

# The Valedictorian

A Commencement Day Story  
By FRANK H. SWEET.

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"I've no patience with your sky-scraper notions about educating girls!" As Silas loosened the baked earth about the strawberry vines with his trowel he gave that emphatic jerk of the head that Elizabeth called nodding his chin. "Stead of gallivantin' off to college, Kit had a sight better stayed at home helpin' you."



"KIT HAD A SIGHT BETTER STAYED AT HOME HELPING YOU."

ground. "Think of the child keeping books summers, taking only a skimpy two weeks' rest, and yet standing at the head of her class—why, Si, she deserves the handsomest white frock we can buy her!"

"Shucks! I'd like to meet the fool woman—I bet a round silver dollar it was a woman—that invented graduatin'. Now Kit's got her le'rain' why can't she come home peaceable without makin' a brass band circus of herself?" The chin nodded excitedly. "I know them graduatin' shows! They squeeze you into a hotbed crowded with chairs, and there you sit shut up tight in a boiled shirt, your best clothes smellin' of the moth balls that have been in 'em since the last funeral, the sweat streamin' down your face like the creek in a freshet."

"Perhaps," said Elizabeth shyly, "tisin't the ups and downs that make life, but the way you take them—the thin ears of corn along with the full." She placed the last filled box in the waiting space of the drawer and slowly straightened her stiff, aching body. "I know it's been a bad year, Si, but fixings for her commencement means so much to a girl, and Kitty couldn't save up for them. It was hard enough to make both ends meet anyway. If you could just strain a point for the frock, if—"

"I told you," interrupted Silas, "I hadn't the money to spend on any such foolishness, and that ends it." The chin wagged vehemently. "I'll not be pestered to death about it, neither—you understand?"

Elizabeth turned to the house in silence. She did understand. She had been Silas' wife thirty years. But the tightly closed lips were not closed in meekness, and the faded gray eyes flashed. The child should have her fixings somehow—yes, even if her mother had to take—Elizabeth sank into a kitchen chair, the corners of her mouth quivering, her hands dropped helplessly in her lap. Then, as though ashamed of a weakness, she sprang to her feet and resolutely hastened upstairs into her bedchamber.

She gave a swift, stealthy glance over her shoulder as she knelt before her opened bureau drawer, pulling out from the toe of a knitted slipper a small wad wrapped in an old glove. Breathlessly she emptied her treasure trove, pennies, nickels and dimes falling softly upon the bills that her proud fingers had counted out on the floor. Nine dollars and eighty-seven cents was the measure of her opportunity for self denial, for the radiant purpose to attend Kitty's commencement had been a golden dream bridging in happiness the loneliness, toil and hardships of the past three years, and to that end she had industriously hoarded every cent that she could call her own, rising an hour earlier busy summer mornings to pick wild berries for the doctor's wife, sitting up winter nights to manufacture tomato pin cushions for the Christmas trade at the Hillsboro store. She gathered the money in her hands, hugging it to her breast. "Kitty's to speak a piece," she sobbed. "The child's going to speak a piece, and her mother won't be there."

The hot, tedious days lengthened, and Elizabeth went through her routine of duties with the soulless precision of a machine.

"Are you under the weather, mother?" asked Silas an evening two weeks later as he sat absorbed in the drowsy comfort of his pipe, his chair tilted back against the house, his slippers feet crossed upon the porch railing. "You seem sort of tuckered out."

Elizabeth looked away as she answered. She dared not trust too much to the deepening twilight. The next day would be that of Kitty's graduation.

"Shucks," ejaculated Silas, "that was the gate's clik! Who can be comin' this time of night? Why, if it ain't the doctor's wife!"

"Mrs. Farland?" Self reproach mingled with tenderness in the questioning. In the stress of her own unhappiness she had forgotten the anguish that her dear little friend must be suffering as she looked forward to the morrow, for during the first years at college Ethel Farland had been Kitty's classmate and only the preceding summer, one of typhoid at Hillsboro, had the sweet young life been called to a higher school. Elizabeth's bitterness shriveled in shame, and, holding out her arms, she ran down the path. No words passed between the two women. The unaccustomed kiss, the outstretching thoughts of each mother heart, was speech enough.

"Don't disturb yourself, Silas," said Mrs. Farland gently as they came up to the porch. "No, Betty, dear, I can't stay." Her voice fluttered nervously. "I came only to give you—this." She slipped an envelope into Elizabeth's astonished hand, pressing it with trembling fingers. "The express passes through Hillsboro at 6:15 and gets to Centerville at 10. The commencement exercises don't begin till half past, you know. It's my own ticket—the one I'd have bought for myself if—things had happened different. This is the only way you can help me bear tomorrow, Betty."

She turned from the spellbound woman on the porch and darted up the path. The gate clicked. The dark silence was broken by the hooting of an owl. In a patch of sky above the shadowing branches of the trees shone a star.

Sleepless hours of happy planning, fitful dreams of thrilling adventure, and Elizabeth's night had slipped into dawn. For a moment of ecstasy she lingered at her window, eyes uplifted to the glory flushing the eastern sky; then she stole downstairs to a hundred little commonplace deeds of love, from giving the chickens fresh water to cutting a pie for Silas' lunch.

After they had hurried through breakfast, Elizabeth chattering so much that she forgot to eat, Silas glumly acquiescent in his wife's "fool hankerin' after graduatin' shows," came the excitement of dressing. Standing before her cracked mirror, her shaking hands tying the black lace veil with its elaborate border about the dingy straw bonnet trimmed in purple ribbon and red currants, she proudly surveyed herself, glad that she had yielded to Silas five years ago and bought a cinnamon brown alpaca instead of the coveted gray, because it looked more "partied" for the present occasion.

She who had for years experienced no more exhilarating motion than a jolting ride in the farm wagon passed through the whirl on the express in a trance. But a shock of awakening came when the express had left her



"I CAME ONLY TO GIVE YOU—THIS."

upon the Centerville platform. She had supposed that Kitty, with the other graduates, would be at the station to see the train come in, and, not finding her, she stood bewildered, with the frightened eyes of a lost child.

"Looking for some one, mother?" called a laughing voice.

With a start she turned toward a nearby wagon, where a boy sat smiling at her.

"I was sort of looking for Kitty, though she didn't know I was coming," she explained. "You see, it's Kitty's commencement, and—"

"Oh, you're one of the college crowd, are you? You'd better get a move on you! Your train's twenty minutes late, you know."

"Late!" cried Elizabeth. "Why, we came flying! Is it very far to walk?" she asked, looking helplessly to right and left. "Kitty speaks a piece. I can't miss that!"

The urchin's smile broadened into a grin. Then an impulse of chivalry stirred the thoughtless boy heart. "Say, you climb up beside me. I'll drive you there in a jiffy."

The hall was crowded when Elizabeth entered, but a smiling usher with a rose in his buttonhole found her a seat just as the band began to play and the graduating class trooped upon the stage.

After much fumbling she threw back her veil and, putting on her "specks," gazed in delight and awe at the young girls seated there, all in a flutter of excitement and fluffy white dresses.

"It looks like the pear orchard abloom," she confided to the lady beside her. She leaned forward, her lips parted, her breath coming in little gasps. "That's Kitty—there in the middle—the one with the sunshiny hair. She's going to speak a piece." Her hand trembled upon the lady's arm. "Why have they hung those pink



"MOTHER!" CRIED KITTY. "YOU DEAR FRAUD!"

sashes over the stage? And, see; there's a pink bow on every girl's chest!"

"The class colors," was the smiling answer.

"It looks like"—Elizabeth stopped abruptly. Again she stood at her window, eyes uplifted to the wonder and the beauty of the early morning. That was the meaning behind it all—the commencement of a new day in the sky; the commencement of a new striving and achieving in these young lives; rose colored dreams and ambitions, ribbons of dawn fluttering with hope and promise in every little graduate's heart.

Kitty's "piece" came at last. She had been elected valedictorian of her class. Elizabeth listened spellbound. To this idolizing judge every thought in it was inspired by genius, every sentence a poem in prose, while through the whole reading ran flashlights of the child herself—Kitty with her first doll hugged in her fat little arms, Kitty with her first medal won at the Hillsboro school fastened upon her proudly heaving breast, Kitty with her hair done up for the first time and the last tuck out of her Sunday dility. And when the good natured house burst into applause Elizabeth longed to stand on her chair and shout, "She's mine, all mine!"

After the benediction's hush bubbled over a reaction of chatter and laughter. "Look at the freak in front of you"—the carelessly high voice drifted over Elizabeth's shoulder—"red currants, purple ribbons and a dress handed down from the ark! A country mother, I suppose, bobbing up at commencement to humiliate a poor little graduate!"

A crimson spot burned Elizabeth's cheek. There was a mist before her eyes, and an ache gripped her throat. But so strong was her habit of unselfishness that she was scarcely conscious of her pain. Her one thought was to slip away before humiliating Kitty.

The opening of the nearby side door promised instant escape, and she hastened toward it. She did not know that the hand was playing. She did not notice the graduates fling down to the same door. She did not hear the muttered protests of the people that she passed.

"One moment, madam." At the door an usher laid a detaining hand upon her sleeve.

She shrank back as though the dazzling white line approaching were an apparition of horror. There she stood, motionless, trapped in a crowd where Kitty could not fall to recognize her—and be humiliated! And yet a sudden joy leaped in her heart as she felt Kitty's eyes upon her. It had been so many months since she had had the child in her arms! With these conflicting emotions she breathlessly waited. The white line flashed on unbroken. Kitty had passed her by.

"Madam, you may go now."

Elizabeth stared vacantly at the usher and tottered out of the hall. Life had ended. Kitty—the pride, the promise of all past years—no longer belonged to her, but to this gay outside world where she was an intruder. "The child" was ashamed of her mother!

She stumbled on. There was a white blur upon her stinging eyes where the graduates flocked on the campus, then a detached white figure with outstretched arms darting toward her.

"Mother!" cried Kitty. "You dear fraud, you pretending you couldn't come! When I discovered you I al-

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most broke ranks and rushed "no march!"  
"But—but, Kitty," faltered Elizabeth, "people are looking, and—"  
"I don't care if the whole world sees me hugging you!" laughed Kitty, with a rapturous kiss. "Oh, muzzer, guess what? I've got the Hillsboro school! I can live at home, and we'll have a servant, and—and you need only twirl your thumbs for the rest of your life! But come, honey, I want to introduce you to all the girls."

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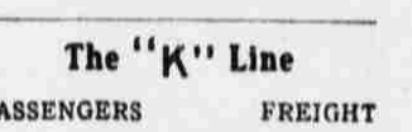


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