to hold out the thin scrap of paper to Wimpole as he moved forward to catch her. He read it. It was a cable notice through the telegraph office, from Brest:

Your message number 731 Henry Harmon New York not delivered owing to death of person addressed.

Wimpole read the words twice before their meaning stunned him. When he knew where he was, his eyes were still on the paper, and he was grasping Helen's wrist, while she stood stark and straight against the pillar of the porch. She lifted her free hand and passed it slowly across her forehead, opening and shutting her eyes as if waking. The porter stared at her from the steps.

"Come," said Wimpole, drawing her; "let us go out again. We can't stay here."

Helen looked at him, only half comprehending. Even in the uncertain light he could see the color returning to her face, and he felt it in his own. Then her senses came back all at once, with her own clear judgment and decision, and the longing to be alone which he could not understand as he tried to draw her away with him.

"No, no!" she cried, resisting. "Let me go; please let me go! Please!"

He had already dropped her wrist.

"Come to-morrow," she added quickly.

And all her lost youth was in her as she lightly turned and went from him up the steps. Again he stood still, following her with his eyes; but an age had passed, with Harmon's life, between that time and this.

He understood better when he himself was alone, walking far on through the damp wind by the shore of the lake, past the big railway-station, just then in one of its fits of silence, past the wooden piers built out into the lake for the steamers, and out beyond, not counting his steps, nor seeing things, with bent head, and one hand catching nervously at the breast of his coat.

He understood Helen, for he also had need

of being alone to face the tremendous contrast of the hour, and to digest in secret the huge joy he was ashamed to show to himself because it was for the death of a man whose existence had darkened his own. Because Harmon was suddenly dead the sleeping hope of twenty years had waked with deep life and strength. Time and age were rolled away like a mist before the morning breeze, the world was young again, and the rose of yesterday was once more the lovely flower of to-day.

Yet he was too brave a man and too good to let himself rejoice cruelly in Harmon's death, any more than he would have gloried in his younger days over an enemy fallen in fight. But it was hard to struggle against the instinct, deep-rooted and strong in humanity ages before Achilles dragged Hector round the walls of Troy. Christianity has made it mean to insult the dead and their memory. For what we call honor comes to us from chivalry and knighthood, which grew out of Christian doings when men believed; and though non-Christian people have their standards of right and wrong, they have not our sort of honor, nor anything like it, and cannot in the least understand it.

But Wimpole was made happy by Harmon's death, and he himself could not deny it. That was another matter, and one over which he had no control. His satisfaction was in the main disinterested, being on Helen's behalf; for though he hoped, he was very far from believing that she would marry him now that she was a widow. He had not even guessed that she had loved him long. It was chiefly because his whole nature had been suffering so sincerely for her sake, during the long hours since he had read the paragraph in the paper, that he was now so immensely happy. He tried to call up again the last conversation in the dark by the river; but though the words both he and she had spoken came back in broken echoes, they seemed to have no meaning, and he could not explain to himself how he could possibly have stood there wrenching at the cold iron rail to steady his nerves less than half an hour ago. It was incredible. He felt like a man who has been in the delirium of a fever in which he has talked foolishly and struck out wildly at his friends, and who cannot believe such things of himself when he is recovering, though he dimly remembers them with a sort of half-amused shame for his weakness.

Wimpole did not know how long he wandered by the lake in the windy darkness before he felt that he had control of speech and action again, and found himself near the

bridge going toward his hotel. It was less than half an hour, perhaps; but ever afterward, when he thought of it, he seemed to have walked up and down all night, a hundred times past the railway-station, a hundred times along the row of steamboat piers, struggling with the impression that he had no right to be perfectly happy, and fighting off the instinct to rejoice in Harmon's death.

But Helen had fled to her own room, and had locked the door upon the world. To her, as to Wimpole, it would have seemed horrible to be frankly glad that her husband was dead. But she had no such instinct. She had been dazed beyond common sense and speech by the sudden relief from the strain she had borne so strongly and bravely. She had been dazzled by the light of freedom, as a man let out of a dark prison after half a lifetime of captivity. She had been half stunned by the instant release of all the springs of her nature, long forced back upon themselves by the sheer strength of her conscience. And yet she was sorry for the dead man.

Far away in her past youth she remembered his handsome face, his bright eyes, his strong vitality, his pleasant voice, and the low ringing tone of it that had touched her and brought her to the ruin of her marriage; and she remembered that for a time she had half loved him and believed love whole. She is a hard and cruel woman who has not a little pitiful tenderness left for a dead past, —though it be buried under a hideous present, —and some kind memory of the man she has called dear.

Helen thought of his face as he was lying dead now, white and stony; but somehow, in her kindness, it became the face of long ago, and was not like him as when she had seen him last. The touch of death is strangely healing. She had no tears, but there was a dim softness in her eyes for the man who was gone—not for the man who had insulted her, tortured her, struck her, but for the husband she had married long ago.

The other, the incarnate horror of her mature life, had dropped from existence, leaving his place full of the light in which she was thereafter to live, and in the bright peace she saw Wimpole's face as he waited for her.

In the midst of her thoughts was the enigmatic specter of the world, the familiar tormentor of those with whom the world has anything to do—a vast disquieting question-mark to their actions. What would the world say when she married Wimpole?

What could it say? It knew, if it knew anything of her, that her husband had been little better than a beast—no better; worse, perhaps. It knew that Wimpole was a man in thousands, and perhaps it knew that he had been faithful to her mere name in his heart during the best of his years. She had no enemies to cast a shadow upon her future by slurring her past.

Yet she had heard the world talk, and the names of women who had married old friends within the first year of widowhood were rarely untouched by scandal. She did not fear that, but in her heart there was a sort of unacknowledged dread lest Wimpole, who was growing old in patience, should be patient to the end out of some over-fine scruple for her fair name.

Then came the thought of her new widowhood, and rebuked her, and with the old habit of fighting battles against her heart for her conscience, she turned fiercely against her long silent love that was crying freedom so loudly in her ears. Harmon just dead, not buried yet perhaps, and she already thinking of marriage! Said in those words, it seemed contemptible, though all her loyalty to her husband had been for a word's sake, almost since the beginning.

But then, again, as she closed her eyes to think sensibly, she set her lips to stay the smile at her scruples. Her loyalty had been all for the vow, for the meaning of the bond, for the holiness of marriage itself. It had not been the loyalty of love for Harmon, and Harmon being dead, its only object was gone. The rest, the mourning for the unloved dead, was a canon of the world, not a law of God. For decency she would wear black for a short time, but in her heart she was free, and free in her conscience.

To the last she had borne all, and had been ready to bear more. Her last word had gone at once with the message of forgiveness he had asked, and though he had been dead before it reached him, he could not have doubted her answer, for he knew her. If she had been near him she would have been with him to the end, to help him and to comfort him if she could. She had been ready to go back to him, and the letter that was to have told him so was already gone upon its fruitless journey, to return to her after a long time as a reminder of what she had been willing to bear. She could not reproach herself with any weakness or omission, and her reason told her plainly that although she must mourn outwardly to please the world, it would be folly to refuse her heart the

thought of a happiness for which she had paid beforehand with half a lifetime of pain.

When that was all at once and unmistakably clear to her, she let her head sink gently back upon the cushion of the chair, her set lips parted, and she softly sighed, as though the day were done at last, and her rest had come. As she sat there the lines of sorrow

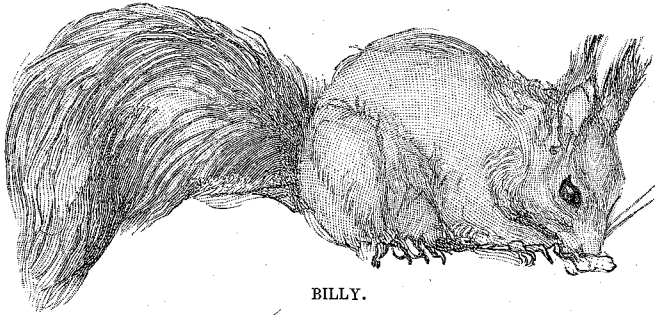
and suffering were smoothed away, and the faint color crept slowly and naturally to her cheeks, as her eyes closed by slow degrees under the shaded light of the lamp. One more restful sigh, her sweet breath came slower and more evenly, one hand fell upon her knee with upward palm and fingers relaxed, and did not move again; she was asleep.

THE END.

F. Marion Crawford.

BILLY AND HANS: A TRUE HISTORY.

WITH PICTURES BY LISA STILLMAN.



BILLY.

SO long as the problem of the possession of the capacity of reasoning by the animals of lower rank than man in creation is investigated through those of their species that have been domesticated, and in which the problem of heredity has become complicated with human influence, and the natural instincts with an artificial development of their faculties, no really valuable conclusions can be arrived at. It is only when we take the native gifts of an animal under investigation, at least without the intervention of any trace of heredity and of what under teaching may become a second nature, that we can estimate in scientific exactitude the measure of intelligence of one of the lower animals. The ways of a dog or cat are the result of innumerable generations of ancestors reared in intimate relations with the human master mind. As subjects for investigation into the question of animal character they are, therefore, misleading, and the wild creature must be taken. And so far as my observation goes, the squirrel, of all the small animals, shows at once the most character and the most affection; and I believe that the history of two that I have lately lost has a dramatic quality which makes it worth recording.

In my favorite summer resort at the lower edge of the Black Forest, the quaint old town of Laufenburg, a farmer's boy one day brought me a young squirrel for sale. He was a tiny creature, probably not yet weaned, a variation on the ordinary type of the European *Sciurus* (*Sciurus vulgaris*), gray instead of the usual red, and with black tail and ears, so that at first, as he contented himself with drinking his milk and sleeping, I was not sure that he was not a dormouse. But examination of the paws, with their delicate anatomy, so marvelously like the human hand in their flexibility and handiness, and the graceful curl of his tail, settled the question of genus; and mindful of my boyhood and early pets, I bought him and named him Billy. From the first moment that he became my companion he gave me his entire confidence, and accepted his domestication without the least indication that he considered it captivity. There is generally a short stage of mute rebellion in wild creatures before they come to accept us entirely as their friends—a longing for freedom which makes precautions against escape necessary. This never appeared in Billy; he came to me for his bread and milk, and slept in my pocket, from the first, and enjoyed being caressed as completely as if he had been born under my roof. No other animal is so clean in its personal habits as the squirrel when in health; and Billy soon left the basket which cradled his infancy, and habitually slept under a fold of my bed-cover, sometimes making his way to my pillow and sleeping by my cheek; and