

RUTH'S JOURNAL.

Make the charred logs burn brighter,
I will show you by their blaze,
The half-forgotten record
Of by-gone things and days.

Bring here the ancient volume,
The clasp is old and worn,
The gold is dim and tarnished,
And the faded leaves are torn.

The dust is gathered on it—
There are so few that care
To read what time has written
Of joy and sorrow there.

December 1, 1880.—I wonder if the reality is ever equal to the anticipation? It has never been so with me. For years the thought of seeing Roger Sheldon again has haunted me, and often, in imagination, my hands have touched his again, and I have seen in his eyes the look I know so well. But it is all over; we have met and that is all. No, not all. Am I disappointed in him? No, no, far from that; he is grander, nobler than when I saw him last. The change is in me. I did not realize there was a change till I went to the glass after he left me and tried to look at myself impartially, as with unfamiliar eyes. Yes, it is a sadly changed face that I see, not much like the one he looked at long ago, when I was a fair girl of 20. I know I was fair then; I may say it now, while the grave sedateness of middle age is coming to me so fast, hurried on by the 10 years that have passed since he saw me last.

They had been hard years for me. After father's death, when we found our money was gone, there was no one to take care of mother and little Annie but me. I have done the best I could. I know they have been comfortable and happy, and even now I am not sorry that I answered Roger's letter as I did. Let me think that was five years ago; he wanted me to be his wife, he said, and offered Annie a home with us; but I could not help imagining that it was out of pity he asked me; besides, I did not like to burden him; so without explaining my reason (I knew he would not listen to me if I did), I told him it could not be. No doubt my letter sounded cold, though God knows there was anything but coldness in my heart. I kept hoping he would write again, but he never did. I might have remembered how proud he was. Still I have never given up the hope of seeing him. It has been the one thing to which I have looked forward. So I was not much surprised this afternoon, when Annie came running up to my room in such haste, to see his name on the card in her hand. I knew he would come sometime. It was not until I was in his presence and saw the look of surprise that came over his face when he saw me, that I realized how much I had changed. He recovered himself in a moment, and we talked like old friends, nothing more. I suppose I should have been satisfied with that; but, as I said at first, the reality did not quite fulfill the anticipation. Any way, my dream is ended, and I must take up the burden of life again—this time with nothing before me to brighten the prospect. But pshaw! how foolish am I, when I say I have work to do, and I will not mourn over what might have been.

December 14.—The days glide away so rapidly that I can hardly find a moment in which to fill these blank pages. Since Roger has been here parties, sleigh-rides and excursions to the city have followed each other so fast that we do not get rested from one before another is proposed. The neighbors seem determined to make his visit a pleasant one. He was always a favorite, and these ten years, that have taken so much from me, have but added dignity and a quiet self-possession to him, which his fun-loving boyhood lacked. From many of these merry makings I have excused myself on the plea of not having time. I find the old trouble likely to reassert itself if I allow it too much latitude. I did not look longingly after the gay party that started out this morning after evergreens with which to decorate the house on Christmas. The weather is perfectly delightful for this time of year. It seems more like Indian summer than anything else. Roger and Annie brought up the rear, as usual. How pretty the dear child looked in the new cloak I sat up so late last night to finish. I was well repaid for the loss of a few hours' sleep when I saw how pleased she was to find it done this morning. She looks so pretty, and she should have them. What difference would it make to a middle-aged woman? What! tears again. I must be getting childish. It is high time to put up my pen.

December 20.—I thought I had had trouble enough, and really felt as if I could not endure any more, but I suppose I can. I have discovered that Annie and Roger love each other. They have not said so, it is true, but I can see it as plainly as if they had. I am a little surprised that Annie has not spoken of it to me, for generally I am but the recipient of all her confidence, but this, I suppose, is different. At first I could not realize that she was anything but a child; why, ten years ago I have discovered that she is now a young woman, and yet I was only seventeen when I loved Roger. I only hope she may be more happy in her loving than I have been. She is, at any rate, very happy now—and Roger seems contented—yes, and happy, I think. I often find him looking at me with a sort of pitying expression. I wonder if he does not guess my secret. I try to control myself, but sometimes, when I see them starting off together, I can hardly keep back the tears. I fear I am getting nervous and cross, for Annie asked me only yesterday if I was not well, which, perhaps, was her gentle way of showing me that I was not good-natured. Well, this torture will not last much longer, for he is only waiting to spend his Christmas and New Year's at home. Ten days will soon pass, I suppose; before he leaves he will ask my consent to take Annie away. Heaven knows the old house is dreary enough with her; what will it be without her?

December 24.—Christmas eve has passed. I keep too busy all day to think much. Rhoda and I have worked as if all the world were to dine with us to-morrow. "What a notable housekeeper," said Roger, as Annie brought him into the dining-room to see the great centerpiece of fruits on the dining table, and what she called "Ruth's noble array of pies" upon the sideboard. Her work of preparation, dear child, had been to weave bright garlands of Christmas greens and bright berries to decorate our sober rooms. Roger helped her, and the work seemed well fitted for them both. Their cheerful voices came to me across the hall as I, the maiden sister, unromantically worked in the kitchen. Lightly they chatted, and sometimes a sound of happy laughter or a snatch of song fell upon my ears, mingling with the droning tones of old Rhoda's complaining voice, as she gave me an elaborate history of her battle with the rheumatism. And this would be the way through life. Poetry and pleasure for them, loneliness and distasteful work for me. Did they ever think of that?

Later, as the twilight brought a cessation from labor for me, the silvery sound of sleigh bells came nearer and nearer, and Gen. Atherly's black horses naved impatiently at the door while their owner ran to ask me to take a sleigh-ride and see the moonlight on the lake not yet frozen over. I went with delight. I was so tired and nervous I could hardly have sat the evening out with the sight of Annie and her lover torturing me—yes, wicked that I am to say it, when her happiness ought to be my dearest thought. But why, oh why, could she not have loved some other than him? I was glad, too, that Roger could see that I was not altogether slighted, and that even one as fastidious as Gen. Atherly sought my company. When he came in, finished and exhilarated with the rapid motion and sparkling winter air, Roger stood alone in the library, gazing fixedly at the bookshelves.

"Alone?" I said gayly, "and growing literary?"

"No," he said quietly, "not very literary, for I did not even know that I was looking at the books. I am waiting for Annie; we are going to hear the choir rehearse the Christmas anthem."

Then Annie came in, dressed for the walk.

"How pretty you look, Ruthie!" she said, running up to kiss my cheek, still cold from the outdoor air. "Your eyes glisten like stars, and you're so rosy and bright that I am sure you enjoyed your sleigh-ride."

"Then I said lightly, (for I was so glad of an opportunity to say it before Roger): "Yes, I have had a lovely time. There's nothing I enjoy more than a sleigh-ride."

"Behind Gen. Atherly's fine horses with the general for an escort," added Roger.

"Yes, of course," was my laughing reply.

Then they went off, Annie, as usual, in the wildest spirits. Roger quiet, but he doubtfully as happy as she. How could he be otherwise? Then I sat down at this old secretary, which was my grand-father's, with my cloak still on, to write these trivial records of my daily life. But even the written confidences to this unresponsive book are a relief. It is better than sitting lonely, watching the strange and ghostly flicker of the light on the walls, and tracing sad pictures in the glowing embers as they fall from the great, half-burnt logs.

But there was not much time for reverie; for before I had finished my writing, they came back. The rehearsal was short, and it was not late, but Roger would not sit down again. He took my hand to say good night; we were alone for a moment. Annie had left the room, probably the words he had said to her on their homeward walk were so tender and precious that she could not take leave of him with even a sister's eye upon the parting, so she waits for him in the hall.

"To-morrow will be Christmas," he said, still holding my hand. "Will your friends keep you so busy then that I dare not claim a moment of your time? I have something to say. Will you come to me in this room before your guests have come to-morrow?"

I said yes, when he summoned me I would come, and controlled my voice so that I am sure not a tremor betrayed what it cost me to keep so calm, so cold, when I knew, oh, so well, what was wanted. He will ask me for Annie. Does he think me stone? Will he not thought of the past come to him when he tells me, of his love for another? Was it thoughtlessness or wanton cruelty that prompted him to select the time and place that witnessed his first love-story to tell me of his second? I am not coward, but I almost doubt if I have the strength to carry me through such an interview.

December 25.—Annie went to church this morning; I had said before that I could not go out, and she did not urge me. I went into the library and watched her from the window. Roger met her at the gate. He will go with her, I thought; but with a gay greeting she went on, and he came into the house, into the library, where I waited for him. I preferred to be first in the room; it was easier than to come in at his bidding. I turned to meet him, but in spite of my schooling I was strongly agitated, and I sank into the chair which he had quickly placed for me.

"This is not the first Christmas day on which you and I have met in this room," said he, with no joy or triumph in his tone, but rather a deep dejection in his look and manner.

He waited as if for an answer, but I did not speak. What could I say?

"I have another interview in my memory," he continued, rather sadly, "which belongs to a time long years ago when I ventured to hope that you loved me."

"Why," I asked in my thoughts, "why does he torture me by recalling those other days?" It was not until after long moments of silence that I could trust my tongue to say: "I thought you had long ago forgotten all that."

"I cannot forget it," he said, "nor would I if I could," he continued, coming close to me and seeking my eyes which I had to keep averted or they would have betrayed me. "Do not think, Ruth," he continued humbly, "that I ever thought myself worthy of you or your love. Ever since I could remember you had been my ideal of all that was beautiful, and my love grew for you with my growth. I hoped, when I had made myself more nearly your equal, that you might love me in return, and in this very room my tongue broke through the bonds I had set upon it, and I told you in wild words of love that would never die; but I did not ask you then to give me hope, for I knew I had spoken prematurely. Then I went away, hoping to make my fortune more worthy of your sharing. At first disappointments came to me; but when I heard of your father's death and your loss of property

I could keep silent no longer, and wrote the letter asking you to be my wife. Your answer, though kind, showed me how presumptuous I had been. I am a proud man, Ruth, and I resolved you should never know how I was hurt, so I wrote a letter as cold as yours, but I did not send it—some power seemed to prevent. I never intended returning, but I could not resist the desire to see you once more. When I came to the door and Annie opened it I could almost have imagined it was you. I think she must have considered me a strange acting person; for, knowing I was so near you, I heard the rustle of your dress, that afternoon, and looked up and saw you before me, so little changed in appearance—only, if possible, more beautiful—I could hardly speak; but you were as self-possessed and friendly as if I had left only the day before. I acknowledge I was terribly disappointed. I hardly knew that I had dared hope. Still, I resolved to wait a few days and see if I could change your opinion of me, and seeing Annie every day has helped me wonderfully. She is such a dear, kind girl, that no one can help loving her. When I would be most despondent, she always had something encouraging to say. I must leave to-morrow, and Ruth, I could not go without telling you—"

"I know what you would say," I interrupted, for I felt that I could not endure hearing any more, and must make the interview short if I wished to control myself. "Take her! she is worthy of you, you dear old gossip, did you think I wanted him for myself? What would I do with a husband? Especially with such a grave one as Sir Roger?" Then she danced away again, and a minute after I saw her romping with the children, the merriest one among them—she is a child after all.

After a while Roger said: "So you were a little jealous of him, were you? We are even, then, for I must confess I felt anything but kindly toward Gen. Atherly. It was only Annie's repeated assurances gave me one more trial to win your love."

And so through these dreary weeks happiness has been knocking at my door, and I have known it. Oh, this merry Christmas day! Will life ever look dark to me again, now that Roger has come back to me, tender and true and faithful through all these dreary years? How could I do him such injustice as I have? but never again will I doubt him; my trust shall be as perfect as my love.

Our dinner was merry-making to the aunt and the uncle and the gay young cousins, but to me, with my new found happiness hidden in my heart, it was like a dream. I heard, and yet I did not hear, the gay conversation carried on at the table and the compliments upon my housewifely skill that were given as freely as the compliments of the guests.

Roger had not been invited, as none but relatives were invited to the family dinner. But Annie had secured a whispered conference with him as she let him out, while I was receiving the guests, and between them they concocted a little plan which was a revelation to the aunts, who, in their minds, had long destined me to a life of simple blessedness. I sat at one end of the table, Annie at the other. Rhoda had brought in the great Christmas pudding and placed it in front of Uncle John to supplant the giant turkey in the excitement of the children at the lighting of the brandy, with which I was saturated, Annie skipped. The cheer from the table, returning with Roger, whose unexpected knock at the door she was waiting for, and ceremoniously installing him in her seat, she crowded in with the little consens.

There were no explanations needed; the look that Roger gave me, he all un-abashed, though I at first felt some dismay at such sudden publicity, told all, even if Annie's nods and whispers had not confirmed it.

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