A Double Celebration

By Alice Brown

"THERE!" said Mrs. Marvin, "I guess we're prepared." She limped to the rocking-chair by the window, and stood beside it in the dusk. Annie, her daughter, who lived alone with her in the old Marvin homestead, was winding the clock.

"What you doin' that so early for?" asked Mrs. Marvin.

Annie's voice came with a flute-like cadence out of the dim corner:

"I thought I'd get everything done up, so there'd be nothing to think of. Then we can sit down by ourselves and talk."

Mrs. Marvin waited by her chair until both weights had been wound, and Annie had given the pendulum that little tap she always accorded it, at the end, to make it swing the faster. It was a trick of her childish days, when she was first allowed to wind the clock, and her mother, after trying in a faint-hearted way to break her of the habit, had acquiesced in it as an irregularity likely to give a moment's pleasure and do nobody harm.

"Le's not stay cooped up in here," said the mother. "Le's go out an' set on the steps."

Annie put a hand through her arm and the two went slowly out to the front-door stone and established themselves there, where honeysuckle was sweet and the garden threw back its blended scents. It was an old custom, this summer-night's communion of a mother and daughter who had fallen into a concord of habit through their life alone together. It would not be the same again. To-morrow Annie was to marry Franklin Blake. There was silence for a time, the girl looking off into the orchard across the road, and the mother with her gaze fixed on the young figure wrapped about by the dark, but visible to her consciousness through the eyes of love.

"You think we'd better whip the cream?" she asked, though the question had been settled twice over.

"For the chocolate?" asked Annie, to carry on the specious dialogue. "Yes, I guess so. But most of 'em will take coffee anyways."

"Well," said Mrs. Marvin, musing into space, "I hope it'll be good."

Then again the talk dropped, and a whippoorwill called from the orchard. Mrs. Marvin shivered.

"He makes me as nervous as a witch," she said. "He sung every identical night the month before your father went away." She was not used to mentioning the girl's father in that tone. For years she had referred to him in a commonplace fashion, as if he had just driven to market, and now Annie started at the change. The night, her mother's altered voice, both gave her courage.

"Mother," said she abruptly, "do you know where father is?"

"Well, no," said her mother, without hesitation, "I don't know's I do."

"But Aunt Nabby asked you yesterday if you supposed he'd come to the wedding, and you said you thought likely not. But you spoke as if you'd heard. Mother, you don't hear?"

"No," said Mrs. Marvin, in a colorless tone; "I don't hear."

"I think it's a shame!" the girl burst forth.

The mother answered gently, like one directing an emotion into some safer channel.

"No, dear, it ain't a shame. You don't see how 'tis, that's all."

But a habit of years once broken, the girl dared what she never had before. Until now her mother had wrapped their lonely life in silence.

"I see what everybody sees," the daughter said. "Father went away when I was a little girl. He's never set his foot here since. He's sent you money; but what's money? Mother, what made him go?"

"I guess he got kind o' tired," said her mother. There was patience in her voice.

"What'd he get tired of?"

"Well," said Mrs. Marvin, with the air of one who, having abandoned caution, has not yet made up her

"WHY, MOTHER," SHE SAID IN A WHISPER, "YOU'VE BEEN MOURNIN' HIM ALL THIS TIME!"

mind which way to take, "folks are made up different. Your father had a kind of rovin' disposition. He hadn't ever ought to settled down. But he did, an' he never realized how 'twas goin' to 'pear to him till 'twas too late."

"Seems 'if you made him out a kind of a gipsy," said Annie, with a distaste that seemed more than half partisanship of her mother.

"No," said Mrs. Marvin, "I shouldn't call it that, either. But folks are different, Annie. The sooner you find that out, the better, so's to give 'em free swing."

"Who's let you have free swing?" asked the girl hotly. "Who's thought of you all these years?"

"Oh, I guess he's thought considerable," said her mother. "Your father's a real faithful disposition. He wouldn't ha' sent home money if he hadn't been. No, your father's just be'n travellin' round over the country, clock-mendin' and tinkerin' an' workin' in fact'ries, an' you've no call to be ashamed of him."

"You speak as if 'twas what you'd have picked out for him to do, if you had your choice," said the girl.

"I couldn't help pickin' it out, if that was the way he was made," said her mother, with the queer little tang of humor that sometimes brightened her. "If I'd ha' had any choice, I'd had my two good feet, an' then I'd ha' gone with him."

"You would, mother? Trailing round over the country for all the world like two tramps?"

"I certain would," said her mother. "Wouldn't you with Frank?"

The girl considered briefly.

"Well!" she said. In a moment she spoke more shyly. "Mother, there wasn't any trouble between you and father when he went away? Did you have words?"

"Your father was pretty still all that spring." Mrs. Marvin spoke rapidly, as if, having launched upon her narrative, she found it hateful to her. "I guess he was thinkin' how dull 'twas just to do the chores an' read the paper. Well, one day, 'long towards spring, he says, 'Sally, should you just as soon Hiram Means would take the farm to the halves?' 'Certain,' says I, 'if that's your wish.' Well, I couldn't help knowin' what was comin', an' I didn't feel any surprise when he begun to pick up his tools, an' made up a little bag 't he could sling over his back. One mornin'—'twas the twenty-third o' June—he shaved him an' took his bag. You was over to Aunt Nabby's, playin' in the garden. I remember you come home to dinner that day with your apron full o' poppy dolls. There wa'n't no dinner. I didn't get any. But I'm runnin' ahead o' my story. Well, he come along to the winder where I was puttin' bread into the pans, an' he says, 'Well, Sally, I guess I'll set out an' see what I can find.'"

"What did you say, mother?"

"I didn't say anything. Oh, yes, I did! I says, 'You got a clean pair o' stockin's?' An' then, when he said he had, I says, 'Don't you want I should put you up some luncheon?' But he shook his head. I watched him 'most out o' sight, an' down under the old elm he turned an' waved his hand to me. Then I went in. That was the twenty-third o' June."

Her voice showed no emotion, except, perhaps, a little wistfulness.

"Mother," cried the girl sharply, her mind upon the man she loved, "I should think you'd have died!"

"Oh, no! I don't know how to put it, Annie, but when things are big enough they don't kill you. They just shut out everything else, that's all."

Annie moved a little nearer. She laid her hand on her mother's knee, and the mother put her own hand gently over it.

"You see," said Mrs. Marvin, "I couldn't say so much as this before; but now you're goin' to have a home o' your own, seems 'if you ought to know how things stood, so, if your father ever come back an' I wa'n't here, you'd take him in. You would, Annie, wouldn't you?"

The words were like shadows coming out of the night. They struck at the girl and hurt her, and she answered sharply:

"What makes you say such things? What makes you say you won't be here? Mother, where you goin'?"

Her mother's soothing hand was on her hair.

"There, dear, there," said Mrs. Marvin, as women comfort babies. "Don't you fret, mother's right here. Only, if anything should happen to me, you must be ready to see to father."

"I want to see to you," cried the girl, in a passion of homesickness. "It ain't right to leave you alone in this house, anyways, even if you do say you'll spend nights over to Aunt Nabby's. Oh, mother, you're terrible obstinate not to come and live with us!"

"Well, now, you see, dear, she said tenderly, "I couldn't, could I, when your father might be home? He's growin' older every year, an' the time'll come when his legs'll fail him, an' mebbe then he'll think of us. So, you see!"

"Why, mother," she said in a whisper, "you've been mournin' him all this time!"

But her mother answered practically, "I've be'n real thankful his rovin' disposition never took him off to sea. 'Twould ha' been terrible in storms. But sometimes, winter nights, I've laid awake—well, I've got faith to believe he ain't be'n snowed up yet."

Then they sat still for a time. There were more questions the girl longed to ask, but the atmosphere had changed between them.

Presently a woman's figure came along the path. Annie saw it first. "Aunt Nabby!" she said, rising. "Mother, I'll go in. I don't feel like seeing folks to-night."

Nabby came stalking through the path between the borders.

"Beats all how this mignonette does smell!" she said in a voice of soldierlike quality, as she reached the steps.

"Pick a sprig," said Mrs. Marvin. "You always was great on smells."

"No, I got some lemon verbena here," said Aunt Nabby, fanning herself with it and diffusing odors. "T'won't do to mix 'em. I harnessed up this arternoon an' drove down to the Junction to git a bottle o' cologne for Annie to-morrer. I thought mebbe she'd like to scent up her handkercher."

"That's complete. Well, Nabby, to-morrer's 'most here."

"Yes. It don't seem more'n yesterday Annie was trottin' off to school with that little waterproof on, the hood up over her head."

"No, it don't." Mrs. Marvin impulsively put out a hand and touched her sister. "Nabby," she said, "what if I should tell you suthin'?"

"Yes," said Nabby comfortably, "so do."

"Well, sometimes I think Annie's weddin' ain't the only thing that's goin' to happen."

"What do you mean, Sarah?"

"I don't believe in signs an' omens," Sarah went on breathlessly. "But I've got it into my head suthin's goin' to happen right here. It's goin' to happen to me."

"Well, what kind of a thing is it?" Aunt Nabby spoke with abated curiosity, not yet knowing what form of sympathy was to be required of her.

"Nabby, I think I'm goin' to be called away."

"You think Stephen's goin' to send for ye?"

"No, oh, no! he never would. I think I'm goin' to die."

"Cat's grandmother, Sarah Marvin! What's got that into your head?"

Mrs. Marvin spoke solemnly now, as if she told the story to herself, regardless of her hearer.

"It's partly because my mind dwells so on the past. Grandmother Marvin always used to say that was a sign. She said when old folks got ready to go, there was a kind of a forerunner. Well, Nabby, that's how it's be'n with me this last week. I feel as if I was kinder preparin' to be gone."

"Cat's grandmother!" said Aunt Nabby again, in her comfortable bass. "You're all nerved up over Annie's weddin', that's the matter with you. You're all beat out, Sarah, with this frostin' cake an' packin' things an' losin' Annie an' all!"

But Mrs. Marvin shook her head.

"No," she said solemnly, "my time has come. But I've talked with Annie an' she knows what I want she should do if ever there's a chance. Annie wouldn't disregard it. She'd say 'twas mother's wish. Well, Nabby—" Her tone had changed to quick alertness. "Le's we get to bed. There's lots to do in the mornin'. The school children are comin' early with brakes an' things to trim up, an' I've got to set out my chiny. It's goin' to be fair. I'm thankful for that."

Aunt Nabby rose more slowly. She was vaguely troubled by her sister's confidence. It was as if Mrs. Marvin had taken off the mantle of her gloom and thrown it upon her. She turned away thoughtfully.

"Sarah," she hesitated. "Now, Sarah!"

"No," said Mrs. Marvin brightly, "no, I ain't a-goin' to fuss no more. You needn't say it. I got kinder nerved up, I guess. Annie's goin' an' all, an' after to-morrer's over I can settle down again."

But that night in her own room, with Annie breathing at her side, she knew this for no spectre of the mind. She lay there looking out into the moonlight, where the linden breathed from countless blooms, and thought anew that something was going to happen quite different from anything that had happened to her before. This did not seem to be one of the calamities forever attacking her husband in her dreams. They were less real. It was something very large and it was near. It was bringing with it, too, a strange beneficence, and she smiled into the night, remembering how she had been told that death itself is welcome at the last.

The next day went in an unbroken current of good fortune. Annie's school children came laden with spoils from woods and meadow, and her girl-mates turned the house into a greenwood bower. The bride was still and calm, and the sun shone on her. The young husband looked all pride and strength. The cream was whipped precisely right, and there were no tears. And through it all the little mother, in her shining hair and her summer silk, moved about with her halting step, seeing that everybody was served and that nothing suffered lack. Nabby breathed freely, finding that her sister was herself again; but Nabby did not know. Cheerfully as Sarah Marvin was turning here and there on her brisk errands, her mind was elsewhere. She was breathless with expectation of a summons sure to come. But it was not until Annie had driven off and the last guest dropped volubly away, that she found time to meet her mood and recognize it. Aunt Nabby had stayed to wash the china, and they talked excitedly over the sweet day.

"Now," said Aunt Nabby, when the last dish was put in place, "you come over with me an' we'll have a cup o' tea an' go straight into our beds."

A look of swift alarm flitted into the little mother's face. She put one small hand on Nabby's wrist.

"No, no," said she, "don't you ask me—not to-night. I'm goin' to stay right here. I'm goin' to have me a cup o' tea by myself, an' then I'm goin' to wind up the clock an' go to bed. You let me do it just that way to-night, Nabby. Seems 'if I must."

"Well," said Nabby, "well!" She rolled down her sleeves thoughtfully, and took up a pile of her own dishes, loaned for the occasion. "I'll be over in the mornin'," she concluded, and went with her grenadier step out at the back door. "You'd better come here an' git a breath," she called from the garden. "Smells terrible good here. 'Cruit you right up."

But Mrs. Marvin wanted no tonic save that of solitude in her familiar place. She sank into the rocking-chair by the window with a sense of peace. The house was full of fragrance. Green leaves were everywhere, and the ferns in the next room diffused a damp deliciousness like their own color. She hardly knew her house, it was so sweet. The dusk was falling, and the Junction clock struck eight. This was not the way she had expected to feel on the night of her girl's wedding; but, strangely, her mind was not on Annie, but with her own lost youth. As if she had stepped from this ceremony into a chamber of her own life, she found herself going over her first meeting with her husband when they were young. It was at a picnic, but she had forgotten who else was there. Only he seemed to be always beside her, carrying her basket, picking flowers, and saying things the others must not hear. Then came their marriage and the first year of it, when there seemed to be nothing in the world but good fortune. Beyond that, the invisible spirit that led her mind did not guide her. The years of slow understanding of her husband's nature, the years when patience had been born in her through sharp travail, had dropped away. A beneficent hand had wiped them out, as if their mission having been accomplished, she might turn from sorrow now to rest. So she dropped idly back into her courtship days, wondering again if, as Grandmother Marvin said, this apparition of the past were a forerunner of the end.

"Sally," came a man's voice from the darkened doorway. "Sally, you there?"

"Yes, Stephen," she answered out of her dream. "Come right in." But she rose, in speaking, and hastened to the door. "I guess that screen's ketched," she said practically. "Sometimes it is."

Her husband stepped inside and set his bag down on the floor. Then it was that she found her heart was beating wildly, and her mouth grew dry.

"Well, Sally!" said he. It was the same voice. Kind and sad, kind by nature, sad for no reason, and it was like a call from that past which seemed at once so far away and meagre compared with the moment's vividness.

"I see in the paper Annie was goin' to be married to-day," he said.

"Yes," answered the wife. "It was a real pretty weddin'!"

"That why you got all this green up? I looked in through the winder."

"Yes. Her mates trimmed up for her."

"SALLY," SAID HE, COMING TO HIS FEET AND FACING HER, "YOU MUST HA' GOT PRETTY WELL WORE OUT WITH ME, ALL THIS TIME."

"I don't know's ever I see anything quite so pretty." Then he added with some awkwardness, "I was over thirty mile away. I thought I'd come."

"Yes; Annie spoke about you last night." She was shaking now so that she was afraid her feet would tremble on the floor.

"Maybe she thought I'd come. Did you think so, Sally?" Some eagerness had crept into his voice.

"No," said she gently, I didn't s'pose you would. Stephen, here's your chair." She drew it forward from its place beside the hearth, but he only laid his hand upon it.

"I did come," he said quickly, like a boy making confession. "I got here 'long about eleven, but I hadn't the face to come in. I didn't know who'd be here. So I cut down across the woods an' set there by the spring till now."

"You ain't had a thing to eat," said the wife tenderly. "You let me get a light."

"No." His hand was on her shoulder, checking her. "Do you wish I'd come to the weddin'?" he asked haltingly. "Should you be'n pleased to have me here?"

She was silent for a moment while they followed the clock's tick, and he wondered at feeling her trembling so under his hand.

"Yes," she said; then gently, "I should ha' be'n pleased to have you. So would Annie. But—" her voice broke there, and with it her hardly won control. "No! no!" she sobbed, "it don't make any difference when you come, so long as you're here now. Do you s'pose I care whether folks see you or not—or whether they think you've done what's right by comin', or anything in the world, so's you're here livin' and breathin' in this room?" She had laid both hands upon him and was clinging to him heavily. Her words came breathlessly. When he bent to her he saw that there were tears upon her face.

"Why, Sally," he spoke slowly and in wonder, "I never knew you set by me like that."

"Oh, me!" she was sobbing. "Oh, my soul! I ain't died while you've be'n gone, but I guess I can't live through anything like your comin' home. Oh, me! Oh, me!" Stephen put his arms about her and stood there, his cheek upon her hair. For the first time he understood his life, and the pang of it was so great that even a woman's mercy could not save him from it. Only by his homecoming could he learn what it had been to go away. But Sarah Marvin was not so unlike the young Sally who had chaffed and bantered him those years ago. She withdrew herself from him and put up her apron to wipe her eyes.

"There!" said she with a little broken laugh, "I should think I wa'n't more'n three year old. Now, you le' me light a light, Stephen, an' git you a bite o' suthin' to eat."

Stephen sank into his chair, as if the weight of thought were heavy for him, and sat there looking straight in front of him, while she struck her match with trembling fingers. She turned up the wick, and he wheeled about in his chair and looked at her. She was changed since the day he left her here. Now she was, perhaps, more a mother than a wife, a soft brooding bird who had protected and counselled and set herself aside. Yet her cheek was smooth and fair, and the gloss of her brown braids was something he remembered. This was the sweetness of maternity, and it moved him.

"By George!" he broke out, under his breath.

"What is it, Stephen?" she asked him softly, and standing with one hand upon the table, she looked at him in turn. He was, to her faithful woman's eyes, almost as she remembered him. His outdoor life had kept him strong and well. An unfretted existence had helped disguise his years. He was clean and wholesome, and she felt in her heart that she was proud of him.

"What is it?" she asked again.

"Sally," said he, coming to his feet and facing her, "you must ha' got pretty well wore out with me, all this time."

Her hand went to her throat, as she felt the accumulated wearying of the years. "I never did once," she said, with the simplicity of a child.

"Didn't you want I should come back?"

"Not till you got ready."

A shade of perplexity crossed his brow and wrinkled it.

"Sally," said he, "did you understand what made me want to go away?"

"Yes," said Sally, in that same instant loyalty, "'course I did."

"Well, that's more'n I do. What was it?"

"You wanted to because you wanted to," said Sally. "You was made that way."

"Well, mebbe I was. But it's a mighty poor way, an' I ought to be'n kicked out on't. Now, you look here, Sally." He crossed the space between them at a stride, and put his hands upon her shoulders. "You want me to stay, now I'm here?"

A look of terror wrung her face. He knew it for what it was, and wondered again that any man could be so dear to any woman. But she spoke with moderation.

"If you feel to, I want you should."

"Then you listen to me: I ain't done a thing I couldn't tell you. An' we ain't so terrible old. We've got a good deal o' time before us. An' what's left on't, we'll settle down here together, an' I'll see what I can do."

His wife flushed slowly. The delicate reddening of her cheeks was pretty to him. She laughed a little with a sudden thought. It was a merriment not far from tears.

"Mebbe I ain't goin' to die after all," she said. "I've be'n possessed thinkin' over what was past an' gone. Now I see what 'twas. You was on your way, an' I got news on't somehow." She turned back to him from the pantry where her cookery awaited him. Her eyes were shining. "Now, you only think," she said. "I guessed 'twas death, an' so 'tis, a kind of death—for death's the passin' away of things that was. It's a kind of a beginnin', too. Now, I'm goin' to make a cup o' tea an' we'll set down an' drink it. Mebbe we'll eat a piece o' weddin' cake."

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