The Acton Free Press

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AN EASTER STORY

"Please tell us a story, mamma,"
The children beg to-night,
As I tuck them up in their beds,
And softly turn down the light.

Then I fill them again the story
Of that Easter garden fair,
And of Christ, our loving Saviour,
So peacefully sleeping there.

The garden was bathed in moonlight,
—Flowers filled the air with perfume;
Only the tread of the soldier
Could be heard about the tomb.

The morning brought the awakening,
The stone was rolled away,
And in this Resurrection
Came to us all "Easter Day."

I find my little ones sleeping,
While I muse on the story read;
Our loved ones who have left us,
Have only gone early to bed.

God's garden is filled with our dear ones,
They are the seed he has sown—
Just waiting his final summons,
To burst into life, full blown.

—Carrie L. Paxton.

EASTER IN THE OLD ELMWOOD ORCHARD

By Martha L. Coolidge.

ELMWOOD, the old Rossiter place, had seen many changes without changing itself. The square Colonial house with its pillared porch might have sheltered Washington or Lafayette for a night, though it laid no claim to such an honor. The lawn in front of the house defied the droughts of the driest summer, for the turf, a century old, had sent its roots down far. The elms which gave the place its name had altered but little in Irene's lifetime, and only to add new majesty to their former grace and strength. Behind the house and to the east lay the hill orchard, the gnarled old trees climbing the slope of a hill till a low stone wall checked their advance. A very low wall it was, the smooth, flat stones rather inviting trespassers than otherwise. And indeed, since the first saplings had been set out, the owners of Elmwood had never grudged passers-by such fruit as they cared to gather.

Irene Rossiter loved the old place with a love that strengthened with her strength, at first because it was home, and later the more dearly as its beauty and dignity appealed to her growing taste and understanding. The big, square rooms, the winding staircase, the many-paned windows, the tall trees shading the house, and the orchard climbing the hill, all were eloquent with more than her childish memories, with the traditions of past generations. Irene was proud of the heritage which had come down to her, a name made honorable by clean living and good deeds.

There was Uncle Knight, of course, to count on the other side, though the strange part was that, in the estimation of part of the world, Uncle Knight had added glory to the family name, instead of staining the record. "And you are really related to Knight Rossiter, the artist," Mrs. Hanover, the city woman who spent her summers at Hillside, had said to Irene, with an inflection in her voice that was not flattering. It seemed to say, "How is it possible for you, an unsophisticated country girl, to be connected with a person of distinction?" From that time indeed, she became so patronizingly kind in her treatment of Irene that the latter was glad when the summer was over, and Hillside knew Mrs. Hanover no more.

Irene was not proud of her Uncle Knight, even though he had won distinction in his chosen field. He had been a bright, ambitious boy, a lovable boy, too. His father and mother had not opposed his determination to study art, though it gave them many anxious hours. "If the Lord has given Knight that talent," the father had said, "I guess he meant it to be used." And the mother had replied simply, "Knight can paint pictures to the glory of God as well as anything else."

So he had gone away, studying first in the big city near his home, and later abroad. Irene vaguely remembered the visit he had made on his return to America, the first and only one. She was a shy little girl of seven or eight at the time, and her strongest impression of her Uncle Knight was that he was very different from any one she had ever seen, that he dressed strangely, and talked more strangely still, and that there was a curious shadow on grandmother's face as she listened. He had stayed only a few days, and gone back to the city, promising to return very soon for a longer visit. His mother had never seen him again. Neither had Irene. But the father had.

It was ten years since it had happened, yet Irene sometimes awoke in the night shivering, terrified, living over again the time grandfather came home from that trip to the city. He had gone unexpectedly, without sending his son word. "I'll give Knight a little surprise," he said to his wife, smiling. "And after I've seen his pictures, he can show me some of the sights."

"And tell him that it's been three months since he was here," the mother answered. "It's time he was making us another visit. Tell him he mustn't work hard enough to neglect us here at home."

It was years before Irene knew the sequel. Indeed, she never knew it altogether. But the old man, coming unannounced to his son's studio, had stumbled on a festive gathering of a sort that shamed and shocked him to his heart's core. He was old-fashioned, perhaps, like the house he lived in, and he had one code of morals for talent and plodding mediocrity. His boy's artistic success was to him no compensation for the undermining of his moral nature. The face Irene remembered after that disastrous visit was the face of one who had looked upon his beloved dead.

Knight Rossiter's letters home made a bad matter worse. There was neither shame nor penitence in the flippant lines, but rather an unmistakable sense of superiority. Condescendingly he pointed out that a young man of his gifts and advantages could hardly be expected to be governed by the strait-laced, old-fashioned standards of a country village. His mother's tear-stained letter, written in reply, only made him angry. By and by he had ceased to write. The years passed. Irene had grown from a little girl to womanhood, and Knight Rossiter had never come back to the home of his boyhood. Irene's lip curled over the reverence with which Mr. Hanover spoke his name. He might be a great artist, but he had fallen short in her estimation of being a man.

The year that Irene was eighteen, sharp eyes might have noticed significant signs about the old Rossiter place. The house needed painting. All the years, before, the house surrounded by elms had been immaculate in its snowy whiteness. The lawn was kept close cut as usual that summer, but up in the orchard the grass grew tall, and the trees were not trimmed at the regular time. Mr. Rossiter's step was more halting than usual, too, and an anxiety, like a shadow, lay across his wife's delicate old face. Irene knew the difficulty, and she was pondering over plans till the time should come for speaking. It came at last.

"This can't go on, grandmother, dear," Irene said one day. "I've got to start in to help. There's nothing for me to do here. I'm going to the city and get a position."

"The city! Oh, not that," Mrs. Rossiter cried, and her cheeks blanched instantly. Irene understood.

"Grandmother, don't! You're afraid to have me go — because of Uncle Knight. You don't trust me. You think I'll make a failure just as he did."

"He was such a dear boy," the old lady said. "Such a loving, tender-hearted boy. And he hasn't written home for ten years, Irene. Not a line." The tears ran down her cheeks, and the girl choked over the lump in her throat.

"Grandmother, it's cruel. But don't believe that I'm like him. You can trust me. Say you do." She leaned toward her, half entreating, half commanding. "Grandmother, it would break my heart not to have you sure of me. Say that you are."

She had gone out into the temptations of the big city double-armed. To disappoint the one who waited back in the old home, to fail the sweet spirit that trusted her, would be to dishonor the name she bore. And the thought kept her on the safe side of many a doubtful question. Its the strange, hard, new life, beset with so many pitfalls for unwary feet, the presence of a frail, white old lady was always close at hand. She had battled to sight, dangers to shun, temptations to defy, but failure was out of the question. She had promised grandmother that she might trust her.

Irene met Mrs. Hanover on the street one day late in the winter, and that lady paused to greet her with a real, if rather hurried, kindliness. She was touched by an indefinable change in the girl's face.

"And you've been here all winter, and haven't come to see me!" she said reproachfully.

"I am very busy. I have a position, you know," said Irene, determined not to sail under false colors. But if Mrs. Hanover was surprised, she concealed it.

"You must give me your address, my dear. I'll look you up as soon as I can. Really, I haven't a minute for my own. I often tell my husband that I'm more of a slave than he is, for all that business men say so much about the exactions of business." She ran on thus for five minutes, and then passed on her way, leaving Irene amused, yet somehow cheered by the sight of a familiar face.

The weeks slipped by, and Irene was not surprised at Mrs. Hanover's failure to present herself at the cheap boarding-house. But one night, on her return from work, she found something that did surprise her, and very pleasantly. She went down to dinner in such an uplifted mood that she had no heart to join in the grumbling over the fare.

The girl who sat next her studied Irene's absorbed face with frank curiosity. "I guess you've had good news," she said abruptly.

Irene roused herself from her musings. "Why, yes," she replied. "I just received an invitation to go to see some beautiful pictures. The Spring Exhibit, they call it on the card, I think. It's next Tuesday evening."

"The private view?" exclaimed the other; and as Irene nodded, she added, "You're lucky to have fine clothes enough to wear to that."

Irene laughed. "I've nothing especially nice to wear," she answered. "I'm going to see the pictures, not to be seen."

The other shrugged her shoulders. "It's fine you can feel that way," she returned. "Now I wouldn't care about seeing the finest pictures ever painted, unless I could feel as well dressed as the rest of the crowd."

If for a moment Irene felt a sense of being out of place when on the following Tuesday her card admitted her among a dazzling throng, it was but a transient emotion. Something of the love of beauty which had turned Knight Rossiter's thoughts to the study of art possessed the girl who was of his blood. Heedless of rich gowns and flashing jewels, Irene went from picture to picture absorbedly happy. Nor did she guess that more than one pair of wearied eyes turned from the works of art to dwell upon her innocent girlish happiness.

The room filled. The babel of conversation swelled to deafening proportions. Then all at once Irene stood before a picture, oblivious to the crowd, to staring eyes, to the sudden strange hush that had fallen. Then the rushing tears blotted out the scene from her view. But she could still see it—the slope of the hills and the apple trees, heavy with blossoms, climbing their patient way to the low stone wall. She put her handkerchief to her eyes, sobbing with sudden uncontrollable homesickness, and a hand touched her arm.

"What is your name?"

Through her mist of tears she looked up. His hair had whitened, his face was heavily lined since she had seen him last, but she recognized his eyes. "Oh! Uncle Knight!" she cried.

"Irene!" he gasped. Then he looked about, frowning a little as he met curious glances. "Who is with you, child?"

"No one. I came by myself."

"Let us get away where we can talk," said her uncle. He led her away from the staring crowd. "What are you doing in the city?" he asked abruptly.

"I'm working."

"Working? Where?" The consternation in his voice touched her pride. She straightened herself.

"You needn't be anxious about me, Uncle Knight. Before I came away I told grandmother she could trust me, and so can you."

"I should suppose your grandmother would need you at home," he said with evident irritation. "Why should you work in an office? Is the old place too slow for you? Or are you troubled by the modern ideas of independence?"

"Neither. Her composure was quite restored by now, and she faced him with eyes as steady as his own. "There is a mortgage on the place. Grandfather had to have help with the interest money. So I came."

"A mortgage!" cried Knight, biting his lip. "Outrageous! Why wasn't I told?"

Irene put her hands behind her, as if he had offered alms.

"Do you think we'd take money from one who does not care for us?" Her voice shook with suppressed feeling. "You're mother has hungered for ten years for the sight of you, Uncle Knight. She waits for every mail, still hoping there will be a letter. I love Elmwood. It's the only home I've ever known. But I wouldn't ask you for a penny to save it, unless you'd done some other things first."

She stopped short. It was not the recollection that the one she was addressing was a celebrated artist that checked her, but the remembrance of the picture on the wall. "You must have loved Elmwood, too," she said more gently, "or you couldn't have painted that picture."

"I do love Elmwood." His voice was grave and sad. "Irene, help me to help myself. Get me back to the right road." There was almost entreaty in the voice. "Let us together go to the old place, you and I."

"Oh, I'd love to go, Uncle Knight," Irene exclaimed. "But I can't go till Saturday, you know. I can't leave my work."

"Saturday then let it be. But, Irene—will they forgive me—forgive the past?"

"You little know them, if you doubt."

A long breath came from the artist. "I'll believe you. It's my one chance."

That was a wonderful home-coming three days later. And of the weeks that followed words cannot tell. Too sacred are some scenes to be spoken of. The man grew strangely quiet, the grandmother joyous like a girl in her twenties, the old father subdued but content.

The grass was green, and starred by dandelions. The southern woods were warm and luxurious. The artist stood with his mother on the porch looking out over the lawn to the orchard beyond.

"Knight, to-morrow is Easter Sunday—You can't know what an Easter it will mean to me," said Mrs. Rossiter.

"And to me, mother!" And Knight took his mother's face between his two palms, and raising it, kissed one velvet cheek and then the other.

It was Easter morning. Down over the lawn went Irene. Among the Lenten-laden trees she found the artist, his face aglow.

"Come," he cried. "It's a miracle. These apple trees, what a wealth of bloom they are putting forth. I feel as if I were a boy again. Not a thing is changed, and the old trees riotous in pink and white, just as they did when I first remember. Oh, if only it were not too late for me to begin a life of blossoming!"

"They don't seem to think it's too late," said the girl, very low.

"How so?" He looked at her, his face changing.

"They're older than you are, Uncle Knight, some of these trees," Irene returned. "And they're beginning over again with their fruitage. 'Make a fresh start.' That's what the spring always says to me. It's never too late to put out new blossoms. And it's Easter, Uncle Knight. And Easter tells us of a life springing out of death, and triumphing forever and ever." There was a catch in the girl's voice, and she stopped speaking. Silently but with tears blinding her, she broke a spray of blossoms from a low-bending branch, and held it out to her companion. He took it gravely. Silently they went back down the gentle decline of the hill to the old house where breakfast awaited them.

"Irene, I will begin over. God helping me, I will."

The village church that morning was beautiful in honor of Easter. The spring had come early, and there was no lack of green leaves and bright blossoms to transform the plain little building almost beyond recognition.

A slender girl in the choir, with a voice rich, though untrained, sang the sublime words which have echoed down through the ages, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." As she sang, she glanced from time to time down at her uncle's face. She knew from the quiet joy in the dark eyes of her uncle that new life had not come to the blossoming orchard alone. It had also come to the heart of Knight Rossiter, the artist.

"APRIL FOOL"

"But how do you fool them?" asked Margy.

She was a very little girl—not six years old—and she looked up to Edgar, who was twelve, as an extremely wise person.

"You make 'em think things are different from what they are," said Edgar. "Only, of course, you don't tell them. And when they find out they're tricked, you call 'April fool!' It's lots o' fun."

"It must be," said Margy, eagerly. "I mean to try it."

Edgar looked at his sister. Somehow, although it was "lots o' fun" for him, he did not like to think of Margy teasing her friends, and laughing at their disappointment. "Oh, you're too little," he said.

"Mamma told me one wasn't over too little to help others," Margy declared.

Edgar was so puzzled by this speech that he made no further remark.

When the Wheaton family came into the dining-room, on the first of April, mamma was saying: "I am so tired of that baked apple every morning, and I don't care for oranges any longer. I do wish, either it was time for berries, or that Dr. Mason had not told me to eat fruit for breakfast."

Margy danced along by her side, listening and smiling to herself. As Mrs. Wheaton caught sight of the table she gave a cry of surprise. There sat a plate of strawberries beside her napkin.

"April fool!" called Margy. "I bought 'em myself, mamma, down to Mr. Hyder's. And you thought you were going to have baked apples again. April fool!"

The real—her father and mother, Jamie and Edgar—looked at each other over the little girl's innocent head. "That is a sweet way—to trick you with something nice," said mamma.

"Why, what other way would there be?" asked Margy. "Nobody would do mean things to people—not on any day in the year."

A merry voice called "April fool!" after papa, whose hat and coat, all neatly brushed, lay upon the hall table. And the same cry followed Edgar's usual scurry for his scattered school-books and his tingling ears, strapped together, lying beside his cap. A sprig of geranium from Margy's cherished plant was pinned upon the lapel of Jamie's overcoat, and "April fool!" he heard as he hurried into it.

Ellen, the second girl, went out to the butler's pantry a while later, and discovered the silver from the breakfast rinsed and dried and laid in its proper baskets. "April fool!" piped Margy.

"What are you doing, child?" inquired Miss Wilkinson, opening her window to question the little girl in the garden next door. Margy looked up brightly:

"I'm going to April fool the birds," she said, "with this plate of crumbs. They don't expect a thing, you know, they'll be so surprised."

Miss Wilkinson gazed down into the upturned little face.

"You're a good child," she said, quickly and shut down the sash.

Margy ran into the house and told her mother how Miss Wilkinson had April fooled her. "Because she never said I was a good child before."

When the scrubwoman, who was working next door, went home that night, Miss Wilkinson astonished Maria by giving her a basket of cold pieces. "April fool!" said her employer, smiling in a grim way, and Maria smiled too.

"Thank-ye kindly for foolin' me," said she.

Mr. Wheaton had not been writing long in his office when an acquaintance came in, who wanted one dollar for some charitable object. The face of his little girl came up before her father. He handed the man five dollars and said, "April fool!" and then they both laughed.

Jamie was one of the old pupils in the high school, and a favorite and leader among the big boys. Miss Forman, the timid, nervous Latin teacher, always dreaded that half-hour she had to pass with mischievous Jamie Wheaton and the comrades he incited to whispering and nonsense. To-day those on the back benches in the Virgil class behaved as well as the girls upon whom she could depend. They behaved so well, in fact, that she stopped them on their way out of the room and thanked them for it. Jamie looked up into her face with twinkling eyes. "We April fooled you, didn't we?" he asked.

Jack Watson, who had quarrelled with Edgar, had played a horrid trick upon him yesterday. The two sides of the pump had the march from it, on alternate days. On the thirty-first of March Jack had improved the opportunity to drop a decayed apple into Edgar's overcoat pocket. Edgar was very angry. To-day Jack had good reason to look out for something in return. To tell the truth, Edgar had actually brought in a box a dead mouse from the trap at home, with the full intention of tucking it into Jack's pocket as he passed the overcoat on his way downstairs.

"Nobody would do mean things to people," Margy said said. Jack had been mean to him. Yes; but his little sister thought him her wise, good brother, above such revenge and spite. Her shining eyes, when she called "April fool!" after him, as he found his books in the hall, seemed to look down into his heart. He could not deceive their trust.

At noon he ran down-town. When Jack, very cautiously and fearing the worst, peered into his pocket that night, a flush of shamed surprise crept over his cheeks. He saw a handful of chocolate creams and a slip of paper that read, "April fool!"

"I've had such a lovely day," sighed Margy, sleepily, as her mother tucked her into bed that evening: "I've been busy every minute—most. And I've fooled lots of folks. Wouldn't it be nice if they came oftener—April Fool's and Christmas Day, I mean. They seem a good deal alike, you know."

—Ruth Hall.

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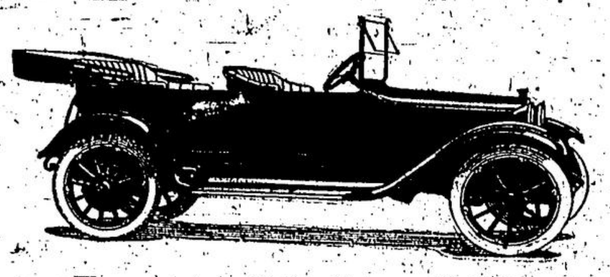

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