

A SKETCH FROM LIFE

Every time I passed the diminutive cottage with its well kept yard and garden at one side I found this tall, square, spare woman plying a formidable hoe, under whose tyrannical strokes the clumps of earth yielded meekly. Was she always alone? Was she always digging?

The mystery surrounding her only heightened my curiosity, and one autumn morning, as I was taking my way to town along the picturesque little path overhung with richly dyed trees, that led past her home, I stopped and said, "Good morning!" For there she was, digging away against a background of snowy clothes fluttering cheerfully on the lines. "I hear that you wash and iron. Have you as much as you can do? If not, I should like to have you take some for me."

"Oh, yes, I can do it," she replied, with a careless toss of her head. "I read and work in my garden nearly all day, and at night I wash and iron. Why, it has only taken me 15 years to buy this house and lot with what I have earned."

"Only 15 years!" I repeated to myself, noticing at the same time that she did not possess the Hoosier accent. "You are fond of reading? Who are your favorite authors?" I asked, wondering.

"Oh, it is only the old ones I know—Dickens, Scott, Thackeray. The new books never find their way into my isolated home, and the old ones are worn out with much reading." Suddenly her eye left mine and sought the fields beyond with a wistful expression. There was almost a smile about the corner of the thin lips as she said dreamily: "There was a book I read once, long before I ever came here, that I have never forgotten. Perhaps, turning to me, as though becoming conscious again of my presence, 'you know it. It was 'Lorna Doone.'"

"Lorna Doone?" I exclaimed, with surprise and delight. "Why, I have it and will gladly lend it to you. It is also one of my favorites."

I missed as I walked toward her. Washes and irons at night! That is why there is always a light in her window. When does she sleep? Seldom, from the looks of her. She may be anywhere from 30 to 50 years of age. They say she is "off in the upper story." They who have never heard of a Dickens, or a Scott, or a Thackeray! What a pitiable, lonely life!

At the end of the week I stopped in to pay her for the work, which had been beautifully done. It was the twilight of a gray, chilly day. The leaves had begun to "rattle," a mournful murmur against their fate, as they went fluttering to the brown earth. One of those "melancholy days" that served all the more to accentuate the loneliness of this woman, and yet from her very appearance she seemed a part of this sad season.

I had purposely avoided bringing the exact change, hoping to prolong my stay with her and perhaps be taken into her little home and her confidence. Both wishes were gratified. I was led through the tiny front room, where I had only time to notice its cleanliness and the wonderful red peacocks embroidered on the pillow shams, back to the tinier, unplastered kitchen. It was indeed cheerless. Through the cracks in the planks the poor daylight seemed to creep in reluctantly, and I could only dimly see the white ironing board with its basket of sprinkled, neatly rolled clothes underneath.

She lighted the gas, for even the poorest could afford the natural gas, and showed the surroundings even grimmer than before. I asked if I might remain a few moments, and she almost smiled again as she offered me the one chair. Then she took for me a glass of coffee, from which she procured the necessary change, saying as she handed it to me: "Do not think me very queer; but, living so alone, I must take every precaution to protect myself and so I resort to all sorts of deceptive places for my few valuables. Do you see that flour sack hanging from a beam? That contains my fire insurance policies. Would any one ever suspect it? And the rest of my money is sewed up in the mattress. You see, I am telling you all my secrets, but somehow I trust you. You are the only one with whom I have cared to talk for many years. May I tell you a little of my life?"

She had by this time carefully adjusted a shirt on the board and was easily, quickly ironing. "I do not want you to think, as the other people of this town, that I am crazy. I have never even taken the trouble to try to disabuse their minds of the idea, but with you it is different. I want you to know that I, like you, am a southerner of refined parentage."

I went to the stove to change her iron and stood there for some time lost in thought, her eyes looking away with that same wistful expression. Then she continued speaking, more to herself than to me: "How plainly I can see it all, the sweet home life, an ever fresh picture in my mind! Sometimes I can almost fancy the odor of the jasmine flower stealing in on a warm breeze. Ah, all those youthful, tender memories charitably cling around me like a vine about some ruin! But there came a time"—She turned her eyes to mine with a hunted, frightened look, which soon, however, changed to one of yearning. Her under lip trembled like a child's, her whole stern figure leaped into dependent womanhood, and she sank down at my feet murmuring between her sobs, "Oh, you know the one thing that makes a woman give up everything for a life like this!"

I was incapable of speaking for some moments, but I stroked the scanty hair drawn back into the uncompromising knot, and my whole heart went out to this erring, tired woman. It was probably the first time in all these years that she had let go the secret that was eating away her life.

At last I rose, took her gently by the hand and led her to the door of the front room. "I am going now," I said, "but before I go I want to ask two favors of you—one that you will come to luncheon with me tomorrow at noon and the other that you will let me be your friend."

"Oh," she murmured softly—her whole nature seemed to have softened—"I must decline to grant the first favor, as I have for so long eaten from the front of the stove I would not know how to behave at a table, but for the second"—she put her two hands almost roughly on my shoulders—"will you be my friend? I yearn for one more than I can tell you."

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