

Literature.

The Old Turnpike Road.

BY VIRGINIA F. TOWNSEND.

I easily persuaded my cousin to go to Longwood and take up his residence in the gray old stone house, which my grandfather built. We had the interior renovated and modernized, without seriously altering its old-fashioned physiognomy. For I am no iconoclast. Early in the preceding March we had settled down here. It was the only spot on earth which was home to me. Fred and Annie were enchanted with their new residence, and we daily congratulated each other on the success of our project.

"Bryant," Annie began, in her light, quick way, while the silk ran in a crimson ripple over her rapid fingers, "I think it's high time you were waked up. You've just done nothing but settle down here over your books, ever since we got snugly under this blessed old roof. Fred says you ought to pass two-thirds of your days under the trees, from this time to November."

"You mustn't make it so pleasant in the house, then, that a fellow can't muster up courage to get out of it."

"Well, if that's all that's wanted to get you out, I assure you nothing shall be left undone on my part," with a comical dip of her bright head, and an arch laugh running out of her blue eyes.

"And accomplish it, no doubt, because you are a woman; but, Annie, if you got me outdoors, it wouldn't be far, or long;" and I glanced at the crutch which stood at the foot of the lounge.

A little sadness crept across the brightness of her face; "Oh, yes, you will, Bryant;" but the sentence was broken into by an urgent summons from some neighbor, which at once took Annie down stairs. I lay still, amidst the bright sunshine and dozing winds, but, for awhile, the thoughts which came over my soul were like those cold mists which sail in from the northeast, and cover the face of the earth every November.

I thought of my bright, careless affluent youth; of my proud, strong manhood all crushed out of me in an hour; of the broken dreams, and health, and hope; of the slow life, and the crippled limb that I must carry to the grave; and I laid my head back with a slow, weary headache, and almost longed to die.

And with that last thought a new light and warmth came through the mist, and glorified it. Whatsoever my life was, my death would be better for the evil that had befallen me. Had I not learned in that long, wasting sickness, patience and submission, love to God and to man?

"Uncle, Uncle Bryant, see what I've got for you!"

A slender thread of sound came through the open door, and there was the soft patter of a child's feet in the room, and a little head with clusters of shining curls, and pretty red lips that were always full of the motion of talk and laughter, came up to me, and a little hand, that was like a sea-shell, held up triumphantly before my eyes a cluster of white roses. Large, queenly, luscious flowers they were, their snowy blossoms full of heavy passionate fragrance, as they lay half sheltered in a covert of green leaves.

"Oh, Harry, my pet, where did you get these beautiful roses?"

"Miss Willoughby gave them to me," lisped the voice of six summers.

"And who is Miss Willoughby?"

"She's my school-teacher, you see; and I went home with her to-day, and when I saw the flowers growing all round the front window I spoke right out, 'Oh how Uncle Bryant would like some of them!' And Miss Willoughby smiled, and said, 'Would he dear?' And then she gave me these, but I knew she meant 'em for you, though she didn't say so."

"What do you know about this Miss Willoughby, Annie?" I asked of Harry's mother, when she returned to my room.

"Very little; I've seen her but once. She struck me as a quiet, ladylike person; a little over twenty; and, altogether, her manner pleased me. She teaches the district school, and I sent Harry to her, just to get the little rogue out of the way for a few hours. I remember, now, that Mrs. Peekham told me the school teacher's name was Margaret Willoughby, that she wrote poetry occasionally, and supported her grandmother, who is an infirm and very old woman."

Margaret Willoughby, Margaret Willoughby! The name seemed to go in slow, silver liquid echoes up and down my thoughts, as though it came from some far country in the past, and wound through all the years, and called to me, soft and faintly, "Margaret Willoughby."

"That's it!" I brought my hand down suddenly, and with no little emphasis, on the table.

"What's it?" cried Annie, half springing from her seat with the start I had given her.

"Something I've found in my thoughts."

that tenderness and sympathy which Luther meant when he said: "The heart of a Christian woman is the sweetest thing this side of heaven." And Margaret Willoughby was this—a lady by the will of God! I knew it during that morning that we passed together, for school had a week's vacation.

We rambled over many subjects, and, though I cannot recall these, I remember perfectly the impression which Margaret Willoughby's conversation left on me. What struck me at first most prominently was a kind of childish artlessness which wound its golden thread through her whole speech and manner; yet it was tempered with a sweet womanly gravity, and dignity, and thoughtfulness, just as the expression in her eyes was by the rest of her face. Perhaps somewhat of this was owing to her small knowledge of the world, for she told me she had never been thirty miles from Longwood in her life. But she had read, studied, lived; and so she had bloomed into her young, sweet, fragrant womanhood like the white roses she had plucked for me.

I saw the young school-teacher very often after this; for, as the summer grew, I gained strength of body and soul, and we had frequent rides together; and there was a little fringe of woods back of the small white cottage where we used to go, and sit, and listen to the brook, whose silver waters tangled themselves with gurgling leap and laughter over the stones; and Margaret was never weary of listening with those bright child-eyes and that womanly face of hers to the stories I had to tell her of foreign countries. She had read much and seen little, and this always gives to a woman a kind of a strange, contradictory air and manner. She had something, too, to tell me of her life; of its struggles and aspirations, and how, after she had attended the village Academy five years, she was offered the situation of village school-teacher, and since then her grandmother's increasing age and infirmities had rendered her unfit for any active cares or duties. I looked at the small, trembling figure, and wondered at the brave, true, strong soul which it held.

"I shall leave you here to take care of yourselves with a great many doubts and misgivings, but there's no help for it," said Cousin Annie, as we all gathered in the sitting-room after tea, one evening just in the opening of September. She had been summoned to the bedside of her mother, who was ill—not dangerously so, but in the state of mingled nervous excitement and prostration which required her daughter's care and society, and Frederick had given his wife "leave of absence" for a month.

We all felt sad enough at the thought of missing Annie's bright face and cheery voice about the house, and I knew the lightness of her tones was assumed to hide something deeper in her voice, as she pushed an ottoman to her husband's feet, and, throwing herself on this, rested her cheek on his knee while Harry perched himself on the other.

"I expect Bryant and I'll make awkward work, keeping old bachelor's hall," laughed the young husband, as he smoothed the yellow silken hair that lay in its abundant beauty on his knee.

"Our case looks dubious, Fred. We shall have nobody to scold us for not being punctual at dinner, or keeping the rooms in disorder—in short for committing any of these numerous delinquencies by which the sons of Adam have managed to keep the tongues and tempers of the daughters of Eve in a constant state of excitement during the last six thousand years."

Annie lifted her head, and shook with playful threatening her white hand in my face. "Bryant," she said, "I wish you would take one of those daughters of Eve you've just malign'd so to wife before the next twenty-four hours goes over your head."

"Thank you for your benevolent wishes. If I could only find her now!" Here Harry slipped off his father's knee, and pattered up to me, and put his pretty face close to my ear. "Uncle Bryant," he said, confidentially and earnestly, "I know of somebody you could get to be your wife."

"Who is it, my pet?"

"Miss Margaret Willoughby."

How his father leaned his head back and laughed, while his mother clapped her hands and shouted!

"But how do you know she'll have me, my boy?"—lifting the little fellow on my knee.

"He nestled his head on my shoulder. 'I'll ask her to-morrow, and see.'"

Another peal of mirth; Annie's sweet laughter tangling in and out of her husband's.

"No, thank you, Harry; I prefer to 'speak for myself' on such a subject, or I fear that I should meet with no better success than Miles Standish did with the Puritan maiden, Priscilla."

"And probably Uncle Bryant will select a somewhat different 'maiden' from your school-teacher, Harry, when he does speak for himself."

"How do you mean, Annie?"

"Why, I mean different in position, family, fortune, everything. Do you know, Bryant, Mrs. Peekham was wondering this afternoon that you could visit Miss Willoughby so often. She says she has never had any position in Longwood, that she's low-bred, and her grandmother kept the toll-gate!"

"And what did you tell her, Annie?"

"Oh, I told her that I knew nothing about Miss Willoughby, having never met her but once, only she was a little protégée of yours once, though I knew you had no serious intentions in that quarter."

"How did you know it?"

She turned and faced me. "Why Bryant, you haven't have you?"

"It has struck me that I have."

"Well, that's cool, old fellow?" It was Fred interposed here, not knowing exactly how to take me.

"Now, Bryant, are you in sober earnest?" asked Annie, coming over to me.

"Yes; I think I shall take Harry's advice, and ask Miss Willoughby to be my wife."

"Oh, Bryant, what will Mrs. Peekham—what will the world say?"

Do you think I should stop to inquire, Annie Mathers? Do you think when I found a woman whose soul was crowned with those rare and beautiful jewels above all price, which make a loving and Christian womanhood—do you think I would not gather her to my heart sooner than a crowned queen, and holding her there, its joy and light and completeness, do you think I should care what Mrs. Peekham or the world said of it?"

"No, I wouldn't if I were you, Bryant!" out spoke Annie, for her heart was full of noble and generous impulses that responded quickly to the right touch.

"No, a thousand times no!" answered the deep, emphatic tones of her husband.

And then I told them a little of all Margaret Willoughby had been to me; how unconsciously, the knowledge and the love of her had wakened my life into true and higher purpose; and how her sweet, childlike faith had called to mine, which lay cold and dormant in my soul; and how the great sorrow of my life had taught me, at last, a new submission to the will of God, our father; and how I who once longed to die, was now willing and rejoiced to live for His sake. And when I concluded, my cousins came and placed their hands in mine, and said: "Bryant, may you be very happy with the wife of your choosing?"

I went up toward evening to the little white cottage set like a cup among the trees. Margaret was sprinkling a moss rose-bush, in the front yard, with a small watering-pot. She came toward me, her brown eyes full of their shy smiles, and the soft flush going in and out of her face. She wore a lawn dress, with sprigs of pink scattered over the white ground, and the sleeves were looped back from the small white arms. We talked awhile of the sunset clouds, of the flowers in the yard, of the farewell of the summer, and then I said to her, "I have a book, Miss Margaret, and out of its sweet, fresh, perfuming pages I have selected a little sketch which, with your permission, I shall read to you."

"Thank you," and we went into the parlor together; but when I drew the book from my pocket, she glanced at it and said, with a sudden drawing in of her breath, "Oh is that the book?"

"You have seen it, then?"

"I—I have heard of it," and she turned away, and seemed very intent on smoothing the folds of her dress.

The book was the one which I had read that day that she had given Harry the roses.

It struck me that her manner was a little singular, but I sat down and opened the book, and she sat a little way from me, and listened to my reading. She sat, as I said, a little apart from me, her hand lying still in her lap, except when the little fingers fluttered restlessly against each other, for they had a kind of habit of motion. The sketch was a very brief one; a little exquisite, pathetic picture of a country home and hearts made very heavy with the anguish of misapprehension and parting, and glad unspeakably with the sudden joy of meeting and reconciliation.

"Isn't it a touching little thing?" I asked, as I closed.

"I—do you like it so much?" and her face was radiant.

"Yes—don't you?"

She opened her lips—her blushes came and went—suddenly it flashed across me—"Margaret, you wrote this book."

She tried to look astonished but she was not used to dissemble. She buried her face in her hands and broke into sobs.

"Margaret, dear Margaret, have I no right to your secret—the right of one who would be neither friend nor brother, but more, and better than these?"

She understood me, but only sobs kept swaying back and forth the small, slender figure.

Once, and once only, I tried her. Margaret, you do not answer me. Is it because you cannot love a man who is crippled for life? whose health can never be?"

Her face sprang up from her hands. The tears were held in check upon it.

"Oh, Mr. Hamilton, you do not think so meanly of me as that!" and I answered.

Then, for the first time, I gathered her to my heart, and kissed the red blossom of my lips, and thanked God that she belonged to me for life; that she would walk by my side, true, tender, sweet, loving till death took us apart—my wife, in the best and holiest meaning of that blessed word.

Two years she has been this—two years which have taught me how priceless was the pearl I found on the old turnpike road—the pearl that I found, and wore on my heart—Margaret Willoughby!

[THE END.]

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