

The Free Press Short Story

RUTH'S CHRISTMAS SACRIFICE

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Over the earth the October sun shone brightly. Its rays crept into the broad old-fashioned windows of a little farm house, bringing forth a warmer glow from the copper jardiniere on the little parlor table, with its quaintly carved legs and braces; and resting at last with caressing touch on the silvery head of old Grammie Tremball, sitting quietly in her comfortable chair by the window.

From where she sat Grammie could look far to the westward, across the well-tilled fields of her little farm, and the larger farms of her more prosperous neighbors, and away to the horizon's rim.

To Grammie and Grammie Tremball God had given but one child, her lovely daughter, Kathleen.

Many lovers had Kathleen. All the young men for miles around, husky young farmers would willingly have laid their hearts and fortunes at her feet. She smiled on all, but nothing else.

At last one day, came a young missionary to the little farmhouse, and Kathleen's heart was lost forever. Many happy hours they spent, and when at last Philip Carleton returned to Chicago, he took with him as his bride beautiful Kathleen Tremball.

Dark and cheerless seemed the old home without the girl's sunny presence. Only the letters received at long intervals brought happiness to the parents. Bright, cheerful letters they were, telling of Philip's goodness; the little home at the Eastern mission station; the work of the missionaries; and of the custom of the Orientals; and of the work to be done among the people. Then came the news of the arrival of a bonny baby boy. His fond parents had given him the name of Donald, in loving remembrance of the old grandfather. Another two years passed and came tidings of a little girl, Ruth, with her mother's beautiful hair and dark eyes. But what with the baby's coming, the mother's strength waned. Nine months Kathleen lingered and then died.

The news came as a terrible shock to the aged couple in Canada; the poor old father moved restlessly about the old farm. And in the little whitewashed rooms which had sheltered the lovely Kathleen, the aged mother rocked and wept, and would not be comforted.

When little Ruth was a year and a half old, Philip obtaining leave, took his children, and turned his face toward the old farm home where waited with yearning hearts the old grandparents. And so, one cold November day he arrived at the little village station, and found Grammie Tremball awaiting them. Tears streamed down the old man's face as he opened his arms to receive little Ruth, and when Donald put his arms about his neck and called him "Gran'pa," his heart was full and he could not utter a word.

Neither Philip nor his father-in-law spoke much during that homeward drive. Both hearts were too crowded with sad memories. As they climbed the last little hill before turning in at the farm gate, both men strove to appear a little more cheerful, for Grammie's sake.

Only a few days did Philip remain, then he must needs return to his work, the work in which he hoped to bury his great grief. For a few days after his going the little one fretted and cried, and Donald wandered around calling piteously for "Daddy." But soon the new surroundings, the charm of horses, chickens, and the playful collie which romped and sported with him, drove all memories of the past from his young mind, and he became happy and contented.

The old folks loved the boy deeply, but it was on the little helpless Ruth that the old grandfather's affection was lavished most. For hours at a time he would hold her sleeping in his arms; and when at last she was able to toddle around, his watchfulness and care, lest she should run into danger, knew no bounds, and many a time his stick and crops were neglected, that he might roam around with his "children," as he loved to call them.

Time passed. Donald and Ruth had grown up and were attending college, when news was received that their father had been murdered, while doing noble work in the mission field. They came back to the old home saddened and subdued. They had longed so much to see the father whom they could not remember but whom they had been taught to reverence and love. Now that could not be.

For some weeks Donald remained; then as his ambitions awoke, he returned to the city to start practice as a doctor. He took over the practice of an old physician and soon had a large number of patients.

At the college he had become acquainted with Martha Tansly, a generous, warm-hearted girl, a chum of Ruth's, whose sunny smile had won its way into his young heart.

Three years from the date of his return to the city they were quietly married, in a little church in the suburbs, with Ruth and the old people standing by.

Ruth was now twenty years old, and the old folks' helper and comfort. When a new school was installed in the little village, she was given the position of school-mistress. Her days were now busy indeed. Early in the morning she rose, and performed all the heavy housework. At noon she hurried home to prepare the

dinner, and when school was dismissed she busied herself till dark doing exercises, and doing odd jobs for her grandfather, and caring for her grandmother, now growing feeble.

A little son was born to Donald and his wife, little Bobbie. Twelve since his arrival had the parents visited at the farmhouse, which always seemed empty when they went away. Grammie Tremball was now very old. Care had weighed heavily on him, and he grew weaker day by day. One morning when Ruth went to carry him his breakfast she found him sleeping the sleep that knows no awakening, with a peaceful smile lighting his fine old face.

Sorrow now came singly, they say, and this proved true in Ruth's case. Returning from her grandfather's funeral, she was met by a messenger, with a telegram bearing the news of the double tragedy of the deaths of Donald and Martha. Donald had been fighting an outbreak of typhus fever when he contracted the disease himself, with fatal result. In nursing him, Martha also caught the disease and died.

Ruth kept up until she could go to the city and bring home her loved ones. Henceforth Bobbie must dwell with her and with Grammie. Then when human strength could endure no more, Ruth took to her bed, where for many days she lay and moaned in delirium.

Grammie, her loved old heart filled with grief that she must lose this, her last and best loved darling, hung over the sick-bed and would not be coaxed away. Kind neighbors came to care for the three helpless people, taking turns with the nursing and cooking. When at last Ruth returned to consciousness, and could bear to speak of her brother, she was but a mere shadow of the strong, clear-eyed young woman who had cared for her grandparents; that their strength might not be overtaxed.

Her illness had greatly depleted the little store of money which had been safely stored in the village bank. Little Bobbie and her grandmother must be cared for and so one day in early autumn she returned to her school. Her pupils, welcome, cheerful and enthusiastic, though sympathetic and respectful, helped to ease the sore spot in her heart, and she daily became a little more cheerful, more like her old self.

When Ruth had gone to the city to bring home the remains of her loved brother and his wife, she had found a young man in charge, a friend of Donald's, and like him a physician. The sight of her face, pale and drawn with pain and sorrow, awakened feelings in Doctor Marlyn's heart such as he had never known before. When she lay ill he had had reports sent to him daily of her condition, by an old aunt in the village, and when she had been able to practice visitors, he had placed his practice in the hands of a colleague, and had come to call at the farmhouse. Ruth welcomed him gladly. He, her brother's friend, should be her friend for Donald's sake. That he should become more than friend she did not dream, but as time passed and found him still staying with his aunt in the village, she began to realize that Paul Marlyn had secured a place in her life which none other could fill.

When Ruth returned to her teaching, Dr. Marlyn went back to his patients. Letters were exchanged at regular intervals.

On Christmas eve, Ruth going to the post office on her way from school, found a small parcel addressed to her in Paul's well-known handwriting. Tearing it open as she walked slowly homeward, she found inside a small box, well wrapped and bearing the words: "To Ruth Carleton, from Paul Marlyn, to be opened Christmas morning." Tucked beside the box she discovered a note, which, when opened, read:

"Dear Ruth, Inside this parcel you will find my gift to you this Christmas-tide. When you read what I have written inside the box, if you can then truthfully do so, please accept the gift. I shall arrive in the village to-morrow afternoon, and will be with you in the evening. Whatever your decision may be, dear Ruth, God bless you always.

PAUL. Her cheeks flushed and fingers trembling with excitement, Ruth tucked the little parcel in her pocket, and hurried homeward. She determined not to tell Grammie of the note or the parcel until she had ascertained the contents.

All that evening as she went about her work, her mind kept reverting to the mysterious box in wonderment as to what it might contain.

But the longest night will have an ending, and morning, clear and cold, dawned at last. As she dressed silently in the early sunlight, Ruth wondered at the feeling of glad anticipation that brooded her being. For a few moments she stood at the window gazing out over the glistening fields of snow on which the frost jewels glittered and sparkled in the sun's bright rays.

Always, as long as she lived, Ruth would remember that Christmas scene at the last day, which she looked with the happy eyes of childhood.

She turned from the window at last to kneel beside her bed for a few moments seeking wisdom in prayer. Rising she

went to the little table; took the box in her hands, and with a swift movement tore open the wrapper and lifting the lid disclosed a beautiful ring set with one pure lustrous pearl.

With feelings of delight, Ruth gazed on the lovely gem, then remembering the note of which Paul had spoken, she searched and found it tucked beneath the velvet cushion on which the ring reposed.

"My darling: I must call you so, for so you are and always must be. You will have found the ring before reading this. Dear Ruth, it is the token of my love for you. My highest ambition is that you may return my love, will you wear the ring to-night? That will be your answer. When I see it shining on your dear hand, I will be the happiest of men. Try to love me a little, Ruth, and believe me Yours for all time.

PAUL. Ruth sank into a chair, overcome by the happiness which had come to her with the knowledge of Paul's love. Did she love him? God alone knew with what depth of affection she accorded him first place in her heart and thoughts! Could he be his wife? Her happy heart throbbed its answer, "Yes!"

It was with a start that she was brought back to the consciousness of the place she held, with all its responsibilities, in the lives of Bobbie and of Grammie Tremball.

The little boy had awakened early, and clad in his little sleepers, he clamored for admittance.

He held tightly in his hand his stocking crammed with fruits and toys, which he wanted "Auntie Ruth" to see. Ruth went quickly at his call and gathered him close in her warm arms, chiding him gently for walking over the cold floor, bare-footed; then seating herself once more she held him cradled in her lap where he rested, content. When the toy had been all displayed and duly admired, Bobbie asked:

"What did Santa bring 'ou, auntie?" "What had he brought her?"

A few moments since she had thought her gift to be perfect happiness, wonderful gladness. But, now, with the child's sweet trusting gaze lifted to her face, his little loving arms encircling her neck, his curly head resting on her shoulder, she began to wonder. If after all, the Christmas-tide, spell peace and joy for her.

How could she tell her aged grandmother that she was going to be Dr. Marlyn's wife, and go off to the city to dwell. A vision of that Grammie now grown feeble, almost entirely dependent on Ruth's care and support rose before her.

Ah, no, she could not leave, nor would she. Neither could she ask her lover to provide for these two helpless beings.

Mechanically, her mind filled with the great life problem which so suddenly confronted her, she helped Bobbie to dress. Then, leaving him happily to gaze with his new treasures, she proceeded to her morning's duties, just as though there never were such things as love and puzzled hearts. As she worked, her determination became stronger, that at all costs she could not be separated from her dear ones.

"Oh Ruth the hours of that Christmas day seemed winged with lightning speed, so swiftly did they pass. Before she realized it the afternoon was spent, and the shrill scream of the train in the distance warned her of the swiftly approaching trial. In the little bedroom, where but short hours before, for was it years? she had been so happy, she threw herself sobbing on her knees, and prayed that the God of Love would be with her in the trial soon to be met; and aid and strengthen her to do what was right.

Then with a last wistful glance, and a sigh that was more a sob, she turned and went slowly to the little chapel organ which stood in the cozy parlor.

Many times in the past when troubled or perplexed she had found comfort in her blessed nuptial, and now she turned to it again hoping that the magic chords might steal into her breast and rob it of its pain.

Softly the sweet music stole through the evening air.

Coming up the gravelled walk, Ruth paused to listen. The notes of the grand old hymn, "Rock of Ages," floated out through the open window, and as Ruth began the verse, singing in her clear voice that yet held a puzzling note of sadness.

"Could my tears forever flow, Could my zeal no respite know, He took off his cap and bowed his head in reverence.

From Rock of Ages, she passed into "Abide With Me," the man out on the darkened path listened, entranced, with the marvellous beauty of the voice that soared, triumphantly.

"I fear no foe with Thee at hand to bless; His love no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is Death's sting? where grave thy victory? I triumph still, if Thou abide with me!" Silence, then, as Ruth rose from the organ, and stood dreaming in the twilight that gleamed on her pale face and glossy dark hair.

To the man whom she greeted a moment later, she had never seemed so beautiful. Taking her right hand in his warm clasp, he drew her gently to the sofa where she seated herself beside her.

"Your answer, Ruth, darling?" he said anxiously. "Doubt's to speak, the girl silently held out to him her other hand, on which no jewel gleamed. "I am sorry, Paul," she said, simply, when she could control the tremor in her voice. Her tones were so quiet and calm, that her lover did not dream of the depth of pain that lay behind. For a few heart-throbs they remained

silent, Ruth, because she was fighting with all the strength of her will for courage to carry her through the ordeal, the man, because to him speech was an impossibility just then. Stunned, he rose to his feet, feeling as though the skies had fallen on him, crushing his life. When at last he found his voice, he said, in tones from which all the youthful gladness had fled.

"You do not love me, Ruth? I thought, more, I believed that you cared for me even as I care for you. To me this hour is fraught with the bitterness of painful defeat, where I had looked for the joy of victory. Ah, well, this is my cross! God help me to bear it, manfully! But remember this, that until we both shall stand before the Great White Throne, I will love you, as never man loved woman since time began."

"One question only must I ask, before I leave you, and I know that you will answer truly.

"Do you love someone else better?" "Yes, ah, yes! There is someone else." Ruth said in a low voice. She could not explain that someone was a feeble old woman or a little helpless child, and to Paul her answer was sufficient.

A few seconds longer he looked on her blood face, then murmuring, hoarsely, "God bless you, always, Ruth, my darling, my own darling for such you must always be" stooped, kissed her white brow, tenderly, and turning went swiftly out into the dark night.

Three years later. Ruth is no longer mistress of the little village school. When Grammie Tremball passed to her well-earned rest, Ruth had to give up her position to be with her little nephew. Missing her grandmother deeply she gladly welcomed the care of Bobbie. Working, spending as little as possible, she lived from day to day. Some of her savings still remained, and from it by thrifty management she had kept the old place going, hiring a neighbor to do the heavy work, taking care of the rest herself.

But the little store of money was slowly but surely dwindling away, and Ruth was faced with the problem of future maintenance.

Once again 'twas Christmas Eve. Her curly head filled with visions of the good Santa with his sleighload of wonderful gifts, six-year-old Bobbie lay sleeping.

Ruth quietly filled Bobbie's stocking with toys and sweets, hung it again on the bedpost, stooped and pressed a light kiss on the soft rosy cheek, then stole quietly out. Closing the door between bedroom and parlor, she placed a log on the glowing coals in the fire place, and drawing a low rocker before the blaze, settled down to dream.

Her thoughts went back to that other Christmas Eve, so long ago, when Paul Marlyn passed out of her life.

His face rose clear before her eyes, and his "God bless you, always, Ruth!" rang once more in her ears. Four after four she dreamed on, her heart filled with unutterable longing that Paul's love might come to her again. At last she slept.

And so she did not hear the crunch of wheels on the gravel road; did not hear the door open softly. She awoke with a start, fancying that it was dawn, and she was out in the rain, to find her lover's arms about her and his tears falling on her face. She had looked so wan, so pale and tired, that Paul could not bear to wake her suddenly.

From his aunt he had at last heard the story of Ruth's noble sacrifice, and with heart overflowing with tenderness, he had come straight to the little old farm.

After a time when explanations had been made, Ruth, suddenly remembering, drew herself gently from her lover's embrace, and slipped quietly from the room.

When she returned a moment later her left hand wore a ring in which the lustrous pearl shone as the fire-light caught its rays. No word did she speak. None were needed, but Paul drew her again to his breast and gently kissed her, not on the brow this time, but on the lips.

Then he led her to the sofa where they had sat three years before. Many plans did Paul unfold. The farm should be rented. Perhaps some day they would return to live there. Ruth must take Bobbie to the city and place him in a good school, and then, Paul said, Ruth must come to him.

His sister wanted to welcome Ruth as a sister and from her house they would be married.

When Paul finished, and Ruth remained silent, he bent down to look into her eyes as he asked, "You will come with me, darling?" And like Ruth of olden times, she answered, "Whether thou goest, I will go; whether thou dwellest I will dwell; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God."

And it was just then that out on the still air the Christmas chimes pealed forth.

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AGED FRIENDS OF MY YOUTH

As Christmas comes but once a year, the heart with welcome swells To mind the days of old, the minor tones of bells; So, rather grimly stray myself, I find a rowrent joy Recalling aged friends I knew when I was yet a boy.

—WILL T. HALO

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