MARTHA FINLEY

SIGNING THE CONTRACT, AND WHAT IT COST

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CHAPTER I.
A WANDERER.

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“Lost! lost! lost!”

The sun had set amid angry clouds; deep shadows already filled the recesses of the forest through which the iron horse went thundering on its way, while an icy wind, bringing with it frequent dashes of rain and sleet, swept through the leafless branches of the trees, tossing them wildly against a dull leaden sky.

A lady, gazing out into the gathering gloom, started with a sudden exclamation of surprise and dismay. Her husband leaned hastily past her to see what had called it forth; then, with a smile at his own folly in forgetting that at the rate of speed with which they were moving the object, whatever it might be, was already out of sight, settled himself back again, bending a look of mild inquiry upon her agitated countenance.

She shivered, and drawing her shawl more closely about her, put her lips to his ear, that she might be heard above the noise of the train.

“It was a face, John—a woman’s face upturned to the sky, wan, distressed, wretched, with great sorrowful eyes. It just gleamed out upon me for an instant as we swept by, and was gone. Poor thing! poor thing! she must be in sore trouble.”

He shook his head with a smile of conscious superiority of wisdom.

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you, my dear, or waste your sympathy upon a wandering gypsy, who would not exchange places with you if she could.”

The train was slackening its speed, and they could now converse with ease.

“She is no ordinary tramp,” was the quick, earnest reply. “And if ever bitter, hopeless grief and despair were written on a human face, they were on hers. I wish we could go back and find her.”

“Quite impossible, Dolly; so let us talk of something more agreeable.”

“We change cars soon, don’t we?” she asked.

“Worse than that; we get out at the next station and wait there two mortal hours for another train.”

“Clearfield Station!” shouted the conductor, throwing open the car door.

An acre or two of ground had been cleared of trees, though many of the stumps were still standing; there was no appearance of a town; only a depot and a few shanties scattered here and there, the whole hemmed in by the forest, except on the two sides where the road had cut its way through.

The train stopped, and John and Dolly—otherwise Mr. and Mrs. Kemper—alighted, and the gentleman hurried his wife out of the rain and sleet into the depot.

A very forlorn place it looked with its rusty stove, filthy floor and windows, and hard, straight-backed wooden chairs and settee, which gave small promise of rest or ease to the delayed and weary traveller.

“What a wretched hole!” said Mrs. Kemper, sending a rueful glance from side to side. “How long did you say we’d have to stay here, John?”

“Two hours, Dolly. Here, take this chair by the fire, and I’ll go and see what can be done.”

He came back presently, and pointing through the window, “You see that light yonder, Dolly?” he said. “It comes from a shanty some hundred yards away, where they tell me we can at least find cleanliness and a cup of hot tea. There seems a lull in the storm at this moment, too; shall we go and try it?”

“By all means,” she answered, rising with alacrity and taking his offered arm. “I presume the walking is bad enough, but my boots are thick.”

Picking their way carefully between stumps and pools of water, just visible in the deepening gloom, they reached the place.

It was a long, low building of rudest structure, its walls rough boards nailed on horizontally, leaving large cracks between, with merely a covering of painted canvas upon the outside to keep wind and rain at bay. The gable-end with its one door and window, in which burned the lamp that had guided them, faced the road.

Entering, our travellers found themselves in a small waiting-room, very simply furnished, but invitingly warm, clean, and tidy.

A neatly-dressed young woman greeted them with a pleasant “Good-evening,” and throwing open an inner door, asked if they would walk out to supper.

“I should prefer just taking something here,” said Mrs. Kemper, shrinking back at the sight of a long table with only a number of rough-looking men about it. “Couldn’t you bring me a cup of hot tea and whatever you have to eat?”

“Yes, ma’am, of course;” and the girl vanished to return presently with the tea, a piece of steak, bread, butter, and hot corn-cakes.

Out in the forest a woman was battling with the storm—a woman with a child in her arms. A slight, willowy form was hers, once the perfection of grace in outline and movement, now bent and staggering with weakness; a face whose bright, soft eyes, glowing cheeks, and ruby lips were not long ago the admiration or envy of many, though now wan and pinched with famine and wasting sickness.

It was the same face that Mrs. Kemper had seen from the car window, upturned despairingly to the stormy sky as for a moment the weary wanderer paused and leaned against a tree by the roadside to gather strength and breath for renewed exertion.

Both were well-nigh spent, and hope so nearly dead within her that, but for the babe in her arms, she had lain her down to die there in the lonely wood, with no human creature near to pity or console.

But mother-love was stronger than the love of life: she had taken the thin faded shawl from her own shoulders to wrap it about the little one, and so had kept it comparatively warm and dry, while she herself was drenched to the skin. Her limbs were almost benumbed with cold, and the cutting wind, as it dashed the rain and sleet full in her face, seemed piercing to her very vitals.

Twilight was fast deepening into night; the way grew dark and slippery; now her feet sank in the mud, and she struggled out only to slip into a pool of water, or to stumble and fall over a stump or log, or to catch and tear her clothing on some thorny bush.

The pauses for breath grew more frequent, the steps, as she moved forward again, weaker and more tottering, the weary arms could scarce sustain the weight of the child, and she knew not how far distant was the nearest human habitation. She was about to give up in utter despair, when the gleam of a not very distant light seen through the trees inspired her with new hope and energy.

She pressed forward, and presently emerged from the wood and found herself at Clearfield Station, with the light in the window of the shanty inn shining out ruddily not a hundred yards away.

She crept to the door and knocked faintly.

Mr. Kemper, who had just finished his supper, rose and opened it.

“Come in,” he said. “This is a public house, and I presume no one will object,” he added, catching sight of the ragged, dripping figure.

She stepped in, staggered to the fire and dropped down on the floor beside it.

“Drunk!” he muttered, with a gesture of disgust.

“No, no, John! she is ill—starving perhaps!—poor thing! poor thing!” cried his keener-sighted wife, springing forward, barely in time to catch the sleeping babe as the weary arms relaxed their hold and the wanderer sank back

against the wall in a state of semi-insensibility, her eyes closed and not a trace of color on cheek or lip.

“She’s dying!” exclaimed Mr. Kemper in a frightened whisper; and rushing to the inner door, “Somebody run for a doctor, quick! here is a woman who seems to be very ill!” he cried hurriedly.

“None to be had within three or four mile,” returned a gruff voice from the table. “What ails the woman? and who is she?”

“I don’t know; but something must be done.”

“Give her a cup of your tea, Irene,” said the voice.

“A few drops of brandy from the flask in our luncheon-basket, John,” said his wife. “I always take it along in case of sickness, you know.”

But the child, a girl of eighteen months, woke with a cry, “Mamma! mamma!” and at the sound the mother’s eyes unclosed.

“Give her to me—my little Ethel!” she said faintly.

“You are ill, my good woman, not able to hold her,” Mrs. Kemper said, as she reluctantly complied with the request.

“Yes, and I—have eaten nothing to-day—and have walked many miles.”

“Poor soul!” exclaimed Irene, the kind-hearted mistress of the shanty, coming in with the tea. “Here, drink this, and I’ll bring you some supper. You look more dead than alive, and the rain has soaked you through and through. Dear, dear! you’ll catch your death o’ cold!”

She raised the wanderer’s head as she spoke, and held the cup to her lips.

It was eagerly drained to the last drop, and seemed to revive the poor creature greatly.

Food was brought, and the babe devoured it as if half famished, but the mother ate sparingly. She was evidently very ill, almost dying, thought those about her, and hastened to do all in their power for her relief and comfort.

Plainly she was, as Mrs. Kemper had said, no common tramp: there was lady-like refinement in face, voice, and manner; her accent was pure, her speech correct and even elegant, as, in answer to kindly inquiries, she gave a brief account of the causes of her present sad condition.

At an early age she had been left an orphan and without any natural protector; had married some three years ago, and two years later her husband had died, leaving her penniless, in feeble health, and with a babe to support. She had managed for a time to earn a scanty living by needlework, but there was little demand for it where she lived, and wages were very low; so, taking her child in her arms, she had set out in search of other employment or a better location.

It had proved a long, weary quest, and here she was, in utter destitution and about, she greatly feared, to die, and leave her helpless babe with none to love or care for it.

With the last words a great sob burst from her bosom; and clasping the little creature close,

“Ah my darling, my little Ethel, if I might but take you with me!” she moaned in anguish.

“Ah now don’t take on so,” Irene said kindly. “You’ll be better to-morrow. Walking all day in the cold, and gettin’ wet too, it’s no wonder you’re down-hearted like; but cheer up,

you’ll get over it and find work, and maybe see as good days as ever you did.”

The wanderer thanked her with a grateful look, as she continued silently to caress Ethel; the child, no longer cold and hungry, hanging about her mother’s neck, stroking her face lovingly, and prattling in innocent glee.

Mrs. Kemper watched her with delighted, longing eyes, the tears starting to them once and again.

“What a lovely, darling little creature she is!” she whispered to her husband; “just the age our Nellie was.” And then she added a few words in a still lower tone.

He nodded acquiescence; and turning to the mother, said that he and his wife would like to adopt the child and bring it up as their own; that they would do so if she would at once give it up entirely to them.

A look of mingled grief and terror came over her face at the bare suggestion. She clutched her treasure in a death-like grasp.

“No, no! how could I? how could I?” she cried, “my baby! my precious baby! my all! no, no, never, never!”

“Take time to consider,” he said soothingly. “I am sorry to distress you, but, as you have yourself said, your child will soon need another protector, and it is very unlikely that another will be readily found to do as well by her as we would.”

“But wait—wait till I am gone!” she moaned. “She is my all, my all! Oh, ’tis hard to die and leave her! My baby, my baby, your mother’s heart will break!” and the tears fell like rain on the wondering little face upturned to hers.

“Don’t ky, Ethel’s mamma! Ethel love ’oo!” cooed the babe, lifting her dress to wipe away the tears, while with the other arm she clung about her neck, then kissing her wet cheek again and again.

Mrs. Kemper, with great tears of sympathy rolling down her own cheeks, knelt at the wanderer’s side, and, taking one thin hand in hers, said:

“I feel for you, my poor, poor friend! I do indeed. I know a mother’s heart, for I once had a little one like this, and when death snatched her from me I would gladly have gone down into the grave with her, for she was my only one. That was ten years ago. I have never had another, and it is not likely I ever shall; and now when you feel that you must leave this darling, will you not let me have her to fill the vacant place in my heart—in *our* hearts and home, for my husband will love her dearly too, and be a good father to her?”

“Oh, gladly, when—when I am gone!”

“But we cannot wait; we must go on our journey in another hour. And it will be to you only parting a little sooner; for her good too. You cannot be selfish where your dear child is concerned.”

“No, no, God knows I would suffer anything for her. I love her better than my own soul. But I cannot give her up till—I must. Have pity, have pity! she is all I have left—parents, sister, husband, home, all—everything gone but her—my precious, precious baby! Oh, don’t, don’t ask me to let her go from my arms while I live!” she pleaded in heart-broken accents, and with bitter sobs and tears.

“We would not if it could be helped,” sobbed Mrs. Kemper, “but it cannot; and for her sake you will give her to

us now?”

Mr. Kemper joined his arguments and entreaties to those of his wife. They engaged to do all in their power for the well-being and happiness of the little one, treating her in every respect as if she were their own offspring, on the one condition that she should be given up entirely to them, never to be claimed by any one—even a near relative, or the mother herself, should she by any possibility survive.

Mr. Kemper had torn a leaf from his note-book, and, with pen and ink furnished by Irene, had drawn up a deed of gift to that effect, which he was urging the mother to sign.

“No, no! I can never, *never* agree to *that*!” she cried in reference to the last stipulation. “Live without my own precious child! never, never!”

“A mere form,” he said. “You cannot live many days, my good woman; do you not feel that it is so?”

She but clasped her child closer, while her whole frame shook with the violence of her emotion. She seemed almost ready to expire with the mental anguish superadded to her great physical prostration.

At length the distant rumble of an approaching train was heard.

“There, you have but a moment left for decision,” said the gentleman; “that is the train we must take. Will you sacrifice your child’s welfare or your own feelings?”

She was now seated beside the table, her child asleep in her arms.

He laid the deed of gift he had made out before her as he spoke, and put a pen between her fingers.

She lifted her eyes to his with a look of wild anguish fit to move a heart of stone.

He simply pointed to the unconscious babe.

She looked at it, seized the pen, hurriedly scrawled a name at the foot of the deed, and fell back fainting.

But the shrill whistle of the locomotive and the thunder of the train close at hand aroused her.

“We must go now; let me take her,” Mrs. Kemper was saying in tones tremulous with great compassion. “I will love her dearly, dearly; I will cherish her as the apple of my eye. Let me wrap this warm shawl around her.”

“No, Dolly, I’ll carry her,” Mr. Kemper said, in a tone of half-suppressed delight, as he finished buttoning up his overcoat after safely depositing the note-book, with the deed of gift, in an inner pocket.

But silently the mother put them both aside. There was agony in her wan, emaciated face. She could not speak for the choking in her throat; but she strained the child to her heart, laid her cold white cheek to its warm and rosy face and kissed it passionately again and again.

“We must go,” repeated Mrs. Kemper. “Oh, my heart aches for you, but we *must* go!”

“We must indeed, poor thing! there’s not a moment to be lost,” added Mr. Kemper, taking the child from her with gentle force. “Here, this will supply your needs while you live, I think,” putting a roll of notes into her hand.

She dropped them as if a serpent had stung her, and with a wild cry rushed after him, as, hastily wrapping a shawl about the infant, he ran with it toward the train, his wife close behind him.

They had already tarried almost too long; had scarcely time to gain the platform of the nearest car ere the train swept swiftly on its way.

“My child, my child! give me back my child!” shrieked the distracted mother, pursuing with outstretched arms, the storm beating pitilessly on her uncovered head, her long, dark hair streaming in the wind.

For a moment she seemed to fly over the ground, love and despair lending her unnatural strength and speed; the next—as the train was lost to sight in the depths of the forest—she tottered and would have fallen but for the strong arm of a kindly switchman, who, hastily setting down his lantern, sprang forward just in time to save her.

“She’s in a dead faint, poor thing!” he muttered to himself. “Here, Bill,” to a comrade, “take a holt and help me to carry her into the depot.”

“Who is she, Jack? an’ what ails her?” asked Bill, hurrying up and holding his lantern high, while he peered curiously into the white, unconscious face.

“No time to talk till we git her in out o’ the wet,” returned Jack gruffly.

They laid her down on the settee.

“She’s a human critter and in sore trouble, that’s all I know,” remarked Jack quietly, drawing his coat-sleeve across his eyes as the two stood gazing upon the pitiful sight.

CHAPTER II.
RESCUED.

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“Amid all life’s quests,
There seems but worthy one—to do men good.”—Bailey.

A light covered wagon had just drawn up at the depot door, and out of it quickly stepped an elderly gentleman. Hurrying in with youthful alacrity, he glanced with eager haste from side to side of the dingy apartment. A look of keen disappointment swept over his features, changing instantly to one of grief and terror as his eye fell upon the little group about the settee.

“What—who—who is it? What has happened?” he asked tremulously, turning pale, and laying his hand on a chair-back as if to steady himself; then heaving a sigh of relief as the men stepped aside, giving him a view of the prostrate form, Jack Strong saying:

“It’s not Mr. Rolfe, sir, but on’y a poor female woman as has fainted. Mr. Rolfe, he didn’t come. Somebody’s took her child away from her, I do believe. Leastways she was screamin’ for it, and runnin’ arter the cars, which of course she couldn’t ketch. I reckon she’s sick too. Looks mighty bad, anyhow.”

“So she does, poor creature!” said the gentleman, approaching. “We must do something at once to bring her to. Water, Jack—quick! I wish Dr. Wright was here.”

But at that instant a moan came from the pale lips, and the eyes—large, dark, and lustrous—opened wide. They caught the pitying gaze of the new-comer. Feebly she lifted

her arms toward him, then dropped them again, faintly murmuring:

“You have been gone so long, father, and I am ill—dying. Take me home.”

“That I will!” he said, obeying a sudden generous impulse, for he was much moved by the appeal. “Jack!”

“Do you know her, sir, Mr. Heywood?” queried the switchman in surprise.

“No more than you do, Jack, but surely she is in sore need of help, and I’m able to give it. In fact, I think it is a plain call of Providence. I’ve brought the dearborn, thinking to take home Rolfe and his luggage; but he hasn’t come, and here it is—the very thing to carry her in.

“But wait a moment; what do you know of her? Is she quite alone?”

“Indeed I don’t know nothin’ more than—” began the switchman, but was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Irene.

“Is she livin’? where is she?” asked the girl, rushing into their midst breathless with haste and excitement. “Here’s some money the gentleman gave her, and she throwed it on the floor; I reckon because she thought ’twas paying her for the child.”

“My child! my Ethel!” cried the wanderer, starting up, but only to fall back again, overcome with weakness. “Come to mother, darling, come!” she murmured, her hand feebly extended, her eyes closed, while she moved her head restlessly from side to side.

“She’s out of her mind,” whispered the girl.

Mr. Heywood nodded assent; and drawing Irene aside, asked a few rapid questions, in reply to which she imparted all the information she could give in regard to the sufferer.

All he heard but strengthened his resolution to befriend the poor creature, and he at once set about making preparations for removing her to his own house, some three miles distant.

A quantity of clean straw was bestowed in the bottom of the dearborn, a buffalo-robe laid over it, making a not uncomfortable bed. On this the invalid was gently placed, and carefully covered with a second robe.

She made no resistance. She was quite delirious, and knew nothing of what was passing around her.

“Carefully now, Mike,” the old gentleman said, taking his seat beside the coachman; “the poor thing’s in no state to bear unnecessary jolting.”

“Hallo! hold on there a minute; here’s a message for you, Mr. Heywood!” cried the telegraph operator, rushing out from his office with a piece of paper in his hand. “From Rolfe, sir; he’s all right—missed the train, that’s all; will be here to-morrow morning.”

“God willing,” added the old gentleman reverently, taking the paper with trembling fingers; “and His name be praised that my boy is safe. I’m obliged to you, Dixon.”

The storm had increased in violence: the showers of rain and sleet now fell almost without intermission, and the wind blew with a fury that threatened danger from falling trees as they drove on through the forest, their progress necessarily slow because of the state of the road and the intense darkness.

The raging of the tempest was not favorable to conversation, and few words passed between them, while the woman for the most part slept heavily under the influence of a narcotic, only a moan or a muttered word or two now and then escaping her lips.

Mr. Heywood was one of the early settlers of Iowa. He had invested largely in land on his arrival, and in the course of years had, by its rise in value, become quite wealthy. The log cabin in the wilderness, in which the early years of his married life were passed, and where his children had first seen the light, was now replaced by a large, handsome brick house standing in the midst of well-kept gardens and cultivated fields. “Sweetbrier” Mrs. Heywood had named the place, and it was often pointed out to strangers as one of the finest residences in the county. The Heywoods had not, however, been exempt from trials: four out of six children had passed away from earth. Of the two survivors, the eldest, a son, had emigrated to California several years before this, and was now returning for his first visit to his old home, parents, and sister.

Ada, the daughter, a fair girl of eighteen, was full ten years younger than Rolfe, he being the eldest and she the youngest born.

In the sitting-room at Sweetbrier mother and daughter eagerly awaited the coming of the loved travellers—father and son.

The room was tastefully furnished, a bright wood fire crackled cheerily on the hearth, and an astral lamp on the centre-table shed a soft, mellow light on two happy faces, on books, pictures, lounges, and easy chairs.

In the adjoining room a table was set out with snowy damask, fine French china, and silverware, in readiness for the feast preparing in the kitchen, whither Mrs. Heywood occasionally hied to oversee the labors of her cook.

“How the wind does blow!” she remarked, returning from one of these little excursions. “It’s a dreadful night for your father to be out. I wish Rolfe had come yesterday.”

“I wish he had,” said Ada, running to the window. “How very dark it is! I’m sure they can’t see the road, or any tree that may be blown down across it. Mother, I am afraid they’ve met with some accident, for it’s nearly ten o’clock—high time they were here.”

“We’ll not distress ourselves, dear, with anticipating evil; both we and they are in the Lord’s keeping,” replied the mother, striving to put away anxious thoughts. “I think Peace and Plenty will be able to find the road; I never knew them to miss it yet, even in nights as dark as this. Come, sit down by the fire, Ada, and read me again the letter you received from your brother the other day; that will help to while away the time till they come.”

The girl complied, drawing the letter from her pocket, and seating herself on an ottoman at her mother’s feet.

“I wonder,” she said, refolding the missive, “that Rolfe has never married. I pity the somebody that’s missing such a good husband.”

“Time enough yet,” said the mother, smiling; “he is only twenty-eight. There! I hear the rattle of the wheels.” Both sprang up and hurried to the outer door, each heart beating high with delighted expectation.

They were just in time to see Mr. Heywood alight from the vehicle, which had already drawn up before the entrance.

“My dear,” he said, hurrying up the steps into the portico, “don’t be alarmed. I have not brought our boy, but he’s safe and well; sent me a telegram to say he’d missed the train, and will be here to-morrow, God willing.”

“Well,” she said, with a sigh, “it’s a sore disappointment, but I’m thankful it’s no worse. You’ve had a hard ride, and __”

“Have brought an unexpected guest with me,” he interrupted hastily. “Mary, dear, remembering the Master’s words, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me,’ you’ll not object to taking her in, for she may be one of His.”

“Who, Joseph?” she asked in a startled tone.

“A poor, forsaken, dying creature, Mary; I’ve not been able to learn her name.” And he hurried to the assistance of Mike, who had fastened his horses and was preparing to lift the woman from the wagon.

Taking each an end of the buffalo-robe on which she lay, they carried her in between them and laid her gently down before the sitting-room fire.

Mrs. Heywood had hastened to order a room and bed made ready, and now, returning with such restoratives as were at hand, knelt by the side of the sufferer to apply them.

“How young! how pretty!” she said in surprise, gazing down at the unconscious face with its broad white brow, cheeks now slightly flushed with fever, sweet mouth, and

large, lustrous eyes, which suddenly opened wide upon her, then closed again, while a deep moan escaped the lips and the head moved restlessly from side to side.

“She’s very ill, poor dear!” said the old lady. “Ada, my child, don’t come near lest her disease should be contagious. We ought to have the doctor here as soon as possible, Joseph.”

“I’ll go for him,” said Mike, starting for the door.

“Hark!” cried Ada, “there’s a horse galloping up the drive. Who can it be coming at this hour on such a night?”

Mrs. Heywood rose to her feet, and they all stood for a moment intently listening; then, at a “Hallo!” from a familiar voice,

“Why, it’s the doctor himself!” they exclaimed simultaneously, the old gentleman and Ada running out to the hall to greet him.

He had already alighted from his horse, and was coming in.

“All well?” he asked almost breathlessly, not even pausing to say good-evening.

“Yes—no!” returned Mr. Heywood. “This way as quick as you can, doctor; we’ve a poor creature here who is very sick indeed.”

“Ah, that explains it,” remarked the physician, as if thinking aloud, while hastily following his host.

He pronounced his patient in a brain-fever and very ill indeed.

“The poor creature (evidently a lady) must have been half famished for months past, and has hardly strength to cope with the disease,” he said, “yet with the blessing of

Providence upon skilful treatment and the best of nursing”—with a bow and a smile directed to Mrs. Heywood—“she may possibly recover.”

“Poor dear! my heart is strongly drawn to her,” said the old lady, twinkling away a tear as she bent over the bed where they had laid the sufferer, and softly smoothed back the hair from the pale forehead, “and she shall not die for lack of anything it is in my power to do for her.”

“Singular!” murmured the doctor meditatively. Then glancing from the face of his patient to those of his old friends, “It doesn’t seem to have occurred to you to wonder how I came here so opportunely to-night,” he remarked.

“Why no, to be sure,” said Mr. Heywood. “How was it? We have been so taken up with this poor creature’s critical condition as to have no thought for anything else.”

“Just so. Well, I was hurrying home from the bedside of a patient some two miles from here; very anxious to get home, too, out of the darkness and storm; when suddenly it was strongly impressed upon my mind that I was needed here and ought to come at once. It was a good half-mile out of my way, as you know; bad road, too, through the thickest of the woods, where the wind was blowing down trees, and one might at any moment fall on and crush me and my horse; but so strong was the impression I speak of that I really could not resist. And there surely was a providence in it,” he added reverently, “for by to-morrow morning medical aid would have come too late to give this poor woman even a chance for life.”

“I am sure of it,” said the old lady; “and in her coming here also. I shall watch with her through the night, doctor.”

“And I shall share your vigil,” he replied.

The morning sun rose bright and clear, but its cheerful light brought no alleviation of the wanderer’s pain. She lay tossing on her couch unconscious of all the solicitude felt for her, all the kindness lavished upon her, now muttering incoherently, now crying out for “her child, her Ethel, her sweet, darling baby.”

Immediately after breakfast Mr. Heywood went himself in search of a nurse, and having procured one, and seen her established by the bedside, he and Mike again drove over to the depot at Clearfield, reaching there in time for the morning train. When they returned Rolfe was with them.

CHAPTER III.
ONE FOR LIFE.

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“And doth not a meeting like this make amends
For all the long years I’ve been wand’ring away?”—Anon.

A noble, handsome fellow was Rolfe Heywood, and though the suffering stranger guest was neither forgotten nor neglected, “joy crowned the board” at Sweetbrier upon his return, and the weeks that followed were full of quiet happiness to himself, parents, and sister.

He was succeeding well in the new State of his adoption, and hoped to persuade these dear ones to join him there at some not very distant day.

He took a benevolent interest in the sick woman, and rejoiced with the others when the physician pronounced the crisis of the disease past and the patient in a fair way to recover.

“She’s come to her full senses now, and there ain’t no doing anything with her,” announced the nurse a few days later, looking in at the open door of the room where the family were at breakfast. “Not a morsel of food will she take, not a drop of medicine will she swallow. She just lays there with her eyes shut, and every once in a while I see a big tear a-rollin’ down them thin, white cheeks o’ hern.”

She withdrew with the last words, and while finishing their meal the family held a consultation on the case.

On leaving the table, Mrs. Heywood repaired to the sick-chamber.

The face resting on the snowy pillows was not only wan and emaciated, but wore an expression of deepest melancholy. The eyes were closed, but not in sleep, as Mrs. Heywood at first thought. Stepping softly to the bedside, she stood silently gazing upon her, thinking how sad it was that one so young and fair should be already weary of life.

“My baby, my baby!” came from the pale lips in low, heart-broken accents, and tears trembled on the long silken lashes that lay like dark shadows on the white cheeks.

“My poor, poor child,” said the old lady, bending down to press a gentle kiss upon her brow, “do not despair. Try to get well, and who knows but we shall be able to find your treasure and restore her to you.”

“Yes, to be sure,” said the nurse, putting a spoon to her patient’s lips. “Swallow this that the doctor left for you, there’s a dear, and then take a little of this beef-tea, and I’ll warrant you’ll feel a heap better.”

“No, no, take it away. Let me die in peace,” she sighed, averting her face, and with her wasted hand feebly putting the spoon aside.

“I want to die—I’ve nothing to live for now.” And great tears rolled down the pale sad face. “Ah, me! I gave her to them, and they will never, never give her up! Oh, my darling! my baby! my little Ethel!” she cried, bursting into hysterical weeping.

Endearments, persuasions, caresses, reasoning, exhortation on the duty of doing everything in our power to preserve the life God has given—all were tried by turns, but in vain. She lay there in silent despair, seeming neither to hear nor heed.

Though nearly as much interested in the suffering stranger as were his parents and sister, Rolfe had not ventured into the sick-room, and so had never yet seen her face; nor had he ever heard her voice or learned her name, of which last, indeed, they were all ignorant.

Something was taking him to his own apartments that evening on leaving the tea-table, when he met Mrs. Scott, the nurse, coming down the stairs.

“Do you leave your patient alone?” he asked.

“Never for long. I’m going down to my supper, and I’ll speak to Miss Ada to come up and take my place for a bit.”

She had left the door of the sick-room ajar. A moan caught Rolfe’s ear in passing, then the words, “Oh, my baby, my baby!” He started violently, a strange pallor suddenly overspreading his face. He stood still, intently listening. The words were repeated; and hastily pushing the door open, he stepped to the bedside.

“Ethel, Ethel! Can it be? Oh, Ethel, my light, my life!”

“Rolfe!” she cried, starting up in the bed, with both hands extended, the large, lustrous eyes full of joy and amazement.

He took her in his arms, seating himself on the side of the bed; her head dropped upon his shoulder, and folding her to his heart, “Yes, it is Rolfe,” he said. “Oh, Ethel, have I found you again? Are you mine at last?”

“Yes, yes,” she faintly whispered. “But they told me you were married to another; then—”

“Never, never, my darling! I have loved you always—you alone. Oh, why did you write so coldly, rejecting my offered heart and hand, and telling me that another had won you?”

There was no answer. The strength excitement had supplied for the moment was gone, and she lay apparently lifeless in his arms.

With a sharp cry of agony he laid her back upon her pillow, and began chafing the cold hands and pressing passionate kisses on the pale lips.

Hearing his cry as she neared the door of the sick-room, Ada hurried in, full of wonder and alarm.

“Rolfe!” she exclaimed in astonishment.

“Ada, make haste! Throw up the window to give her air! Hand me that bottle of ammonia—quick, quick! she’s dying! she’s dead! Oh, Ethel, my life, my love! have I found you only to lose you again?” he groaned, redoubling his efforts to restore her to consciousness, while Ada, divided between amazement at his presence there and excessive agitation, and her fear that life was really extinct, hastily obeyed his orders.

“Thank God, she yet lives!” he said in tones tremulous with emotion, as at length the eyelids began to quiver and a long, sighing breath came from the white lips.

“Rolfe,” they whispered very low and feebly.

“Yes, yes, I am here, my poor little Ethel,” he answered, kneeling by her couch and fondly caressing her hair and cheek. “You will live for me, and nothing in life shall ever part us again.”

A beautiful smile crept over her face as she opened her eyes for a single instant; then closing them again, she fell asleep with her hand in his.

Ada stood on the farther side of the bed, looking and listening in increasing surprise and wonder.

Mrs. Heywood and the nurse stole in on tiptoe and beheld the scene in no less astonishment and perplexity, but Rolfe motioned them all away, and kept guard over the slumbers of the invalid as one who had a superior and undoubted right.

She slept quietly, awoke refreshed, and refused neither food nor medicine at his hands.

But he would not let her talk.

“Wait, my Ethel, till you are stronger,” he said, “and then we will tell each other all. In the mean time we may rest content in the knowledge that we are restored to each other, and no earthly power can part us.”

Lips and eyes smiled brightly, and a faint color stole into her cheek, but faded again as she moaned sadly, “My baby, my baby!” the tears stealing down her face.

“We will find her; she shall be restored to you. Nothing is impossible to a determined will,” he said with energy.

She believed him, and once more resigned herself to peaceful slumber.

It was now near midnight, yet a bright light burned in the sitting-room. Mr. and Mrs. Heywood and their daughter, too much excited to think of retiring, sat there waiting for they scarce knew what. Reluctantly leaving Ethel to the care of the nurse, Rolfe joined them.

“Yes,” he said, in answer to their inquiring looks, “we knew and loved each other years ago in Jefferson, where I first set up business. She was an orphan, and the sweetest creature I ever saw, but very much under the influence of an older sister—a proud, selfish, scheming, domineering woman. She, I have always thought it was, who came