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AND COUNTY OF HALTON INTELLIGENCER.

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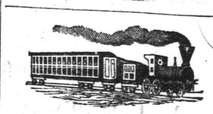

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"Please go on with the poetry," she said, assuming an air of dignity, and taking no notice of his last words.

He opened the book he was holding, and commenced to read a poem quite at random:

"How many years will it be, I wonder,
And how will their slow length pass,
Till I shall find rest in silence, under
The trees and the waving grass?

"Many there be in the world who love it,
Who cling to its trifles and toys;
But I could never find aught to covet
Among its vanishing joys.

"But once, indeed, was my heart elated,
And pleased with a dream of its own—
A beautiful dream it was, but fated
Soon to be overthrown.

"Death, like a shadow, fell and darkened
The light that had shone so clear—
How oft since then have I vainly hearkened,
And prayed for his coming near.

"But he cometh not, and I vainly wonder,
How will the long years pass,
Till I shall find rest and silence, under
The trees and the waving grass?"

He paused, and Aline, impressed against her will, but determined not to show it, cried out, almost peevishly:

"Why do you read such a doleful thing? I do not like sad poetry."

"That is the fault of your youth again," he quietly answered. "Now I, on the contrary, rather admire the pathetic style. The time may come, perhaps, when you may have that very fancy. Nay, you may even subscribe to the sad sentiment it embodies."

"I should never do that if I lived to be as old as Methuselah!" cried Aline, with the rash confidence of youth, and Oran Delaney smiled—that slow, pensive smile whose latent sarcasm she already began to understand with the swift intuition of woman.

"Why do you despise youth, Mr. Delaney?" she cried out, hotly.

"I do not despise it, I only pity it," he answered.

"I can fancy age deserving pity, but not youth," she answered, resentfully. "Why do you pity it?"

"For its illusions," he answered, and his time the sarcasm had faded from his voice and face. Both were genuinely sad.

"Its illusions—what are they?" queried the girl, and again he smiled, sadly.

"Do not ask me. They will come home to you soon enough, as they have done to me. Youth is the happiest period of life. I pity it because it comes to an end. I do not despise it, and I fully subscribe to the poet's plaint:

"'The loss of youth is sadness
To all who think or feel—
A wound no after-gladness
Can ever wholly heal.'"

Aline lay very still for a moment, gazing silently at him with a feeling of vexation that she had permitted herself to listen to him with interest and even with an unconscious sympathy. She was about to make some careless answer to show her utter indifference, and to provoke him again, when she suddenly observed that he had turned deathly pale, and that a stream of blood was pouring from inside his coat sleeve down upon his hand.

"You are wounded, too!" she cried out in dismay, and feeling a deathly faintness stealing over her at sight of the trickling blood.

"It is nothing—a mere flesh wound—a scratch," he muttered, tearing off his coat, hastily, and then Aline saw that his shirt-sleeve had been torn open and his arm bandaged above the elbow, but the linen had become loosened in some way, and the gaping wound was bleeding profusely.

He tried clumsily to draw the crimson bandage tighter about the wound, but he was very awkward with his left hand, and he did not succeed. Aline could not help being sorry for him.

CHAPTER IX.

She had a very tender heart, this little wilful heroine of ours, and although she thought she hated Oran Delaney she would not willingly have seen him suffer. She saw that he was growing pale and faint from loss of blood, and she could not keep from pitying him.

She cried out, hastily:

"Come here, Mr. Delaney. I will fasten the bandage for you."

He looked surprised, but he came to the bed and held down his arm within reach of her little white hands. She drew the band tighter and bound her handkerchief tightly around it. The blood ceased to flow, but her own hands were stained with blood when she had finished.

"Does it frighten you much?" he asked. "You look very pale."

"No, I am not frightened," bravely. "Tell me—how did you come by your wounds?"

"In much the same manner as you came by yours," he replied, reservedly.

"Through that horrible—*something?*" she inquired, with a shudder.

"Yes."

A gleam of intelligence flashed from Aline's eyes.

"Ah, now I begin to understand," she said. "You met it first. It was your blood I saw upon the knife and the hands and the dress?"

"Yes."

"And you did not run away from me to—to save yourself? I thought—thought——" She paused and looked at him, half inquiringly.

"Well, what was it you thought?" he inquired.

"When you left me in the hall, you know," she said, with some embarrassment, "I believed that you had deserted me and fled like a coward, leaving me to the mercies of that terrible creature. I was mistaken, perhaps."

He looked at her with a slow flush rising through the pallor of his face.

"Every moment I am with you, Miss Rodney, I learn more and more how contemptible I am in your eyes," he said, with irrepressible chagrin.

"But I told you I was mistaken," said the girl, with unconscious repentance in her voice. "Was I right?"

"I met the danger first," he answered, simply.

"Yes, I understand, and I am sorry I thought you a coward. I beg your pardon," she said, gently.

"You are freely forgiven," Mr. Delaney replied, quietly, as he brought a damp sponge and carefully removed the blood-stains from her delicate, dimpled white hands.

She submitted quietly to the operation, though he had half expected that she would snatch her hands away in petulant anger.

"I am a great deal better to-day, am I not, Mr. Delaney?" she inquired as he resumed his seat.

"I think so," he replied. "Your wound was not serious. It was struck too hastily. I hope you will soon recover now. You are bearing it very bravely."

"Thank you! And when are you going to let me go home?"

The wistful tone of the young girl struck him like a reproach. He turned away his head as he answered:

"As soon as your wound is healed. That will be in a few weeks, I hope."

"Can I say or do nothing that will induce you to let me go now?" she entreated.

"That would be impossible. You are not able to be moved yet. The result of such an imprudence might be most serious."

"And you will not communicate with my friends?" she went on.

"I am sorry to be compelled to deny you that gratification," he replied, with decision.

"And in the meantime they must suffer all the pangs of doubt and suspense. Oh, Mr. Delaney, is that right, is it just?" cried the wounded captive.

"There are many things in this world, Miss Rodney, that are neither right nor just," he replied. "This may be one of them; but circumstances will not admit of my acting otherwise. I am compelled to keep you hidden here, unknown to any one, until you are well enough to be returned to your home."

"You have no pity for them nor for me!" she cried, almost wildly.

"I cannot follow the bent of my feelings. I am compelled to pursue this course," replied the the mysterious recluse.

"Do you know," she said, "that my friends will be very angry with you for keeping me hidden away from them? What if I should die here in this dreadful house?"

"They would never know what fate had overtaken their darling," he answered, gloomily.

Aline stared at him with wide, terrified blue eyes. Indignation was rising within her again—indignation added to something like fear.

CHAPTER X.

"Mr. Delaney, I cannot understand you," she said. "You talk strangely. I am tempted to believe that you cannot be sane, that you are not in your right mind."

He looked at her steadily with his grave, dark eyes.

"Do I look like a lunatic, Miss Rodney?" he inquired.

"No, but you talk like one," she cried out petulantly. "Do you really imagine that you can keep my presence here a secret from my own people? Do you not know that they will search for me until they find me?"

"They are already searching for you, but I am quite certain they will never find you," he replied. "The last place where Mr. Rodney would think of looking would be in his neighbor's house."

She knew that it was true. Her heart sunk heavily, but she cried out, spiritedly:

"But when I go home and tell him—what then? Are you not afraid of his anger when he knows the truth?"

"He will never know," Oran Delaney replied, strangely.

The pale face on the snowy, lace-fringed pillow grew paler still, the blue eyes darkened with agitation.

"Not know?" she cried out passionately. "Why, what can you mean?"

"You will not tell him," he replied.

"Now I am quite sure that you are mad," said Aline. "Do you think I shall not tell them when I go home?"

"I am quite sure you will not!"

Aline could not speak for a moment. She was mystified by Mr. Delaney's words and manner. She almost began to believe him mad indeed. To what did this strange talk tend?

While she puzzled within herself he drew his chair nearer to the bedside—near enough indeed to touch her pulse with his cool fingers.

"Pray do not excite yourself unduly," he said. "There is really no necessity for it. Cannot we discuss this matter coolly and dispassionately, and come to an understanding?"

She drew her hand away with a heavy sigh.

"I do not believe I can discuss it coolly," she said. "I am frightened at the mysteries of this house, and the mysteries with which you choose to surround me. I am here within a stone's throw of my own home, wounded, helpless, a prey to grief and every anxiety, while my friends are seeking for me everywhere in sorrow and distress. I cannot be calm and cool. I am perfectly wretched. How can you explain away these things?"

"Will you listen to me while I try to do so?" asked Oran Delaney.

"Yes," she answered, impatiently.

"I will not take long," he said. "In the first place, Miss Rodney, I take some blame upon myself for this. I should not have brought you into my house—I should not even have admitted you into my garden. But I thought you a lonely child, and was carelessly willing to gratify your penchant for my beautiful flowers."

"Those dearly bought flowers," sighed Aline.

"Through your own thoughtlessness and mine," he continued, "you have stumbled upon the mystery of Delaney House—a mystery too terrible to be given to the world—a secret I will guard with my very life, if need be. Therefore——" He paused, after his odd fashion, and gazed gravely into her face.

"Therefore," she repeated, wonderingly.

"The Delaneys have been a proud race from the beginning—I am the proudest one yet," he said. "That which you know of Delaney House, Miss Rodney, you shall never be permitted to carry across its portals to blazon to a curious, mocking world!"

"Do you mean to kill me?" shuddered the girl, shrinking in terror from the dark, stern, agitated face.

He started, and looked at her.

"Poor child! Have I indeed frightened you so much?" he asked. "I must indeed be an ogre in your eyes! No, Aline—you are such a child, let me call you so—no; I do not mean to kill you. I am no murderer. I shall simply bind you by an oath of silence when you leave this place."

"An oath of silence?" she repeated, vaguely.

"Yes," he answered, steadily. "I shall swear you to silence regarding your whereabouts during the time you have been away—silence regarding the wound you have received—silence regarding me—silence, in short, as to everything that can throw the least light on your strange disappearance from your home."

"And if I refuse to swear?" Aline exclaimed, gazing at him almost defiantly.

"If you refuse, you will never be permitted to leave Delaney House!" he answered, firmly.

"Never?" she echoed.

"Never!" he reiterated.

CHAPTER XI.

The strange and perfectly unaccountable manner of Aline Rodney's disappearance from her home had excited a great sensation in the town of Chester. Such a harrowing mystery had never before agitated the pretty little country town.

Mr. Rodney, Aline's father, was the only lawyer the town could boast, and although not wealthy, was a prominent member of society in Chester. His two pretty daughters had been educated as carefully as his means would allow, and were the boast of the town for their beauty.

Effie Rodney was a hazel-eyed beauty, with soft waving tresses of chestnut-brown, and a complexion of the loveliest red and white, combined with features of the purest Grecian type. She was twenty-three years old, and so stately, quiet, and dignified, that her more volatile sister Aline, audaciously dubbed her an old maid.

Mrs. Rodney was a pretty woman of the same type of beauty as Effie. Mother and daughter were remarkably alike, both being tall, extremely graceful in appearance, and very dignified in manner. To both of them the wild and wilful ways of blue-eyed Aline was a perpetual source of wonder and annoyance. They loved her, but she was a sore trial to their patience, and their understanding. She was so gay, so wilful, so thoughtless, that, as Mrs. Rodney expressed it, she kept her family "in hot water all the while." They could never tell what mischievous prank their pretty Aline would be into next. Never were two sisters more unlike than Aline and Effie, both in mind and looks, although they were really fond of each other. Both were beautiful, but one was like a stately, bright-plumaged bird of paradise, the other like a brilliant humming-bird, always on the wing, never at rest in its aerial flight.

Neither Mrs. Rodney nor Effie could understand Aline's complex character. She was wild and wilful, but she was also warm-hearted and loving. She was always getting herself into some kind of mischief, always being blamed by mamma, and lectured by Effie. If papa had not petted her and Max adored her she could not have stood it. But the forces for and against being very equally divided she was enabled to hold her own with tolerable equanimity. Sometimes mamma, acting upon a mistaken sense of duty, allotted to Aline some quite severe punishments, as in the case of the imprisonment the day of the picnic; but there was always papa to pet and soothe his injured little girl, Max to load her with sugar-plums, and even stately Effie to lament that her darling little sister had to be punished. So Aline, with all the faults of her head and heart was dearly beloved and bitterly missed and mourned in the home from which she had so strangely dropped out like a link from a golden chain.

The incredulous horror on returning from Walnut Grove and finding her gone was something better imagined than described. They examined the empty room, they peered beneath the bed, behind the curtains, within the wardrobe, while little Max, in a fit of absent-mindedness, pulled out the bureau drawers, and even lifted the tray of her Saratoga trunk in a vain search for the lost one.

Beautiful Aline had flown from the dreary room like a swift-winged bird from the prison bars of its cage. They called her name, but she answered not. They sought her in her dearest haunts, but they found her not. They were face to face with a mystery.

Cook had not anticipated such alarm on the part of the family. She had missed the young lady several hours ago when she had taken up luncheon to her, but being used to the mischievous pranks of her young mistress, had believed that she was hiding herself somewhere within the room. She had set down the tray on a stand and gone away, locking the door behind her.

It was locked still when they came home from the picnic rather earlier than they would have done but that they were anxious about Aline—poor Aline who had missed all the delights of the picnic because she had been a naughty girl yesterday and left undone those things which she ought to have done, and done those things which she ought not to have done.

Aline had deserted the sewing-machine and the ruffles mamma had set her to hem yesterday and gone a-fishing with ten-year-old Max and his comrade Harry Jones. She had coaxed away from cook the sponge-cake that was destined to accompany the cream at dinner, and she had triumphantly packed it into her lunch basket and shared it with the two boys that day on the river bank where they cast their lines into the waves. And she had come home with the end of her nose and the back of her neck blistered red, her dress-skirt soiled and "brier-torn," like Maud Muller's, and her pretty bare hands turned brown, while Max came trailing behind her with his pantaloons rolled up to his knees, his feet and limbs all yellowed with river mud, and a string of ridiculous little shining minnows in his hands. It was bad for Max—it was utterly disgraceful for that great girl, Aline, decided mamma and Effie. It was a case that called for punishment, more especially as Aline could not even be induced to repentance for her fault. She insisted that she had not meant any harm and that she had done nothing wrong. She could not be brought to see her error in the light that her mamma wished her to see it in. So Mrs. Rodney, deeming this an extreme case, resorted to extreme measures. She knew that Aline had set her heart on the picnic in Walnut Grove—therefore she kept her away to meditate on her misdeeds, and, if possible, to win her to repentance. She even dared hope that under the stress of such a punishment Aline might be brought to promise "never to do so any more."

But, after all, she had been sorry to punish her bright Aline so hardly. She thought about it at the picnic. It rather damped her pleasure in the gay and festive scene. She told herself that if Aline was brought to a proper state of submission she would make it up to her. She had kept the girl back somewhat, deeming her childish and uninformed. She would lengthen her dresses now, put up her careless, girlish ringlets, and let her take her place in Chester society as a grown-up young lady. Perhaps the importance of the change might thrust dignity, as it were, upon the wilful girl.

She confided her plans to Effie when she could get her away for a moment from the knot of admirers who always surrounded the pretty Miss Rodney. Effie coincided with her mother. She was too secure in the consciousness of her own beauty to be jealous of her younger sister's charms, and she thought that it was quite time for Aline to give over childish ways.

So they went home sorry for Aline's long day of confinement, and full of kindly intentions toward her, eager to hear of her repentance, and to give her the kiss of pardon; and they found her place vacant, her chair empty. They were full of incredulous dismay at first. They thought it must be one of her practical jokes, and that she would return to them presently full of glee over the fright she had given them, and eager to hear how they had passed the day from whose pleasures she had been ruthlessly debarred.

In the meantime, they were full of wonder over the way in which the runaway had escaped from her room. The little chamber formed a small wing of itself on the left side of the cottage. It had three windows, one of which looked down upon the front of the street, another into the small, brick-paved back yard, and the third into the beautiful, neglected garden of Delaney House. It was quite impossible, they thought, that Aline could have escaped through either of these second-story windows unless she had made a rope from the sheets of her bed. But the downy little nest where Aline rested her fair form nightly was undisturbed in its snowy order. She had certainly not escaped that way, but had gone through the door, and the Rodneys were fain at first to accuse the woman whom they had left in charge of connivance at her freedom.

Cook denied the accusation sturdily, and, having a good reputation for veracity, no one presumed to doubt her vehement asseverations.

The mystery thickened. They discussed the possibility of Aline having a skeleton-key to the door, and inclined to that belief. In no other way could they account for her absence.

Night fell; and now, indeed, they began to grow alarmed. Aline was known to be an arrant little coward in the dark. Her little feet would have carried her flying homeward long before night overtook her.

"She has gone to some of the neighbors," Mrs. Rodney suggested, and her husband and little Max set out to see.

She was not found at any of the neighbors. She did not come home that night, nor for many another succeeding night. It grew into a most absorbing mystery, the strange disappearance of a young girl from her home. It was not a matter of local interest merely, but of general. From the local papers the item was copied into the papers all the country over. It excited a great interest and sympathy. It became one of the sensations of the day. Search was made far and near. Personals appeared in the newspapers; the largest rewards Mr. Rodney could afford were offered for his daughter's return. He was half made with cruel anxiety; he hurried hither and thither in search of the lost one. But, in all his grief and anxiety, in all his suspicions, no warning instinct ever prompted him to look into his neighbor's house.

It was the strangest thing that had ever happened in Chester. In the pretty quiet town no such sensation had ever been heard of before. A young girl locked into her room in the safe sanctuary of home had disappeared in the strangest manner, and not the slightest clew could be found to the mystery. Add to this that the missing girl had been a general favorite, loved for her winning ways, and admired for her beauty, and you may form some idea of how Aline Rodney was missed and mourned.

The panic only became greater as days went by, and there came no tidings of her fate. People were frightened. Young girls shivered in their rooms by day and by night. What if a like fate should befall them?

Mrs. Rodney's grief and remorse were extreme. The thin crust of pride and dignity melted around her heart, and she realized that she had been hard and stern to the lost one. She blamed herself as the cause of Aline's flitting, and her self-reproach was most bitter. When proud, hard natures melt, no one can calculate the effect. Mrs. Rodney's sorrow and remorse completely prostrated her. She became seriously ill, and her physician declared that there was no telling how her low, nervous fever would end, unless her terrible suspense could be broken by news of her lost daughter.

Those were weary days for the Rodneys. Effie was wretched, her mother ill. Mr. Rodney worn to a shadow, and little Max's grief unceasing. They began to realize what a sunbeam in the house had been the brighteyed girl whom they had blamed so often. Now, when she was worse than dead to them, mamma and Effie began to realize her worth. Papa and Max had known it all the while.

Two weeks had elapsed, and Effie was sitting by the bedside of her sick mother one evening, when a stranger's card was brought to her. She looked at it in some surprise. "Dr. Anthony," she read, slowly. "Why, mamma, have you called a new physician?"

"No, I have not," said Mrs. Rodney. "It is a stranger, dear. Go to him quickly, please. Perhaps he brings us news."

Her eyes grew bright with hope and excitement, and Effie's heart beat a trifle quicker, too. What if her mother's surmise were true, and they were about to hear news of Aline? She did not even stop for the customary womanly peep into her mirror, but hastened down to the parlor to meet the stranger.

CHAPTER XII.

A tall, decidedly handsome young man rose to meet Effie as she glided into the pretty little parlor with that stately grace that her admirers called so queenly. He waited with a courteously bowed head for her to address him.

She did so in a silvery-sweet voice, and with a slight blush.

"I am Miss Rodney, Dr. Anthony," she said, glancing at the card which she still held in her hand. "Papa is away from home, and mamma is quite sick. Can I serve you in any way?"

His dark eyes rested on the beautiful, gentle face in uncontrollable admiration a moment, then he said, in a clear manly voice:

"I have called in the vague hope of serving this afflicted family, Miss Rodney."

"In what way, sir?" inquired Effie, as she waved him back to his seat, and sunk into one herself.

"In that calamity which has excited the sympathy and sorrow of the whole country," he answered, respectfully.

Effie's heart gave a muffled throb of joy at the suggestive words.

"God bless you, sir, if you bring us any tidings of our dear Aline!" she exclaimed. "He saw that he had excited extravagant hopes within her, and said, hastily:

"Do not build too much upon my words, Miss Rodney. I do not wish to deceive you. It may be but a vain quest upon which I have come, but some facts in my possession I have thought best to lay before your father in the vague hope that they might somehow lead to news of your lost one."

Seeing how much he had dampened the springing hopes in her breast, he said, anxiously:

"Miss Rodney, is there in your possession a photograph of your missing sister?"

She could not understand why such a deep shadow fell over his frank, manly face, as she answered:

"No, Dr. Anthony; my sister's picture was never taken in her life."

"That is most unfortunate," he said. "I had counted so much upon her picture."

"I do not believe papa would like to have Aline's picture published in the papers. He shrinks from publicity," said Effie, reservedly.

"You misunderstand me. I have no such intention," said the young physician. "Nothing is further from my thoughts, Miss Rodney. I quite agree with your father that unnecessary publicity is most distressing. In the absence of Mr. Rodney, may I state my reasons to you?"

"You may," Effie answered.

"Thank you. I will try to do so," he said. "In the first place, I will say that I have lately seen a girl, under very distressing circumstances, who answers to the published descriptions of your missing sister."

"When? Where?" exclaimed Effie, agitatedly. The young physician's face grew grave and perplexed.

"I can really tell you when," he answered; "but the strangest part of the mystery is that I cannot tell you *where*."

Miss Rodney's face reflected the perplexity on his.

"Dr. Anthony, I do not understand you," she said. "How can such a thing be? You have seen her; but you cannot tell where. Pray, explain yourself."

"I am about to do so," he answered. "Then you will readily understand the seeming discrepancy in my statements."

Effie bowed silently, and settled herself to listen. His frank, handsome face, and quiet, earnest manner inspired her with confidence in him, although he was a stranger whom, ten minutes ago, she had never beheld. She was most anxious to hear what he could tell her of that girl whose description answered to that of Aline.

She fixed her bright, hazel-brown eyes upon his face with an earnestness that Dr. Anthony found very fascinating.

"In order to be quite sure of dates," he said, "I will ask you to tell me that of Miss Aline's disappearance."

She named it quickly, and he exclaimed, with a sudden brightness in his dark eyes.

"The dates correspond! Oh, how much I would give at this moment for the counterfeit presentment of Miss Aline Rodney!"

In a moment he continued:

"I live at the little town of Maywood, some five miles distant from this, Miss Rodney. I have practiced medicine there for several years, and may say, without vanity, that I have built up quite a creditable practice there and in the surrounding country—at least, I am always busy."

Effie bowed silently, and he went on:

"Some strange things happen to a physician in the course of his practice, Miss Rodney. A mysterious thing happened to me on the night of the date you mentioned just now."

CHAPTER XIII.

Miss Rodney's face was pale with emotion and anxiety. She hung eagerly upon Dr. Anthony's words.

"A mysterious thing," he repeated. "I was closing up my office at eleven o'clock that night, preparatory to going home, when, in the darkness, a stranger touched me upon the shoulder and said, in a muffled voice:

"'Come with me at once, doctor. A lady needs your professional services.'

"I am so used to being called out at night, Miss Rodney, that at first I thought nothing of the request. I have ridden miles and miles on the darkest nights through the peaceful country neighborhood hereabouts without fear or molestation. So I said, carelessly, to the man, whose face I did not see clearly by reason of the extreme darkness: 'Is it a long distance? If not, I will walk, as my horse has been put away for the night.'

"'A matter of two miles or more,' he answered, in the same low, muffled voice in which he had first addressed me. 'But my buggy is here at the corner. Come with me and I will send you back. We have no time to lose.'

"So careless and fearless had I become in my career as a physician, that I felt no alarm at his proposition. I carelessly assented, and accompanied him to the corner, where I found a fine horse and buggy waiting for us, as he had said. We sprung in, and he drove rapidly to the outskirts of the town, when I, being weary of the silence maintained by my companion, inquired the name of the person I was called to attend.

"To my surprise, the man replied in a cool, quiet voice, as if there was nothing strange in what he was saying:

"'That is a secret, Dr. Anthony, and must remain so.'

TO BE CONTINUED.