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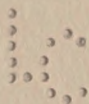
STILL THE GIRL LISTENED; THE NOTES FLOWED ON

STELLA

A SKETCH

BY


NATHANIEL GORDON



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Another issue

PZ3
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To Sweet Charity
This Sketch is Inscribed

STELLA

IN the sunny shelter of a range of hills that lift their crests into mountains there lies a wide farm.

Once its owner was a middle-aged man.

Father and grandfather had dwelt there before him, and by their hands had been set the long rows of saplings whose branches now overarched avenues of shade.

Perchance a heart's idol, false to her faith, had embittered the youth of this holder of lands; for not until the noonday of life, after wanderings various beyond the seas, had he returned to make abode on the broad acres of childhood and chosen a helpmate to grace his home. The bride was an orphan of gentle birth, bringing no portion save a mother's few gems, yet a dream of loveliness. But when, after the long, troublous hours of a certain night, to the sylph-like young consort her first-born had come, the vigilant old doctor,

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who bent anxiously over her, shook his head mournfully.

The curtain had been brushed aside from the window and the light of a morning star stole in. Did the sufferer think of that other star that once "stood over" the cradle of a babe? For, like the touch of an angel, a radiance suffused her languorous features, and she whispered:

"Call her Stella."

Then, with the little one's breath on her bosom, the mother slept.

Hours sped by, the star again shone down—the mother still slept. She had gone—to shine; perhaps as a star.

But Stella lived. Day by day the child still thrived. No illness overtook her, no blight marred her bloom. The seasons chased each other away. A merry, rosy, romping little maiden was Stella. She frisked with the lambs and carolled with the birds; and when, at the close of a long summer day, the little girl would meander home from the fields, crowned with a chaplet of gay wild flowers, and climb upon her father's knee, the fond parent would listen delighted, as, flushed with

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health, his darling rehearsed her list of adventures, until at the very height of the prattle her eager eyes would suddenly droop, a shower of locks fall on his arm, and Innocence slept. Then the devout father would bow his head above the slumbering child and breathe thanks to God for this little star.

The years glided by. The large part of these years Stella had spent on the farm; for she dearly loved the old homestead sleeping so peacefully amidst the hills. Besides, the girl knew how dependent her father's happiness was upon her presence. Sometimes he would urge her to cross the ocean and visit abroad; for, as the fruit of earlier investments in distant climes, this retired old gentleman possessed liberal means. But not for a moment was Stella deceived by the parent's feigned content with the picture of his offspring touring afar. Ready though he was to make any sacrifice for her sake, the daughter well knew how grievous a trial her absence would bring him.

"It would break my heart to say farewell; I am nowhere so happy as here," she would say. "There is no place like home; no com-

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pany for me like yours, father, dear," and Stella would caress the parent beloved, imprinting impetuous kisses, first on one cheek, then on the other, just as she always had done since a little girl she sat on his knee, her lap strewn with flowers.

The owner of this highland farm was an ardent admirer of fine animals. His daughter inherited the taste. Since the first time she knelt before the glowing fire, warming a wee, chilled, and motherless lamb, some gentle creature had been always near her.

On her fifteenth birthday her father had presented Stella with a dainty foal born that same morning on the farm and of famous ancestry. Vastly pleased with the high-bred pet, Stella might have been seen several times daily tripping down through the pasture to regale the infant with morsels of sweets. The colt, increasing in size and spirit, had displayed strong affection for her young mistress. Now well grown, the fleet, mettlesome creature, Bess by name, manifested dislike to any other rider. Under her mistress's rein only was she docile.



THUS MOUNTED AND GUARDED, THE HIGHLAND MAIDEN
ROAMED THE WILD, PICTURESQUE GLADES AT WILL

STELLA

Another favorite, a St. Bernard dog, invariably attended Stella on her rides and rambles. Thus mounted and guarded, the highland maiden roamed the wild, picturesque glades at will. The exercise gave health to her body, with roses the fresh breeze mantled her cheeks, while ever dearer grew the proud paintings the hand of Nature hung in the mountain galleries overlooking her home.

Not far from the farm, in a vale among the sheltering hills, rose a queenly chapel, the memorial of the early departed mother, erected by the father forlorn. The pastor had joined in wedlock the father and the youthful mother, had baptized the daughter, and now rarely missed from his congregation Stella's modest face on Sunday morning. Childless himself, the good man had taken to his heart this motherless lamb, permitting her, when just budding in her teens, the freedom of his library, directing her studies, and even devoting a few leisure moments to instructing her in Latin. Hours the privileged pupil, insensible of the lapse of time, had whiled away amongst the shelves.

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“Store your mind; read history, child,” the pastor had been wont in earlier years to say, placing a ponderous tome in his favorite’s small hands. Stella would bravely grasp the volume, bury her face in its wide leaves, and studiously follow the long lines with her finger, until her preceptor’s attention was absorbed by his text, when she would softly substitute for it some book of romance, laughing gleefully an hour later, as the grave man awoke from his reverie and discovered the deceit.

In all the township no one was so conspicuous in benevolence and good works as this zealous pastor. Familiar with the scattered dwellings, he knew each family by name, and was a constant visitor of the sick and the distressed. As the pastor rode about intent on these errands, Stella was often his companion. Her acquaintance thus extended to a number of the poor, and the girl had fallen into the habit of making frequent calls, unaccompanied, upon those to whom in this way she had become endeared and to whom her presence was always grateful. Now it had come about that a babe could hardly be

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born within miles but Stella must be early at the scene, to bend over the cradle and lift the tiny hand and peep into the wondering eyes; and when sometimes in the home of lowliness a little innocent closed its eyes forever, Stella perhaps would be the only mourner to weep with the weeping mother, and with her to follow the plain casket to its resting-place, dropping tears with flowers on the grave.

One evening Stella was riding near the chapel, when through the forest aisles majestic strains of the organ were wafted to her ear. Drawing nearer, the girl reined in her horse and listened. Sweetly the organ lifted up its voice from the sylvan dell in which it reposed. Stella had not heard such notes before. "Some stranger visiting the chapel," she mused. "Like one inspired, he plays."

Still the girl listened; the notes flowed on, growing richer, grander, and more transporting, as they rolled upward and drifted away. The music ceased. In a moment a young man appeared at the chapel door. A slender riding-whip rose and fell. The rapt listener was speeding homeward.

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At church on the following Sunday, with surprised delight, Stella recognized in the unwonted melody of the organ's strains the same master hands on the keys of the instrument, and later caught a glimpse of the same young man. The congregation was charmed. But this Sunday, the next, and others that followed, threw little light on the organist. Save that his name was Ralph, even the pastor knew little concerning him. But it was natural to feel an interest in one, however retiring, at whose appeal the slumbering organ became a creature full of life, and soared and sighed with solemn sweetness. Stella frequently found her thoughts wandering to the stranger.

It chanced that under the guardianship of the chapel was an orphans' home, where Stella's young mother had passed her childhood days. Stella had formed the habit of visiting it on Sunday afternoons, to read and talk to a class of children. At this home the pastor had arranged one Sunday for a devotional service. He had invited the organist to attend. Accordingly, as the tranquil summer afternoon waned and the hour ap-



LITTLE ORPHANS CLUSTERED AROUND STELLA

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pointed for the service drew nigh, a tall form wended its way along the woodland path that led to the home. On the greensward surrounding the children's building, in an arbor fanned by a fragrant breeze, a young teacher had gathered her class. Ralph saw them and thought it a pleasing picture—the group of little orphans clustered around Stella, as beneath the sighing shade trees she sat, dressed in simple white.

The young man passing inquired the entrance to the home.

“If you have come to attend the children's service,” replied Stella, “we may all go in together. It is time.”

So, followed by the little ones and Ralph, the girl led the way to a room full of children, where the pastor and others were already waiting.

At the close of the exercise, as Ralph was about taking his leave, the pastor beckoned Stella, and said to the organist:

“Permit me to introduce you to a young friend whom I might almost call daughter, so dear have been our relations.”

“I am glad to meet one,” said Stella, “whose music has often thrilled me. It must

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be a supreme satisfaction to perform so brilliantly. We are highly favored."

"I thank you for your compliment," returned Ralph, "but you overrate my ability to please, and as I make music for recompense, I hardly earn gratitude."

"Delight of that kind," said Stella, "cannot be repaid in dollars and cents; but I fancy that your best reward lies in the love of your art, for no one could impart such expression to music whose soul was not in it."

"I admit that music is my sweetest solace, my soothing balm in the troubles of life," said Ralph.

"Perhaps," said the pastor, addressing the organist, "you will accompany my young friend as far as her home. She is without her horse to-day."

"I hesitate to become so much of a burden," interposed Stella; "besides, I have a staunch old friend in waiting who will afford me ample protection."

"Hero!" she called.

As a huge animal bounded into the room and laid his head on his mistress's lap, Stella turned to Ralph and asked:

STELLA

“Do you not admire my dog?”

“He is, indeed, a superb fellow. What a noble head!” was the answer. “But if you will allow me, I shall be glad to share his escort, for the afternoon is perfect, and nothing could be more inviting than a little stroll. To say the truth, I feel a trifle lonely these quiet days.”

“I can easily think so,” said Stella. “Your company will be appreciated. I usually come on horseback, but my pet had lost a shoe to-day and I disliked riding her over the rough road.”

“You are fond of that exercise,” observed Ralph, as they started on their walk. “I have often seen you galloping by.”

“I have ridden since a child,” said Stella. “Bess is like a cradle. I am never ill, and father says I owe my good health to horseback riding. A canter through the woods is so refreshing, when the dew sparkles on the leaves, or in the cool of the evening. You must accompany me some day.”

“It would be tempting,” said Ralph, “but I seldom indulge in recreation of that kind. I have neither the means nor, to be frank, the inclination. My life of late has been too blue.”

STELLA

"That will never do," said Stella. "The blue of life should be in the sky. And yet," she added, "it is easy for me to say so, whose life has been a song. I know that there are those who in all the year enjoy less of happiness than I have had in a fleeting day. But where is your home?"

"I have no home," said Ralph.

"In a country neighborhood like this," said Stella, "everyone's affairs are everyone else's. May I ask if it is true that you write songs?"

"I have written songs," answered Ralph.

"I should like to see them," said Stella. "Do you compose the music?"

"I do," was the reply. "Music is my consoler. I lose myself in it, and for a time forget my disappointments."

Stella looked up at her companion. It was her impulse to ask more, but she refrained.

They followed the winding lane until a sudden bend brought into view Stella's home. A spacious old mansion with ivied veranda, it stood, as it were, in a sea of green.

"How I love my home!" murmured Stella. "Do you not think it pretty?"



“THERE IS FATHER WATCHING FOR ME !”

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The shadows were lengthened on the stretch of velvet lawn, when across it the girl espied a familiar figure seated on the porch. Her eyes glistened.

“There is father watching for me!” she exclaimed. “He is never quite at ease when night falls, if I am away.”

At the threshold a courtly old gentleman rose to greet them.

“Well, well, Stella!” were his half-chiding words. “I thought you had forgotten me to-night. It is an hour after tea-time.”

“Dear father!” cried Stella, with a happy laugh and a warm kiss. “You know I could not do that. We had a special service this afternoon, and I have had a charming walk home with most entertaining company.”

The father extended his hand to Ralph.

“I thank you for your courtesy,” he said. “You must sit with us at tea.”

“You are hospitable,” returned Ralph. “But I have been more than compensated for what you call my courtesy and what I deem a privilege.”

“I did not suspect you of being so gallant,” said Stella graciously to her guest. “But of

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course you will stay to tea; that is, if you will take us as you find us. All our friends do that. To such we keep open house."

They drew around the old-fashioned mahogany board. Presently the white-haired man grew dreamy.

"This particular hour—the Sunday sunset hour—" said he, "has always seemed different from any other. It is ever quiet here, but to me a sacred hush hallows the close of this holy day. It awakens remembrances. Sometimes in the twilight's stillness I hear voices—voices of those who used to sit here, at the same table, in these very chairs. If all the loved ones with whom I have shared this antique board were present now, how blissful it would be! Memories! They come to me. I recall even a Sunday long ago, when my little high-chair was drawn back from the table by my mother, and I was permitted for the first time to occupy what I called a 'grown person's' chair—the same in which you now sit," addressing Ralph. "I know it by the arm. How lost I felt in it! Daughter has sometimes desired more modern furniture, but I could not part with what we have had so long."

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“Since I have grown older,” said Stella, “I should not wish to change it.”

“In those days,” continued the father, “where I am seated my grandfather sat—an aged man, his staff by his side. I remember another Sunday, a little later, when I was lifted up to look upon him for the last time. I see the white, peaceful face and the flowers, now. It seems not long ago—yet the time has almost come when I shall lie as he lay then.”

“Father,” murmured a tremulous voice, “you know there is one whose heart it breaks to hear you speak so.”

“Yes, yes, my child, but I do not speak repiningly. An old man lives in the past, and when, at times like this, the dear faces come flitting out of it and vanish again, I long to follow them—but for you.”

“You must be more cheerful, father,” said Stella.

“I am quite cheerful,” was the reply. “These memories are sweet to me. Sometimes my thoughts ramble aloud, but I should be the last to cast a shadow on you.”

“You do,” said Stella, “when you talk of leaving me. When you go, I want to go, too.”

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As they chatted in the parlor after tea, Ralph remarked:

“I see that your attachment to the old times has not extended to your piano,” surveying a fine specimen with interest.

“We must be modern in that,” said the father. “Daughter plays, but I presume she feels diffident in the presence of talent like yours. Perhaps you will favor us.”

“With pleasure,” said Ralph. “Unfortunately, music is my only accomplishment.”

He rendered sacred selections.

“Beautiful! beautiful!” exclaimed the host. “Heavenward your music lifts its wings. It carries one away.”

Later, Stella said to Ralph:

“Will you not come another evening and sing one of your own songs?” And when the young man bade them good-night, her last words, spoken smilingly, were: “How fortunate that Bess lost her shoe!”

As Ralph wound his way through the ancient pines, a gentler light gleamed for him than any the rising moon rayed on his path.

Stella sat at the window, listening to a whip-poorwill, and wondering if the departed visi-



“ BEAUTIFUL! BEAUTIFUL!” EXCLAIMED THE HOST

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tor were fond of the bird, and if, like herself, he could imitate its voice and coax it near. She wondered if the farmer driving by would overtake and hail the recent guest. All night the girl dreamed of music. Awakening suddenly toward morning, she found herself sitting upright, listening eagerly.

* * * * *

Months elapsed. Stella had seen much of the organist, his history learning long ago.

Without brother or sister, a rich man's son, Ralph had passed his earlier days in the busy town. Unhampered by necessity of work the young man, until well nigh the age of majority, luxuriously had yielded himself up to a love of music. One day the rich father died—bankrupt. A pampered mother quickly followed.

The hitherto bland face of the world wore a frown when Ralph, penniless, stepped forward to earn bread. Music was his resource. He secured a position in a city church as organist. But Ralph had always taken wine. The downfall of his prospects proved a crush-

STELLA

ing blow. Ralph turned to the cup as never before. The church position slipped from him. He found another which failed him, too. Obtaining employment grew difficult. Now Ralph craved a constant stimulant as he went steadily down the hill.

One night the young man, supperless and despondent, entered a notorious resort. Around numerous drinking tables were crowded abandoned characters, men and women. Ralph called for wine. Thrusting his hand into his pocket he found it empty. The floor was thronged with dissolute couples dancing to an indifferent piano accompaniment. In his extremity, Ralph exclaimed:

“I will play for the price of the wine.”

The musical instrument was not a bad one. As the young man seated himself before it the spirituous fire mounted to his brain. He swept the keys. Never had he performed more brilliantly. They said, one to another:

“Hear him play!”

Doubly exhilarated by the applause, the musician exclaimed:

“Shall I sing?”

“Yes! yes!” was the cry.

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He sang—a little pathetic song—the last words to a mother of her dying child.

A change crept through that riotous hall. The leer deserted the eyes of some; the oath was mute on the lips of others; the sound of revelry ceased. Over the hard visages a softened expression stole. A strange chord the songster had struck in those sullied breasts. They listened to the end, and as the musician made his way to the street, a hush prevailed in the room. But the pitiful adventure followed Ralph home. The tale reached old acquaintances. Stung in pride, Ralph resolved to escape from the scenes and reminders of bygone days, and though never so humbly, to begin anew. He accepted the position at the rural chapel. Thus had begun his new life.

* * * * *

Winter had flown. The balmy days in May had come, with buds unfolding everywhere. Again it was Sunday—the shadows lengthened, the sky resplendent in the west.

Stella sat with Ralph in the burial ground, at her mother's grave, now redolent of lilies

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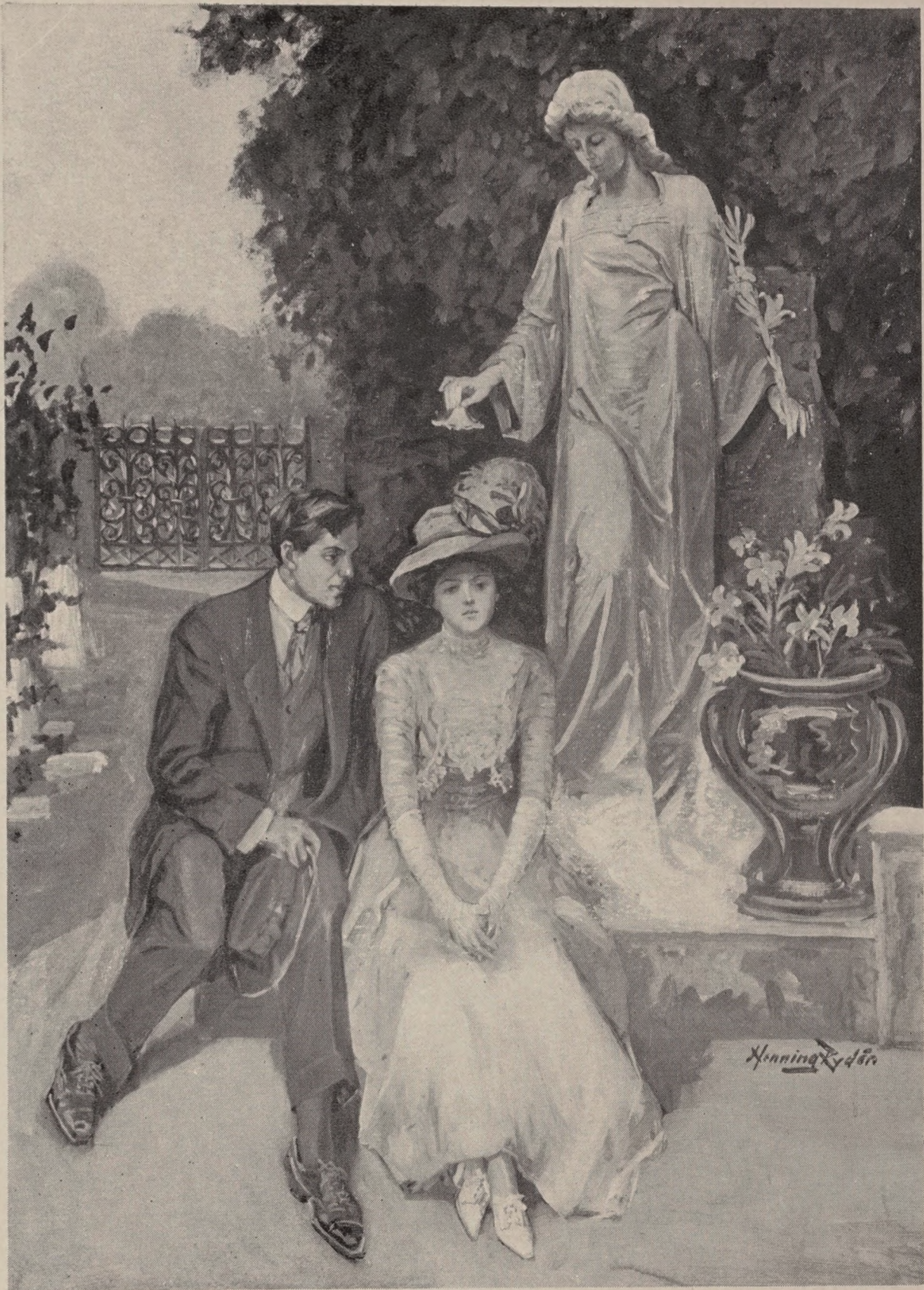
watered by a daughter's own unwearied hand.

"In these spring days life seems all before one," said Stella. "So once it seemed to mother, I often fancy, when I gaze upon her faultless features, lifelike in their picture-frame; yet at just my age she was laid to rest where she is sleeping now. But I never think of her as here, even beneath the flowers, but always as above, in some bright place, like yonder sunset."

Stella thought of the days when, only a little blithesome child, skipping at her father's side, she had sprinkled violets all over the grave, and lifting up to the sky large dreamy eyes, even softer than the flowers, had said, so childishly and trustingly: "Mamma is looking down, and loves the flowers—the pretty, pretty flowers."

"This is the happiest springtime I have ever known," said Ralph. "I owe it all to you. Indeed, I did not suppose the world could be so bright. When I think of the sunshine you have shed upon my path, of the kind words and the companionship, I cannot be grateful enough."

"I owe no less to you," said Stella.



BY HER MOTHER'S GRAVE

S T E L L A

“So different has life seemed since first I met you,” said Ralph, “so changed in all its aspect, that if I should lose your friendship I could not wish to live. Stella, at your mother’s grave, shall you be angry if I ask—May I not always be with you?”

As she listened, long drooping lashes veiled the girl’s lustrous eyes. A moment Stella was silent. Then lifting a guileless face to Ralph:

“You make me glad,” she said. “The hours we have passed together have been to me golden hours. I have treasured them, every one. The thought of parting would make me sad. If you love me, I shall be only too happy to have you always with me.”

Arm in arm, they sauntered homeward. The next Sunday they revisited the spot and renewed their vows. Many other strolls the lovers took while Nature still held her freshness of color and mildness of mood. The verdure seemed to linger especially for them. Their walk often lay among Stella’s acquaintances of the poor.

“For the fairest June,” the girl would sometimes say, “must pass into December.

STELLA

There is no lasting delight but that of doing good.”

Ralph soon became interested in his sweetheart's poor, discovering a secret of happiness he had not known. It cleared the sky of the future; for Stella and Ralph had discussed in uncertainty the days to come.

Ralph determined to prepare for the medical profession. A field of usefulness was right at hand; for since the days of the kindly old man who had ushered Stella into the world, there had been no trained physician in that neighborhood.

Stella easily enlisted her father's interest, receiving his willing permission to defray the expense of a medical education; for the genial old gentleman had liked Ralph.

So a day came when Stella and Ralph took a last stroll. It was a late September afternoon. On the morrow Ralph was to journey to a distant town. They chose a moss-grown woodpath, their favorite walk all summer. But though the crickets chirped bravely, the green was fading and signs of decay were everywhere.

Stella's voice was strangely still.

STELLA

“I feel depressed,” at length she said. “Everything around seems sad. See that crimson leaf fluttering to the ground.”

“I have not seen you in this mood,” said Ralph. “You were always so cheerful.”

“I had not thought,” said Stella, “that parting would be so hard. How lonely the days will seem! They will not be the old days, the days before we met. How happy I have been! Ah, yes,” she sighed, “how happy I have been! But now I see that parting must at some time come to all—the final parting—and when I remember that for the pure in heart love blossoming here will bloom undying in Eden above, I feel that for the great hereafter we should live. Oh, listen! listen!” From deep retreats of the sombre woods, as hand in hand, breathing whispers the lovers stood, the silver notes of the tuneful thrush vied voice with voice in rich reply.

* * * * *

The weeks flew by. Christmas was coming with its glad reunions. A very glad meeting was expected at the farm; for the medical student was coming home.

STELLA

“He will be here to-morrow,” said Stella. All smiling she held a letter.

“I am so happy, father,” exclaimed the girl, throwing her arms around his neck; “so happy I am just a child again. You must see a gift I have for him—a painting by my own hand. I wished it to be something my very own, such a gift as I always have for you. But you cannot see yours yet, father; not yours, you know.”

“He will be here to-morrow,” mused Stella, looking out at the flying snow, and a shadow crossed her face as she saw how dark the clouds were.

To-morrow came—yet darker clouds—the mountains foaming with billows of snow lashed by an arctic gale. The day wore on. Faster flew the fleecy flakes—more fiercely raged the storm. The girl at the farm grew agitated.

“He will brave it all,” she moaned. “He will come through the storm. He will stray from the path in the blinding gale.”

Then a rare light played in her glorious eyes, as she thought:

“But I know the road’s every turn.”



TO THE RESCUE

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The strong steed she chose trembled before the blast, the forest shrieked, the eagle screamed in the swaying pine, but mounting unseen, with dauntless Hero in the lead, Stella rode to the rescue.

Landmarks in disguises, familiar objects grown strange; now toiling up laborious height, now ploughing drift of ravine, guided rather by instinct than by the slight hand on the rein, sturdy horse, bearing light burden, still breasted the storm. Neither beast nor bird was abroad this day, but once a distressful note rent the air, and a dazed hawk, wild yet in the loneliness, welcome stranger, brushed with tired wing the soft cheek of the rider.

A mile, a mile, a third long mile! No glimpse of the face so longed for, no glad familiar cry. The young heart until now buoyed up by hope, grew heavy. "Shall I see him again! Shall I see him again!" was the wail that wrung it.

Suddenly the hitherto mute St. Bernard lifted up his voice in a loud bay, and with frantic leaps the sagacious creature forged aside from the main path. At this point, back from the road and hidden by brushwood,

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stood a deserted cabin, where on well-remembered rides Stella and Ralph had often tarried to quaff the sparkling water of a mineral spring, or to regale themselves with luscious berries. From this direction, above the roar of the unbridled blast, as if in answer to the cry of the dog, a shrill neigh rang out. A few more bounds of the great St. Bernard, and beneath snowy roof of sheltering cabin, the panting, jubilant dog licked the helpless hand of the perishing one sought for.

Thrilled with hope by the frenzied neigh of mysterious horse, the distraught rider, pressing on in the wake of the untiring dog, had urged to yet more strenuous action her struggling steed, when louder, shriller, closer by, another and yet another neigh! Now a sharp turn in the sinuous course of the arduous way, and a bypath choked with mammoth, still rising banks of snow, deflected to the door of the desolate cabin.

The heart of the rescuer beat fast as along this passage she took her trend, and having safely surmounted the perilous drifts, the girl drew up in front of a shed, under cover of which a horse, saddled but riderless, fretting

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at fastenings, awoke the echoes with neigh after neigh. Quickly beneath the welcome shelter, and close by the restive stranger's side, the mountain maiden secured her steed; when forth from the cabin burst the St. Bernard, Hero, then with a melancholy cry led his mistress's steps, uncertain with dread, to the swinging door and across the threshold of the dreary hut.

As the burning eyes of the girl in suspense pierced by degrees the doubtful light and fearfully scanned obscure objects within, they fell upon the figure of the rough-coated dog in a remote corner of the room, standing over the recumbent, unconscious, yet breathing form her yearning arms extended to enfold. With conflicting emotions of joy and grief, in a moment more a maiden kneeling beside the prostrate one detected rise and fall of respiration.

Hard by the cabin logs of firewood had been cleft and stacked for transportation. Fragments yet remained. Out through the snow to the remnants of this pile repaired Stella. With dispatch equal to the emergency, piece by piece fuel was conveyed within the cabin

STELLA

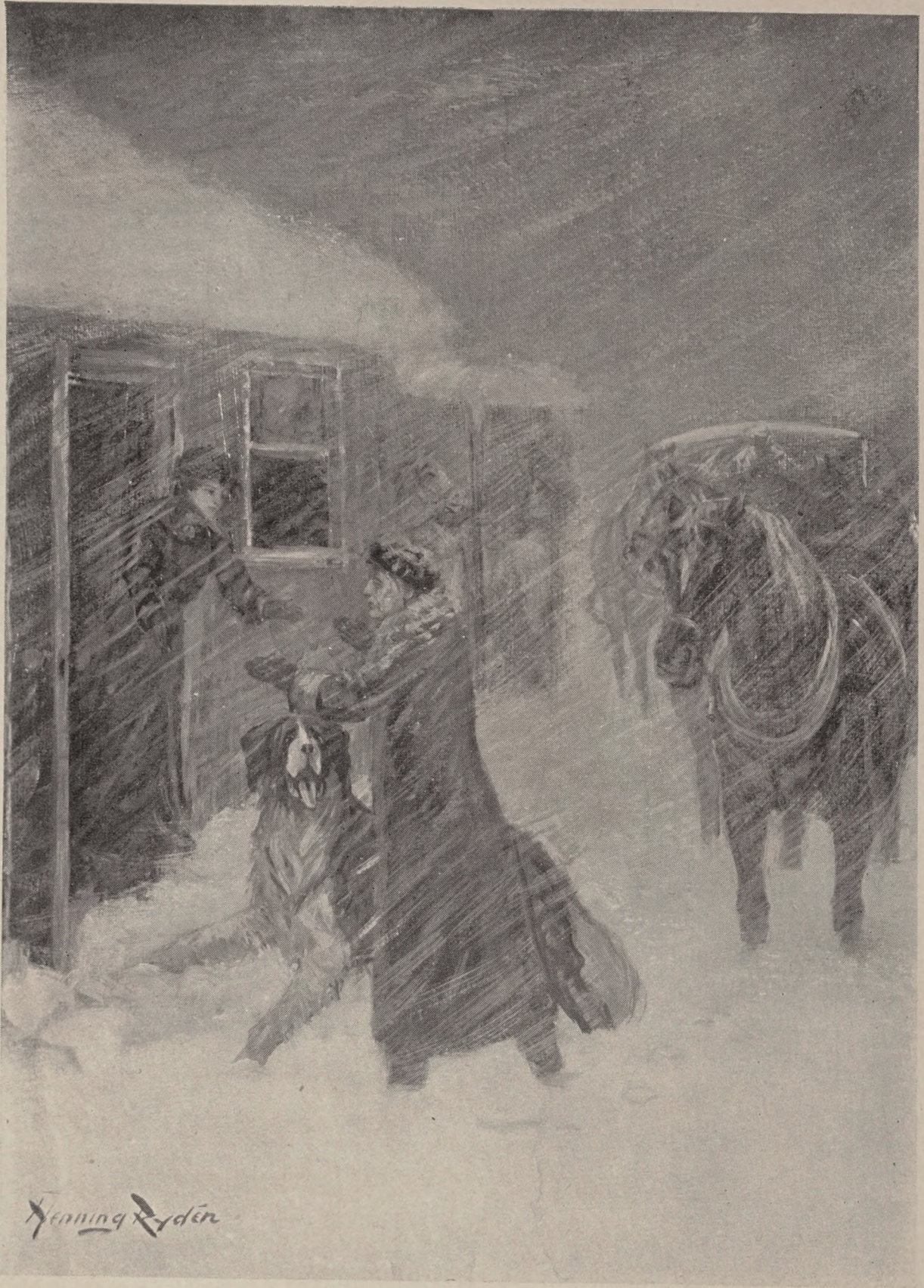
and heaped upon the frigid hearthstone. Matches ignited bits of tinder; the strong wind in the flue swept up the flames; and presently the gruesome refuge resounded with the inspiriting roar of the wide-mouthed chimney. Then from the near saddle-pouch was borne on feet with wings a cordial that loving forethought had provided.

Revived by the potent draught, administered by no inapt hand, the slumberer heard sound as of music, mellifluous sound of a familiar voice, a voice of bygone happy days, calling:

“Ralph, Ralph, awaken, Ralph!”

Slowly the heavy eyelids lifted—a moment only—then dropped again. Once more the languid orbs opened, and now, fixed on the face of the sweet deliverer, kindled with a joyful light. A willowy figure, bending down, touched with lips too glad for utterance a brow; then to the generous saddle-pouch a second time repairing, returned with nourishment.

By the friendly offices of fire and food, Stella had thought to reseal in saddle the exhausted one, and by his side, supporting,



OUT INTO SNOW AND EACH OTHER'S ARMS.

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safely to reach the harbor-home. But courage forsook when he, to whom her heartstrings clung, though cheered by the sound of her hopeful voice and soothed by the touch of the dear one's hand, yet strove in vain to rise. Then, as the shooting flames wearied of sport and dismembered firebrands shrivelled away, between welfare of sweetheart and thought of self, Ralph hesitated not. With supreme effort, seizing the precious, promised hand:

“Fly, sweetheart!” he gasped, “while yet you may. For me, it is too late. Fly! fly! away! away!”

But his companion in distress heeded not. Torn with anguish, her spirit was lifted above the clouds in speechless supplication. Now a calm overspread the girl's agony of face, and from lips without tremor fell the resolute words: “For better or worse our lots are one.”

Supply of fuel at length exhausted, the last of the logs was reduced to embers, the dwindled coals were growing gray; but while the voice of the chimney had steadily abated, that of the elements waxed ever more strong, as faster and faster in rushing chariot drove the trumpet-tongued tempest his flying team.

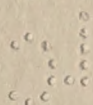
STELLA

Already dread nightfall was stalking abroad, shrouding with sable the waste of white, when with the warning only of a single cry, the St. Bernard sentinel, keen of ear, cleared at a bound the floor of the cabin, and hurling his weight against worm-eaten window-sash and shutter, was lost to view in the outer gloom. An icy draught flooded the refuge—a well-nigh demented watcher sprang up. Faint, faint, and yet distinct, on pinions of the mighty wind, a song, a song! Ah, rapturous song! Bells! bells! bells!

“Oh, thanks to God!” From a breaking heart the words burst forth. Bells! bells! bells! sleigh bells!

* * * * *

In the cheerful warmth of fireside at home, a parent had remarked with grave concern the absence strange of a daughter dear; then with insight unerring had divined her motive in vanishing thus as if rapt by the storm. Wrought up to a degree by the extremity of peril to which his darling was exposed, in the briefest time an elderly father had manned with a crew loyal and hardy, a huge covered



STELLA

sleigh; then with portable heater having equipped the same, was overriding a sea of white rollers, behind teams of strong horses led by the mate of the invincible charger that had borne the daughter of the house away.

No doubt existed concerning the route, and the rescue band pushed steadily on, eagerly expectant, at each turn in the road, of sighting a steed doing battle with the elements in obedience to a mistress's voice and hand. But corners were rounded and milestones passed by, yet no such glad spectacle brightened the eye. At length the critical point was reached where the bypath ran to the refugees' cabin. But unnoticed the spot was slipping by, with no searchlight revealing the daughter so near, no hint of her heartrending plight, when out of the drifts resounded a cry, and shaking his tawny coat, powdered with white, sprang the life-saver, Hero. The overjoyed father would have encircled with arms the neck of the dog; but barking vociferously and wheeling about, the animal sprang away; then, followed by foam-flecked horses and sleigh, retraced the path by which he had come.

S T E L L A

Through the monster drifts a short distance seemed long, but outlying shed and forsaken shanty, with window gaping and insecure door, were reached at last.

Bells! bells! bells! Loud breathing of horses! Sound of men's voices! Jingle of bells! Out of sleigh sprang a father! Out of door flew a daughter! Out into snow and each other's arms! Then tears on smooth face and tears on face furrowed, commingled, as, cheek pressed to cheek, unrebuked they coursed down.

* * * * *

That night, before blazing hearthstone at home, where wrathful voice of tempest without was drowned by roar of fire within, a father and a daughter sat. Dreamily, in the light of the leaping flames, on a cushiony couch another lay—one whom love had snatched from lion's jaws as in lion's den he had lain that day. Now a head crowned with white and a head with no silver were bending while hearts in thanksgiving were lifted on high.

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“ I COULD NOT LEAVE YOU LONGER ALONE ”

S T E L L A

Christmas again, and once again—then fleeting months, till April rainbows, flowers of May and month of the bride—June! Chimes of bells! bells! wedding bells! Within the walls of the ornate chapel a company of well-wishers sat, awaiting entrance of bride and groom. Presently, before the venerable pastor a youthful couple stood. Could eye of flesh discern a visitant from the spirit land, perchance it would have beheld a white-winged mother, hovering near, with hand outstretched to bless the bride. Kisses for bride—good wishes for groom—shower of rice, and the pair had flown.

* * * * *

That evening an elderly father sat in his wonted chair at the old-fashioned board, spread to-night with every dainty, and decked with blooms the choicest a daughter could command—but a face was missing. Delicate viands tempted not. Heavy at heart, to a seat on the porch the parent repaired, where the companionship of the now absent one had beguiled so many moonlight hours, and where, on only the previous eve, hand in hand the

S T E L L A

twain had sat, reluctant even for a season to part. Fast flying hours, sunset again, the father again at the lonely board.

Sounds of wheels on the driveway! Steps on the walk! Two faces at the door! Wide open the arms of a father flew! Within their fold a daughter lay.

“I could not leave you longer alone,” fell accents sweet on the parent’s ear. “Last night in dreams I saw you. When the sun was high I sang the song:

“‘Home, sweet home,
There is no place like home.’”

One white arm encircled the parent, the other around the husband twined. Then from the lips of a father rose the voice of praise:

“Thus far the Lord hath led me on,
Thus far His power prolongs my days;
And every evening shall make known
Some fresh memorial of His grace.”

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